

# OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

## COVID-19 Crisis Response Communications Plan

July, 2020

### INTRODUCTION

While the entire ODU leadership team is dedicated to a safe, responsible reopening during the coronavirus pandemic, nothing will test ODU's public reputation more than our conduct during this unprecedented time. Therefore, the following communications objectives are key to our success:

1. To communicate regularly and accurately to all key audiences
2. To help the news media focus on known facts and positive activities and behaviors
3. To portray ODU as responsible and caring
4. To maintain the trust and confidence in ODU and its obligation to the students, parents, staff, faculty and community it serves

Successfully achieving these communications objectives will not only help protect ODU's reputation but will allow ODU to serve as an example for higher education institutions in Virginia and throughout the country.

### KEY AUDIENCES

1. **Internal:**

- Students
- Staff/faculty
- Board of Visitors

2. **External:**

- Alumni
- Parents
- Community partners
- News media
- Other local and state colleges/universities

### MEDIA RELATIONS STRATEGY

Because the news media has often been influenced by public perceptions during the COVID-19 crisis, our media relations strategies are:

1. **ODU Strategic Communications & Marketing (StratComm)** will be the authoritative, reliable source of accurate information for the news media and the public as it relates to:
  - Campus reopening
  - University compliance with guidelines provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) and the Governor's Office
  - Coronavirus testing, monitoring and contact tracing
  - Coronavirus cases or campus outbreaks

- Student compliance and sanctions for violating the University's COVID-19 policies and safety protocols

**2. In the event of an outbreak or major non-compliance event we will:**

- Alert the COVID-19 emergency response team (should be established) and identify key spokesperson(s), i.e.:
  - **Jared Hoernig**, Director of Emergency Management
  - **Chief Rhonda Harris**, AVP for Public Safety
  - **Don Stansberry**, Interim Vice President of SEES
  - **Giovanna Genard**, AVP for Strategic Communication/ Marketing
  - **John R. Broderick**, President
- To ensure we are speaking with "one voice," the number of media spokespeople will be limited to those listed above unless otherwise directed. Exceptions may include interviews with other faculty experts.
- Immediately draft and provide talking points for the event or outbreak:
  - Confirm what is known at this time
  - Position ODU as student and safety-centered
  - Position ODU as responsible and responsive to the situation
  - Get additional background information about the student(s), staff member or person(s) involved from the college, department or office.
- Activate the previously prepared and approved media holding statement for potential media calls.
- Prepare the first news release or response statement for use upon inquiry:
  - Obtain news release or statement approvals from Giovanna
  - Distribute using pre-determined list in Meltwater
- Issue the approved news release immediately after a confirmed case, known outbreak or major policy breach (i.e. student party that violates COVID-19 policies and safety protocols) is identified, confirmed and investigated by police and/or emergency management.
- Issue an alert with key information to staff and faculty **at the same time** that it is released to the news media.
- Work with Meltwater to assist with monitoring real-time news coverage to include social media and internet
  - Is the information accurate?
  - What is being said about ODU, the individual case or event?
  - Issue news release or use prepared statement in response to media inquiries.
- Respond to media calls in priority order

## KEY MESSAGES

### 1. Talking points

- **General:**
  - Maintaining a safe and healthy environment for our students, staff, faculty and Monarch community remains our highest priority.
  - ODU continues to closely monitor the national impact of COVID-19 along with the rate of spread throughout our community.
  - ODU and VDH have been working collaboratively since the beginning.
  - We believe it is the responsibility of all members of the Monarch community to practice health and safety guidelines established by the CDC, the VDH and ODU.
  - We will continue to follow evolving local, state, and federal guidelines and remain flexible and adaptable as circumstances and guidance change.
  - Regular updates are provided on our COVID-19 website.
  - We continue to look at data trends and projections for infection rates in our area to continue to inform the Monarch community of any changes to our reopening plan.
  - Even though the number of new confirmed cases has been decreasing in Hampton Roads, we don't want to let down our guard by failing to do everything we can to ensure the health, safety and well-being of the entire Monarch community remains a priority in our classrooms and throughout campus.
  - A testing plan which includes daily symptom monitoring, testing, isolation and quarantine, as well as contact tracing, conforms with best practices as they are known today.
  - New policies, including awareness training and educational programs, have been developed.
  - Social distancing is being supported through physical changes in buildings, educational and guidance signage, and reduced room and building occupancy.
  - The face coverings requirement has been implemented in all buildings on campus to support the success of the testing program and the overall health safety of our campus community.
  - The ODU Code of Student Conduct does not permit parties, social events and similar group activities, including those involving alcohol, because they pose a significant public health risk.

- **Reopening**
  - We expect COVID-19 will be with us for the foreseeable future and are planning accordingly.
  - Though no one can guarantee a virus-free campus, from daily monitoring and in-house testing to extensive signage and physical changes in buildings, ODU has made several important changes to help reduce the risks.
  - The ODU strategy for a safe return to campus has been well aligned with CDC, VDH and the Governor's higher ed reopening guidance.
  - The ODU reopening plan will continue to be guided by data trends and projections for the infection rates in our area as well as in the state, which will inform any changes necessary for our reopening.
- **Reigning Responsibly** – Old Dominion University's theme for the 2020 Fall Semester is "Reign Responsibly" which encourages individuals to protect themselves and others.
  - We have asked all students, faculty and staff to abide by the Governor's Executive Order 63 and as well as CDC physical distancing guidelines by practicing the 3 w's – Wear a mask, Wait six feet apart and Wash their hands.
  - Leveraging prominent signage, website content, social media posts, etc., ODU has gone above and beyond to stress the importance of following CDC, VDH and ODU health and safety guidelines.
  - ODU has provided kits for members of the university community, including all students, staff and faculty which include disposable face coverings and hand sanitizers as well as instructions on their proper use.
  - We are better positioned to address health or safety concerns if they are appropriately reported. Through our "Reigning Responsibly" guidelines we are encouraging all members of the Monarch community to report non-compliance or potentially irresponsible behaviors or practices first to supervisors, who will be responsible for notifying the director of emergency management, Jared Hoernig.
  - ODU considers hosting or attending non-university-sanctioned parties or gatherings on or off campus a violation of the Code of Student Conduct. These violations will be considered for immediate interim suspension or action which could separate students from on-campus housing and/or instruction and services, including suspension or expulsion.
- **Testing and tracking** – Developed in collaboration with VDH, ODU's sustained and systematic approach to testing incorporate a broad-scale program for viral testing, including daily symptom reporting via text or email. Persons who report they are symptomatic will be referred to test and/or self-isolate.

