

SPRING 2025

PUR4400C.4402 Crisis Communications (☼)

CLASSES – M 4:05-7:00 p.m. (Online)

Professor: Patty Caballero, MBA

caballero.p@ufl.edu

Office hours: By appointment

Zoom login information available on Canvas

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Course Overview

In today's hyperconnected world, organizations face unprecedented reputational risks. A single misstep can trigger viral backlash, regulatory scrutiny, and lasting damage within hours. This course equips students to navigate these complex challenges through strategic crisis management.

Students will master the complete crisis lifecycle: proactive risk assessment, strategic preparation, real-time response execution, and post-crisis recovery. The curriculum emphasizes hands-on application, analyzing landmark cases from corporate scandals to natural disasters to understand what separates successful crisis responses from catastrophic failures.

Through simulations, case study analysis, and insights from industry practitioners, students will develop the strategic thinking and tactical skills needed to protect organizational reputation when the stakes are highest. Upon completing the course, students will be able to confidently assess vulnerabilities, craft effective response strategies, and lead communications during actual crises.

Course Objectives

Upon completing this course, students will be able to:

- Learn what constitutes a crisis – how it is distinct from day-to-day issues
- Develop a crisis preparedness plan and vulnerability assessment
- Understand the typical stages of a crisis, and how they are changing in the social media era
- Learn to define the crisis and identify the stakeholders most affected by it
- Identify and address the ethical issues presented by the crisis
- Write a crisis communications plan, including a core set of strategic messages for each key stakeholder group (e.g., employees, customers, government officials, key opinion leaders, community leaders, etc.)

Prerequisite: PUR 3000 Principles of Public Relations

Learning Outcomes

The course specifically supports six of the 11 professional values and competencies required of graduates by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC):

- Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of groups in a global society in relationship to mass communications
- Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles, and work ethically.
- Think critically, creatively and independently
- Conduct research and evaluate information by appropriate methods

- Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve

Required Readings

Required Book

W. T. Coombs, *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding* (6th ed.). Copyright 2023 by Sage Publications ISBN: 9781071816646 (Paperback) (available online at [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com/Ongoing-Crisis-Communication-Planning-Responding/dp/9781071816646) and other sites)

Additional readings as provided in Canvas

Additional Readings as Assigned

Students are expected to regularly read business news sources such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Financial Times*, *Reuters News*, *Bloomberg*, and other reputable outlets.

Additionally, students should review trade publications and websites related to the PR industry, including *PRWeek*, *the Holmes Report*, *IPR Research Letter*, *PR News*, and *AdAge Daily*.

Online Course Administration

We will utilize e-Learning on Canvas (<http://elearning.ufl.edu/>) to manage course communication, materials (including PowerPoint files, additional readings, handouts, assignment guidelines, and evaluation forms), and grades. For example, an electronic file of this document is available on Canvas. You can access the site with your GatorLink username and password. Please check the site regularly for announcements and comment threads from classmates and the professor.

Assignments

Note: Assignments must be submitted on Canvas in PDF format.

Individual Assignments

Case Study Paper

Due Dates:

Submission of Topic for Approval Due: January 23, by 11:59 pm

Paper Submission Due: March 8, by 11:59 pm

This individual assignment provides an opportunity to explore a past crisis through comprehensive case study analysis. You will develop a complete case study on a crisis from the social media era, preferably within the past 10 years, assessing the situation from the

organization's perspective. The crisis phase must be deemed over with the post-crisis phase underway or completed.

The paper should be approximately 10-15 pages, double-spaced. Select a topic that allows for thorough analysis based on publicly available information or input from the company or agency involved. No duplicate case studies will be permitted, so topic selection operates on a first-come, first-served basis.

Other Individual Assignments

During the semester, you will be assigned three out-of-class tasks to complete and submit through Canvas. Each task is expected to take 60-90 minutes and must be completed individually.

Quizzes

February 23, in class
April 6, in class

Two quizzes will be held during regularly scheduled class periods on February 23 and April 6. Quizzes are designed to test knowledge of main ideas covered in readings, guest lectures, and class discussions. Both quizzes will be open-book and open-note. The first quiz covers material from the first half of the semester, while the second quiz covers material from the second half.

Missed quizzes receive a zero grade. Make-up opportunities are only available for documented emergencies discussed with the instructor prior to the missed quiz when possible. Students arriving more than 10 minutes after a quiz begins will not be permitted to take the quiz, reflecting the critical timing requirements of crisis management.

Group Assignments

Crisis Group Project (CGP): Paper and Presentation

Due Dates:

- **Crisis Group Project Preference Survey, Due Friday, January 16, by 11:59 pm**
- **Select organization for CGP, Due Friday, February 13, by 11:59 pm**
- **CPG Presentation and Paper Submission, Due Sunday, April 19, by 11:59 pm**
- **CPG Presentations, Monday, April 20, in class**

This semester-long group project requires collaborative work to write a comprehensive crisis communication plan. Your group will serve as the crisis management team for an organization of your choice, developing a crisis communication plan to prepare your chosen organization for a potential crisis based on lessons learned from a past crisis that this organization or a competitor has previously faced.

