

Tips for Working with Your School's Communications Office

Most large universities and institutions, and some schools within universities, have a communications or public affairs office. The staff of these offices, often called public information officers (PIO) or communications directors, generally oversee the institution's external and internal communications efforts and can be a tremendous resource in helping you develop a dissemination strategy for your research.

A proactive and positive relationship with your institution's Public Information Officer will help you raise the profile of your research and you as a public intellectual and expert in your field. This in turn may lead to increased funding opportunities, career advancements, etc.

There are several ways that the communications office can help you, not least of which is helping to tease out the findings of your research that are most salient for the public and crafting messages around them. Then, the staff can help you by writing and distributing news releases, arranging press conferences when appropriate, placing stories in internal publications, including you as an expert in their "experts list" or speaker's bureau, and pitching you and your work directly to the media representatives they know.

However, **first and foremost** you need to understand the protocol at your school or institution for accessing the services of the communications office. At some schools, faculty must direct all contact with the PIO through the program director, dean, or other liaison. At others, individuals are encouraged to work directly with the staff of the communications office.

If it is appropriate at your school or institution, by all means develop a relationship with the communications director. This is the key to getting the help you need when you need it most. Sure, the PIO can help you write a press release and facilitate news coverage of your latest research, but if you approach them early and as a long-term partner, this may open the conversation up to a broader interest in your work and will promote open lines of communication and dialogue. Knowing who you are and the scope of your work will make it easier for the PIO to respond to you when your research is about to be published or the news media calls looking for an expert in your area.

Here are a few tips to help you connect effectively with your institution's communications staff.

- 1) Call them! Let them know well in advance when you're doing some interesting research, if you want to be included on their experts list, or if you have other news. Don't assume they already know about you and your work.
- 2) Have a sense of your key messages. Having a draft of your key messages or "elevator speech" in mind when you first reach out to the PIO may generate a better conversation and help to establish your credibility.
- 3) Give them time to work. Timing is critical in the news business. The more notice you provide the office about a research finding, journal article or other news, the better they can help you in developing an effective dissemination strategy. If you have a journal article coming out and you don't want, or can't have, publicity in advance you

should still let your PIO about it. Timing a press release to the date of publication for your article is important to avoid producing “old news.” Together, you and the PIO can develop a timeline for a press release that gets you the publicity you need but doesn’t compromise your journal article.

- 4) Prepare for your meeting. Whether you have two hours or two minutes to meet with the PIO, be sure to bring clear and cohesive materials to leave behind. Your materials should describe your work in lay terms with minimal complicated scientific terminology. Most important, include a brief summary of your key messages for use as talking points and later reference by the PIO.
- 5) Follow-up: Keep notes during your discussion and be sure to send any reference materials or answers to questions that came up at your meeting as soon as possible. Not only will this help to build your professional credibility, but it will promote confidence in your ability to respond quickly to reporters.