



Working with the Media: Tips for Civic Engagement Professionals

Preparing Now to Save Time Later

One key to working effectively with the media is to be prepared with appropriate information so you can initiate story ideas or respond to opportunities quickly and efficiently. Here are some tips to help facilitate this process.

1. **Work with campus media relations staff** to let them know about upcoming story opportunities and to learn what kinds of information they'll need to help them get coverage. Share general information about your activities and their impact as well as dates and other information about specific programs or events.
2. **Prepare “boilerplate,”** or standard language you can use in multiple contexts, for your initiatives. Include information on the community need you're meeting, how you're meeting it, and the impact you're making or expecting to make, including any relevant data. This language can be included in any media advisories, press releases, and talking points. Where possible, describe both the immediate local impact and broader social benefits. Be sure to use accessible language; leave out jargon and descriptions of internal processes and benefits.
3. **Keep files of campus activity by issue area** (e.g., literacy, poverty, hunger, health care). If you've got information ready on the key issues your programs address, you can be prepared to discuss your work in a given area when the opportunity arises.
4. **Do the same for seasonal projects** or events so you can be prepared to seek publicity for them well in advance. These may include:
 - Annual service days/weeks
 - Alternative spring breaks
 - Thanksgiving/other holiday projects
 - Elections/voting initiatives
 - Others (e.g., MLK Day of Service)
5. **Provide plenty of lead time** if you want coverage for a seasonal program or a specific event. Prepare a media advisory with key talking points (who, what, when, where, and why it's important) to send to targeted media 1-2 months in advance. Follow up (or check with your media relations office about following up) a week before and again the day before.
6. **Be prepared to respond to other news or events** that are relevant to your civic engagement work, including news about a given issue area (e.g., release of new data on literacy or poverty rates), higher education news (e.g., funding cuts, public criticism of higher ed costs), natural disasters requiring relief efforts, or other local, state, or national news. Work with your media relations staff to determine and prepare the most effective response—a news article, op ed piece, etc.

7. **Keep abreast of the campus's overall community efforts**, including related strategic objectives, community partnerships, initiatives (including those outside of your purview), and awards or recognition (President's Community Service Honor Roll, Carnegie Community Service Classification, Campus Compact student/faculty awards, etc.) so you can discuss your work in the context of a broader campus effort.

Demonstrating Impact with Quantitative Data

It's important to decide on and put in place measuring systems before a program or project starts. This will let you provide hard facts, which will lend weight and credence to your story and make it more newsworthy. Track data in key areas such as:

- Number of students engaged
- Number of service hours worked
- Number of community members engaged
- Other service metrics (e.g., number of meals served, acres cleaned)
- Outcome measures (e.g., improved grades or drop-out rates among K-12 students)
- Value of student service (total hours X \$/hour)*

*The Independent Sector currently values volunteer time in Maine at \$16.53/hour. This figure is updated annually; see http://independentsector.org/volunteer_time/. See the national Campus Compact website at www.compact.org/about/statistics for examples of how to use this data.

Once you've got a system in place to track data on individual programs, you can aggregate the data to get figures for overall campus impact. This is worth doing even if you have to pull back on programming a little; remember that tracking data isn't an end in itself but rather a means of marshaling support for your efforts.

Demonstrating Impact with Qualitative Information

Quotes, anecdotes, and other qualitative information can be a very effective way to convey the impact your program has on individual lives. Collect quotes and stories (and permission to use them) from community partners and those they serve about how your work has affected them. Keep a file of program participants and others who are willing to speak to the media, including contact information and best ways/times to contact them. These champions may include:

- Students
- Faculty members
- Community, government, or business leaders
- Other community members (e.g., children, parents, others served—this is an important but often-neglected group to hear from)

You can solicit stories and other qualitative information by asking questions such as "What was the most significant change that took place among participants over the past...?" [specify a time period if appropriate]. This information will provide not only useful quotes but also good feedback on the program and a sense of which quantitative information to track.