Task 1: Crisis Group Project Preference Survey**Due: Friday, January 16, 11:59 pm**

Since professional situations rarely allow you to choose your collaborators, groups will be assigned rather than self-selected. You will have an opportunity to express sector interest by ranking five provided sectors from #1 (top choice) to #5 (last choice). Teams of three to five people will be assigned based on these selections. Choose a sector with which you are familiar or naturally interested, as this makes the assignment more engaging. Complete the Google Form via the Canvas assignment by the deadline, or you will be assigned randomly to a group.

Task 2: Select an organization for the Crisis Group Project**Due Friday, February 20, 11:59 pm**

Your team will choose the organization for your project. The organization can be a for-profit company (must be publicly traded) or a global non-profit organization. All organizations require professor approval. Identify a crisis from the past 5-10 years that this organization or an industry peer experienced. For example, you could develop a crisis communication plan for Chevron based on BP's oil spill lessons, or create an American Airlines plan using insights from Spirit Airlines' bankruptcy announcement and fallout. Submit your group selection via Canvas for approval.

Task 3: Develop a Crisis Management Plan (Written Paper)**Due: Sunday, April 19, by 11:59 pm**

The team will study the identified crisis to understand how it was handled, identifying successful elements and areas for improvement. Based on crisis observations and class learnings, develop a detailed outline for a crisis management plan to prepare your organization for similar situations. Build out the crisis communication portion in detail, including strategy, templates, and contact lists with sample materials. Submit both the written plan and presentation slides via Canvas.

Task 4: Crisis Management Plan Presentation**Due: Submission Due Sunday, April 19, 11:59 pm and Presentation in class on Monday, April 20**

Each group will present their projects in class using PowerPoint, Canva, Keynote, or other presentation tools. Summarize the crisis that inspired your crisis management plan, walk through your crisis plan and key messages, share sample materials you developed, discuss lessons learned from both the original crisis and the planning exercise, and explain what your crisis plan sought to correct, augment, or change. Submit presentations on Canvas by the deadline, as no changes will be accepted after that time.

Course Policies

Grading

Final grades are based on performance across six major areas: Case Study Paper (20%), Group Crisis Planning Paper and Presentation (25%), Other Individual Assignments (20%), Midterm Quiz (10%), Final Quiz (10%), and Active Participation (15%).

Letter grades are determined by total points earned throughout the semester. The grading scale follows university standards:

A	94-100%	B-	< 84% to 80%	D+	< 70% to 67%
A-	< 94% to 90%	C+	< 80% to 77%	D	< 67% to 64%
B+	< 90% to 87%	C	< 77% to 74%	D-	< 64% to 61%
B	< 87% to 84%	C-	< 74% to 70%	F	< 61% to 0%

For complete university grading policies, consult <https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>.

Groups receive a single grade for collaborative projects, but individual adjustments may be made if contribution levels are unequal. A collaboration survey will allow group members to provide feedback on teamwork effectiveness. If group problems arise, contact me early so we can address issues before they impact performance.

Attendance and Participation Policy

Regular attendance and active participation are essential for success in this course. Crisis management requires active involvement, real-time discussions, and collaborative learning that can't be replicated outside the classroom. There are 15 classes during the semester, and you can earn up to 10 points per class for participation, totaling 150 points.

Active participation means coming to class prepared, engaging in discussions, and submitting assignments on time. Cameras should stay on, and you are expected to participate actively in group discussions. While you can earn 10 points per class, attendance alone does not guarantee full points. Points will be deducted for arriving very late, keeping your camera off during class, or not participating.

More than two absences during the semester will result in a grade reduction or course failure. Students should inform the instructor in advance of any expected absences

when possible. Documented emergencies will be considered on a case-by-case basis. If you are uncomfortable participating in discussions or group activities, please contact me to discuss accommodations.

For complete university attendance policies, visit:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/attendance-policies/>

Late Assignments and Extensions

Deadlines are clearly marked for good reason. In communications and public relations, missing a deadline can mean losing a client, damaging a reputation, or missing a critical opportunity to shape public perception during a crisis. Late assignments will incur a 10% penalty for each weekday past the deadline. If you anticipate difficulty meeting a deadline, contact me before the due date to discuss possible accommodations. Extension requests will not be considered after the deadline has passed.

Academic Integrity

Original Work Requirements All assignments must represent your original work, created specifically for this course. Submitting the same work to multiple classes requires prior written permission from all instructors involved. Adapting work from previous classes or other sources requires explicit written consent before submission.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Policy AI tools may be used for initial brainstorming or drafting, but final submissions must represent substantial original development by the student. Work generated primarily through AI tools will not be accepted, including content from ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, or similar platforms where AI generates the majority of the final submission. **When using AI assistance, you must include a log of all prompts and describe how AI-generated content was modified and developed, including this information in your references.** For information on how to cite AI prompts, look at the [Georgetown University Library's AI Reference Guide](#). You can also look at [How to Cite ChatGPT in APA style](#) or [How do I cite generative AI in MLA style](#).

