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Maximizing Student Participation in the Higher Education EOP Planning Process

Emergency management practitioners, law enforcement professionals, and campus administrators all have unique challenges in foreseeing and evaluating a wide range of external and internal threats and hazards to their campuses, and in creating plans to enable their communities to address and respond to these emergencies. Students make up the largest population at institutions of higher education (IHEs); therefore they are one of the main intended audiences of an emergency operations plan (EOP). Some may think that students want safety information only as needed, during an emergency, and are not interested in preparing for potential hazards. However, by asking for their input and incorporating their feedback throughout the emergency planning process, student leaders will gain a greater stake in the success of their EOPs, and increase the odds that students will promote it within their peer and social networks.

By collaboratively using the planning process recommended in the *Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Institutions of Higher Education (IHE Guide)*, institutions signal their intentions to maintain the safety and security of their communities, and ensure that the whole IHE community, including students, plays a valued role in this process. This REMS Express publication provides ideas that IHEs can use to involve students in emergency management and in the EOP development process.

Why is student involvement in the EOP process so beneficial?

The benefits of working with students are vast. Their feedback and contributions can supply critical information that ensures that the core planning principles outlined in the *IHE Guide* are fully met. By incorporating student knowledge, opinions, and needs, campus administrators can gain valuable insights

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and expertise that refine their own efforts and increase the overall chances of success in responding to emergency events. Students bring new perspectives and approaches to the decisions an emergency planning team must make, and shed new light on and assist in fulfilling responsibilities, including:

- enlisting their peers to participate in individual and campus preparedness efforts;
- assisting in the collection of information identifying and assessing hazards and threats;
- participating in the development, execution, and analysis of student climate surveys;
- contributing to the review of the EOP, including its annexes;
- providing strategic guidance on the marketing and communications plan to inform the community before, during, and after emergencies;
- helping with emergency management and preparedness issues and initiatives;
- defining individual roles and responsibilities during emergencies;
- researching available resources to support continuity of education and individual recovery needs; and
- marketing and disseminating information to their peers and families.

One way an IHE can include students in its emergency operations planning is by forming a student advisory committee to supplement its core planning team. In doing so, it is imperative to craft mutually agreed upon goals right from the start, and to decide how student input will be gained and evaluated in topic-specific areas. To ensure that students' roles are truly substantive, IHEs must actively support their participation, provide parameters for their roles and responsibilities, and provide a process for obtaining and integrating their input. While a student advisory committee may not need to meet as often as the core planning team,

Questions to consider:

1. Is there a certain student population we want to ensure is heard and accounted for?
2. Which portions of the EOP need the most student involvement?
3. How are we able to go about finding the students who will have the most knowledge or willingness to participate?
4. Are we interested in learning from their families?

creating a meeting schedule in advance to inform the ongoing EOP development process is helpful.

Alternatively, an emergency planning team can invite student representatives to meet with them informally to provide feedback on student-focused topics.

Which students should you invite to join the Student Advisory Committee?

1. Residence life advisors
2. International students
3. Student government association leaders
4. Student leaders from clubs and organizations that are culturally, religiously, and ideologically diverse
5. Students from relevant academic fields such as medical, criminal justice, and psychology

Include students in assessments to achieve a comprehensive understanding of hazards and risks.

The *IHE Guide* recommends that a planning team do a significant amount of research in order to understand the diversity of the threats, hazards, vulnerabilities, and risks to a community, and to build preparedness. Since a planning team is only able to identify, assess and prioritize responses to those hazards and threats it is aware of, it is important to use as many different perspectives as possible to help ensure the planning team has a full understanding of the environment. Below are opportunities to solicit student input in the areas of climate, site, behavioral threat, and capacity assessment to inform development of an EOP.

Climate Assessment

Case for Student Involvement: Due to their large numbers on campus, student responses on a climate survey will show their unique knowledge of potentially suspicious activities that administrators may not be aware of. An inclusive climate assessment will incorporate this knowledge in its risk evaluation.

Why is a climate survey *especially* important? Student perceptions of safety and security at their IHEs is valuable from both emergency management and public safety perspectives because their insight will help identify which hazards, threats, and concerns need to be better addressed. Even if a planning team decides that the actual probability of a specific risk is low, it is important to remember that the

“Though Emergency Management and Public Safety are the forefront line of defense when it comes to safety on campuses across the country, it is ultimately the responsibility for students and residents to know what to do in the case of an emergency. The more hands-on training a student gets, the better acclimated they are to operate under the extreme stress of an actual emergency.”

—Shawn Simons, survivor of the Seton Hall University Fire (NJ)

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perception of risk accounts for the IHE’s overall climate, and contributes to the ability of students, faculty, and staff to feel safe.