(See *The Most Significant Change Technique*, Davies & Dart, 2005, especially the appendices, which offer sample stories and story collection formats: <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf/>.)

Talking to the Media

These tips will help you prepare for an interview, keep the interview on track, and follow up in ways that will help build future relationships.

- Give briefing materials to the interviewer in advance.
- Have in mind a specific communications message and 3–4 key talking points.
- Make sure you get across your communications message. Use brief (one- or two-line) points that people will remember. End with a brief recap.
- Focus on information that will inform, motivate, and activate the audience. Make your issue newsworthy and important.
- Develop anecdotes and other ways to humanize your issue.
- Be honest, positive, and to the point. Keep your answers short.
- Use language that is natural. Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Don't hesitate to say, "I don't know; I'll get back to you." Then do so in a timely manner.
- Never go off the record.
- Answer only one question at a time. If there are multiple questions, answer the one you want to address, then bridge to your key points.
- If the questions don't allow you to convey your communications message, use the questions asked to bridge to your talking points.
- Think for a moment before answering. Rapid responses appear rehearsed. The extra time will also help you to develop a more strategic response.
- Take time to clarify any points that you think may have been misunderstood.
- After the interview, follow up with any requested or supporting information and offer to serve as a future resource.
- Write a personal thank-you note once the story airs. If possible, note the positive impact the story had.

(Adapted from *The AmeriCorps Retention Project Media Toolkit, 2011–2012.*)

Writing Press Releases

Work with your media relations staff to establish a process for writing press releases. Will they write the release from information you provide, or will you write a draft for them to edit and adapt? Whether you're providing a draft or just talking points, keep the language simple, jargon-free, and focused on the community impact/benefit of the work described. Put the most important information up front, including the main take-away to be used in the headline.

Quotations from campus or community leaders or others involved in the program or event provide both an opportunity to shine light on their role and a way to explain the work in an interesting way. Talk to important participants to see whether they're willing to be quoted and establish a procedure and timeline for getting the quote approved.

Following are key points to focus on in drafting a press release (from *Sharing Your National Service Story: A Guide to Working with the Media* (CNCS, 2005, http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/media_guide.pdf/):

- Who is the story about and whom does it affect?
- What is happening and why is it newsworthy?
- When is the story occurring? Did it happen already or will it happen in the future?
- Where is the story taking place? Is it national or local?
- Why does this story matter? Why should readers care?
- How does this story affect the community? How does it affect the nation?

In addition to the usual news sources, be sure to send press releases to Campus Compact for state and national distribution and to post them on the campus website.

Getting Good Photos

Talk with your media relations staff to see whether they prefer to take their own photos or to have you supply photos. If you are taking your own photos, here are a few simple tips to get the best results:

Set your camera to the highest resolution it allows. The larger the photo, the more flexibility you'll have in cropping the image and using it in different media. (Print requires a resolution of 300 pixels per inch, or ppi; web use requires a much lower 72 ppi.)

Take action shots from various angles. Action shots help the viewer understand the work and are more exciting than “grip-and-grin” photos.

Watch the context: Avoid photos of people with drinks in hand or who look as if they have a plant growing out of their head.

Get permission from your subjects. Your media relations department can provide you with details on what your school requires. Campus Compact for New Hampshire can also provide you with a standard photo permission form. Keep this on file.

Give each photo file a descriptive title and date. This allows better digital archiving for retrieval later and will let others know what the photo is about (e.g., if you're sending one as an attachment).

Use captions to highlight the work your photo illustrates. A good caption is written in the present tense, answers the 5Ws, and gives the photo context. Here's an example:

Students and faculty at San Jose State University march in support of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project, which calls on the federal government to pass legislation creating 100,000 jobs to rebuild the schools, hospitals, fire and police stations, and parks damaged in Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Finally, never grab a photo from the web to use in print. Besides possibly violating copyright laws, the photo will most likely be too low-resolution for print—even if it looks fine on screen.