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How to Hold a Press Conference

Media relations students gain real-world experience by staging a mock press conference to address recent issues at Carnival Cruise Lines



Melanie Reagan '13 (left), Bre'Anna Metts-Nixon '13 and Christopher Lane '13 took on roles of company spokespeople during a mock press conference staged for a media relations course.

May 3, 2013 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – Carnival Cruise Lines has faced its fair share of trouble in recent months -- who can forget the ship with over 3,000 passengers adrift without power for four days in the Gulf of Mexico, while the patrons faced a sewage problem and food shortage? -- but on May 2, the cruise line's public relations nightmare served as a dream project for RWU's senior-level media relations course. A mock press conference put students in the shoes of Carnival officials as they deftly navigated media questions and steered the conversation back to key messages much like the more seasoned company representatives they aimed to emulate.

Their cultivated *mea culpa* coupled with on-point answers demonstrated just how much preparation and practice the students had put into their inaugural press conference – a time-consuming and important event that will serve as a centerpiece for many of these public relations majors in their future careers.

In assigning the press conference to her students, Assistant Professor of Communication Hume Johnson charged them to act as Carnival's chief operating officer and director of operations in addressing the cruise line's recent safety and food issues. As Carnival spokespeople, seniors Christopher Lane and Melanie Reagan informed the "media" in attendance (roles filled by classmates, journalism students and other members of the campus community) of the company's efforts in redressing these incidents, as well as the steps that had been implemented to prevent future catastrophes.

“I, on behalf of Carnival Cruise Lines, would like to give those affected as well as their families a formal apology,” said Lane, a public relations major and psychology minor. “Safety has and will always be our number one priority. Despite the tragic and fearful events, we at Carnival Cruise Lines are seizing this opportunity to learn from our mistakes.”

While holding the press conference itself was the product of the assignment, students learned just as much from the research and planning process. As a class, they researched Carnival’s recent incidents and how actual company representatives handled public relations in the aftermath. They determined their key messages and how best to express it. Then they got down to the nitty-gritty of organizing a press conference – writing press releases and compiling media information kits, and pitching media outlets interested in attending.

The students staged the press conference in Global Heritage Hall, with the Carnival logo on a screen behind Lane and Reagan as they delivered their messages to the public and fielded questions from the media representatives.

Finding the event “nerve-wracking but fun,” Reagan said it was an opportunity for her to translate what she’s learned in the classroom to a real-world experience. She (assuming the role of Carnival’s director of operations) and Lane both had to think on their feet when answering questions from the audience.

“In our classes we don’t have these opportunities to experience things that are more like real life, so it was really valuable to experience,” said Reagan, a public relations major with minors in marketing and sociology and anthropology.

In fact, the news conference was the culmination of a number of assignments that Johnson integrated into the course to provide students a taste of real-world media relations. Having had this hands-on practice to develop applicable skills – public speaking, preparing a strong message and sticking to it during unscripted segments – will serve him well while searching for a career after graduating this May, Lane said.

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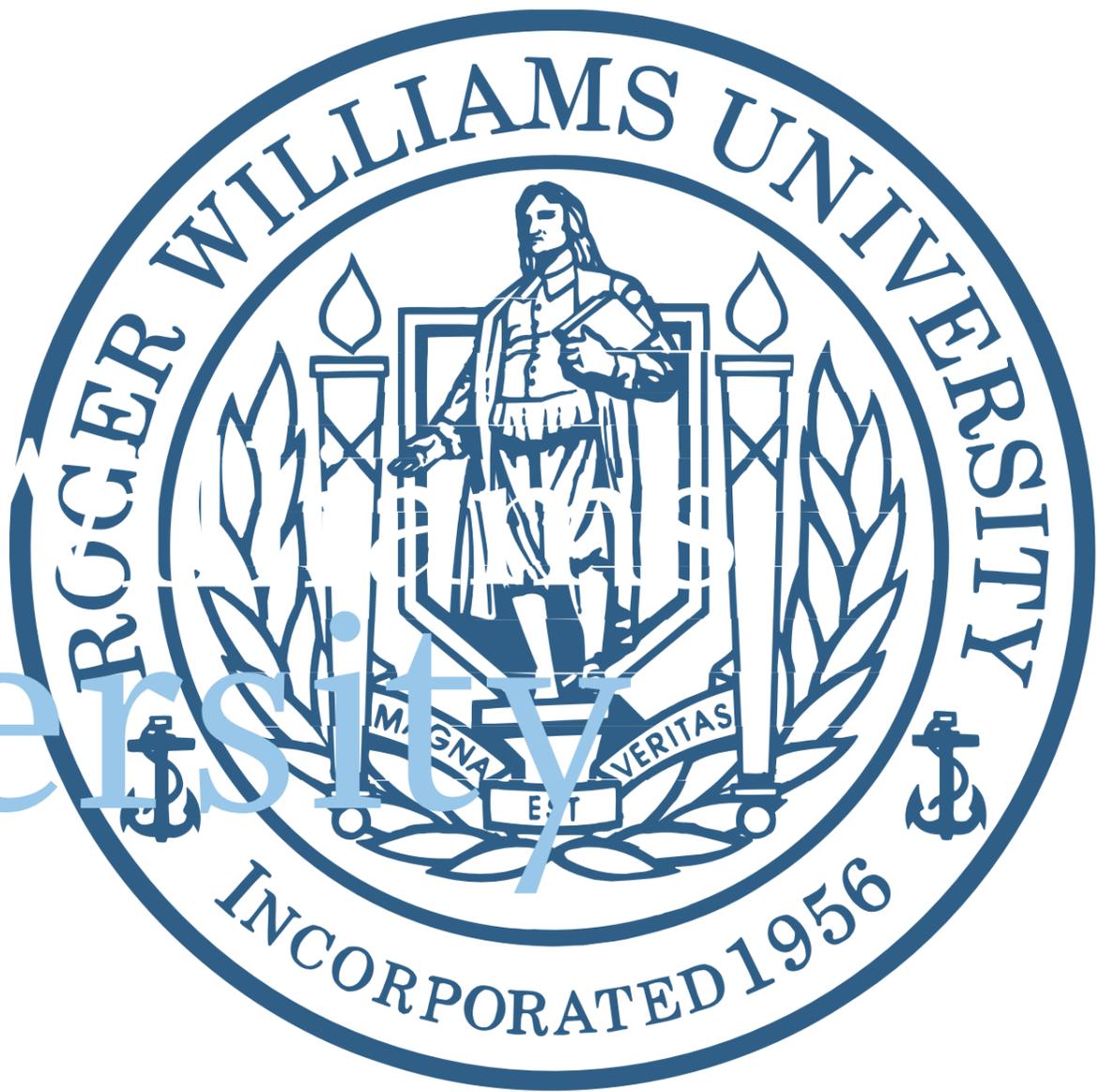
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