Specific Student Contributions:

- Identifying those climate and cultural issues and themes that are most negatively impacting student feelings of security, safety, or well-being
- Providing suggestions for changes in partnerships and/or services that would increase a student’s sense of security (e.g., programs within campus law enforcement, counseling services, residence life)
- Recommending new programs or student-IHE partnerships to promote students’ sense of security

Site Assessment

Case for Student Involvement: Students, including residence advisors (RAs), often have the most up-to-date and key knowledge about the conditions and state of the buildings



they routinely use for academic, residential, and recreational purposes. In case of a quickly-escalating emergency, such as a fire or an *active shooter situation*, RAs and other students will often be the first responders. Including them in site assessments will open doors for more informed hazard and threat mitigation, as well as protection and training efforts.

Specific Student Contributions:

- Providing new information on building defects, deteriorating or unsafe conditions, and general building-specific concerns
- Identifying the locations and buildings where students feel the safest and the most vulnerable, as well as the reasons why
- Giving protection suggestions, including possible areas for lighting and patrols, and emergency communication tools
- Providing insights into how vulnerabilities affect living conditions (e.g., visibility at night around residence dorms)
- Sharing ideas for improving current training

Behavioral Threat Assessment

Case for Student Involvement: Campus threat assessment teams play important roles in maintaining a culture of safety, and often rely on multiple sources of information from the community. Students can be some of the most important contributors to the teams by sharing information about abnormal or worrisome behavior, or a known threat posed to a peer or faculty member.

Specific Student Contributions:

- Alerting public safety personnel to individuals with troubling behavior or signals of potential violence
- Advising how to better inform the community of the threat assessment process

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Capacity Assessment

Case for Student Involvement: Because students make up the largest population group at an IHE, they have the potential to contribute greatly during an emergency. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offers the Campus CERT (Campus Community Emergency Response Team) Program, which promotes student roles and responsibilities supporting the Incident Command System, which helps standardize terminology and organizational structures during emergencies, and facilitates effective emergency responses.

Specific Contributions of Campus CERT Teams:

- Support fire safety and suppression actions
- Contribute to light search and rescue efforts
- Participate in medical response teams
- Promote campus emergency management preparedness initiatives

Developing the EOP

The *IHE Guide* recommends soliciting feedback from members of the core planning team throughout all stages of the EOP process. Therefore, it is helpful to get student feedback during the drafting stages on the portions of the EOP that are student appropriate. Even with limited knowledge of best practices in emergency management, students will be able to verify whether:

- the EOP language makes sense and is clear;
- the EOP is leaving any threats or hazards unanswered; and
- the expectations and courses of action for students are practical.

If law enforcement and public safety departments engage with students, there is the opportunity for open dialogue about which emergency procedures and risks need attention and explanation. While having an EOP in place is beneficial, the measurable success of a plan is how greatly it reflects the community and how well the community is able to adopt and incorporate it into its own safety culture. An EOP that is cohesive, concise, and accurately speaks to its student population has a much higher chance of being well-received and followed by the whole IHE community than one that is not.

Help students become integral and committed partners in implementing the EOP.

Many institutions are taking creative approaches to increasing student interest and engagement in emergency management procedures. For example, the University of Washington (UW) holds a series of educational events, such as “disaster movie nights,” and emergency-themed games, such as “Wheel of Misfortune,” as well as carnival rides that simulate earthquake scenarios. As Steven Charvat, UW’s director of emergency management, explains, these events are successful at drawing a student crowd. Says Charvat, “There’s no magic formula, but we do limited, focused outreach to break through the clutter.”

The more directly IHEs work with students, the better able students are to raise awareness for and increase participation in emergency operations planning; support their EOP planning teams; and help inform the whole student population of its roles and responsibilities before, during, and after emergencies, including participating in training exercises. Students can also offer advice on marketing tactics to law enforcement and emergency management personnel on how they can better communicate the EOP to the greater public.

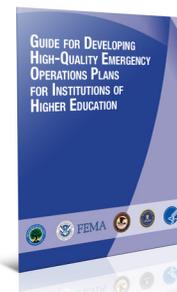
Jacob Evans, Student Government Association leader at West Virginia University, urges institutions to run more frequent, reality-based drills that include students. Calling for the use of fire drills that are commonplace in high schools, perhaps on a monthly basis, Evans says they will “help teach and remind students of proper procedures as well as bring a reality” to the need for emergency preparedness. He believes that “Students do care about their own safety. It’s not a lack of caring, it’s a lack of knowledge. Students feel removed from it because (they) don’t experience it often enough.”

Ultimately, the more students are involved throughout the planning process, the more an IHE’s preparedness level is increased.

Where to Find Additional Resources

Additional information on emergency planning guidance for IHEs, a downloadable copy of the *IHE Guide*, fact sheets, EOP development tools, and other resources can be found on the REMS TA Center website at <http://rems.ed.gov>.

Click on the picture to access an at-a-glance version of the *IHE Guide*, which provides details about the process and principles, as well as plan content, functional annexes, and threat- and hazard-specific annexes.



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