Consequences Any violation of academic integrity standards will result in course failure and referral to the Office of the Dean of Students for disciplinary action. Detection tools will be used to identify plagiarized or AI-generated content. These standards reflect the ethical expectations you will face as communications professionals, where originality and authenticity are fundamental to credibility and success.

Course Professionalism

The College of Journalism and Communications is a professional school where professional decorum is always expected. Students and the professor will adhere to

workplace norms for respectful and collegial interaction. Students are expected to arrive on time fully prepared to discuss assigned readings, not leave early unless prior permission is granted, and wait for class to end before departing.

Assignments are provided on this syllabus with due dates throughout the semester. Public Relations is a business where deadlines matter, and managers and clients won't accept excuses for late work. Spelling, grammar, punctuation, and professional presentation techniques all count. Misspelling your client or agency name during exercises will result in a letter grade deduction.

Class discussions may include potentially divisive and controversial topics. We will not debate or take sides on these issues, but will focus on how to handle communication about them in a crisis. Students are expected to behave honestly, ethically, and politely with classmates and the instructor.

In our online environment, being present is important, so please keep cameras on. Chatting while the professor or another student is talking is unacceptable behavior. Please consider that video calls sometimes have delays, and while I will ensure everyone's voice is heard, be conscious of not speaking over each other.

Cell phones and other electronic devices should be turned off completely during class. In the event of an emergency, notify the professor at the start of class. Laptops may be used for notetaking, but surfing the Internet, checking or sending email, playing games, and other online activities not related to class are strictly prohibited.

Additional Information

End of Course Evaluations

Students are requested to provide feedback on instruction quality by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu/evals>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester.

Resources and Support

Resources and support are available at <https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/uf-syllabus-policy-links/> for academic policies, academic resources, and health and wellness resources.

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (<https://disability.ufl.edu/>) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

Important Notes

The professor reserves the right to make changes, if necessary, to the grading system, schedule, or other course matters.

The professor may be reached via email but will not be able to respond immediately to communication. As a rule, allow up to 48 hours for a response. Therefore, barring an emergency, contact the professor well in advance of a quiz or deadline to provide adequate response time.

Students are not permitted to bring guests to class unless special arrangements have been made with the professor beforehand.

If you notice yourself having trouble in the course, contact the professor immediately. Please feel free to approach the professor about any concerns or comments about this class, and I will be happy to meet with you by appointment.

In addition to required and recommended readings, you are expected to maintain comprehensive class notes because class lectures often contain information not found in the readings. You will be quizzed on this information.

Weekly Topic Schedule Fall 2025

Class Date	Readings for that Class
Monday, January 12	Course Introduction and overview Ch. 1 Crisis communications theory Read: Coombs, Ch.1 Crisis communications theory Assignment: Preferences for Group Projects Due Friday, Jan. 16, 11:59 pm
Monday, January 19	MLK DAY -- NO CLASS
Monday, January 26	Topic: Writing a Case Study Topic: Understanding Risk for Crisis Management Read: Coombs, Ch. 2 Assignment: Topic for Case Study Due Friday, January 23, 11:59 pm
Monday, February 2	Topic: The Risk Mitigation Process Read: Coombs Ch. 3
Monday, February 9	Topic: Crisis Simulation Exercise Topic: Vulnerability Exercise Discuss: CGP: Groups, roles & responsibilities
Monday, February 16	Topic: Crisis preparedness Read: Coombs Ch. 4-5, article in Canvas Topic: Crisis Group Project (CGP) Assignment: CGP Topic Due, Friday, February 20, 11:59 pm
Monday, February 23	Topic: Crisis preparedness (continued) Read: Coombs Ch. 4-5 Assignment: Quiz 1
Monday, March 2	Topic: Crisis preparedness (continued) Read: Coombs Ch. 4-5 Assignment #1 Due
Monday, March 9	Assignment: Case Study Presentations Assignment: Case Study Paper Due, Sunday Oct. 19, 11:59 pm

Class Date	Readings for that Class
Monday, March 16	Assignment #2
Monday, March 23	Topic: Recognizing Crisis Read: Coombs Ch. 6
Monday, March 30	Topic: Managing the post-crisis challenges and opportunities Topic: Postcrisis concerns Read: Coombs, Ch. 7 and 8 Assignment #3 Due
Monday, April 6	Assignment: Quiz 2 Be a crisis manager
Monday, April 13	NO LIVE CLASS - Workday for CGP
Monday, April 20	Assignment: CGP presentations Assignment: CGP presentation and paper submission due, Sunday, April 19, 11:59 pm

Summary of Key Due Dates (Submissions due by 11:59 pm on date listed)

- **January 16** – Fill out survey about team preference projects
- **January 26** – Topic for individual case study due
- **February 20** – CGP Topic Due
- **February 23** – Quiz 1
- **March 2**– Assignment 1 Due
- **March 8** – Individual Case Study Paper Due
- **March 16** – Assignment #2 Due
- **March 30** – Assignment #3 Due
- **April 6** – Quiz #2
- **April 19** – CGP Presentation and Paper Submissions Due
- **April 20** – CGP Presentations