- The ODU testing strategy has also been vetted and is supported by our own faculty and staff experts and epidemiologists and experts from the Norfolk and Virginia Beach Departments of Health as well the University's new occupational health physician.
- We also have in place a random testing process of the on-campus residential community at a rate of 15% upon return to campus, and an ongoing process with 15% randomly tested every seven to 15 days to better monitor the prevalence of the disease in our community.
- The process was designed with the ability to flex up or down in capacity based upon the proportion of disease within our community, the incidence in the larger Hampton Roads area, or within the Commonwealth.
- To facilitate the success of this process, we have established our own sample collection areas and process as well as a research lab to test samples in-house to eliminate the long lag times between sample collection and test results.
- We were fortunate to have been able to secure all the needed lab materials in time for reopening.
- The ODU process will allow for timely notification to the patient, the ordering physician, ODU's designated responsible employee(s) and the Virginia Department of Health.
- These notifications will activate the next steps, with the self-isolation process, contact tracing of persons potentially exposed, and quarantine of those persons.
- We have developed plans for isolation and quarantine space for on-campus residential students with possible or confirmed cases of COVID-19. These students will be provided new housing and receive special care, support and assistance including meals and tutoring if necessary.
- Faculty will work with these students to move their courses online to limit learning interruptions.
- The testing process at ODU also includes ongoing testing of persons who are identified as high or medium risk by their work responsibilities and those who are not able to maintain the 6-foot social distancing guidance, such as housekeeping, dining services, coaches and athletic trainers, and university police officers. Some faculty, particularly those in lab settings may also be among this group.

## HOLDING STATEMENTS

### 1. General:

- We are in the process of preparing a statement based on the information we have up to at this point. We expect it to be issued shortly. We do not have an exact time but expect it to be in about one hour. Our communications contact is Keith Pierce at (610) 405-6373 or [k1pierce@odu.edu](mailto:k1pierce@odu.edu).

### 2. Outbreak:

- It is too early to discuss the details of this outbreak. In order to maintain the integrity of our investigation, which includes following our testing protocols, we want to be sensitive to those involved and be able to understand all the facts ourselves. Until then, it is not appropriate for us to speculate about what may have caused the outbreak, and we encourage others not to speculate.
- We will maintain our ongoing testing procedures and will continue to provide updates about this case on our website and social media channels. We aim to release more information around 2 p.m. today.

### 3. Policy violation:

- It is too early to discuss details of this incident. In order to maintain the integrity of our investigation, we want to be sensitive to those involved and be able to understand all the facts ourselves. Until then, it is not appropriate for us to speculate about what may have caused the outbreak, and we encourage others not to speculate.
- Old Dominion University faculty and staff care deeply about our campus community during these unprecedented times. As stated in our Code of Student Conduct, we have a zero-tolerance policy for parties and disregard for face masks, physical distancing and gathering size and we are continually working to enhance safeguards that protect our students and employees against the impacts of COVID-19.
- The alleged incident is still under investigation. Several students known to have been involved are currently being disciplined under ODU's Code of Student Conduct where violations are considered for immediate interim suspension or action which could separate students from on-campus housing and/or instruction and services, including suspension or expulsion.
- As soon as we have additional facts, we will share them with you.

## **INCIDENT STATEMENTS**

### **1. Outbreak:**

- We do regret to inform you that an unconfirmed number of our students have tested positive for COVID-19. The source of the infection is still under investigation. Several students who have had known contact with the infected students have been tested and are currently being isolated. We are in contact with their families and are doing everything we can to support them. We will offer a more detailed update upon further investigation.
- This is the first known outbreak since our reopening. We will continue to review our protocols and will put in place any recommendations from VDH or other health experts to ensure this remains an isolated incident.
- We will maintain our ongoing testing procedures and will continue to provide updates about this case on our website and social media channels.

### **2. Policy violation:**

- Old Dominion University faculty and staff care deeply about our campus community during these unprecedented times. As stated in our Code of Student Conduct, we have a zero-tolerance policy for parties and disregard for face masks, physical distancing and gathering size and we are continually working to enhance safeguards that protect our students and employees against the impacts of COVID-19.
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## **DAY TWO AND BEYOND**

1. Continue to evaluate the evolving nature of the incident(s) to determine next steps.
2. Conduct an initial media briefing if warranted via Zoom or in-person if possible.
3. With or without a media briefing, provide periodic updates and interviews to the media when justified.

4. Continue monitoring the media and the origin of media inquiries to determine whether media coverage is expanding beyond Hampton Roads and whether communications should be adjusted.
5. Work with SEES to ensure messaging remains aligned with information being provided to students and families.
6. Document the sequence of events and the role of the PR team during the situation to improve or share valuable insights with others.
7. Conduct a PR/media debriefing with the StratComm team.