

## Guidance for Advising Student Organizations on Media Relations

### Division of Student Affairs

### Updated Spring 2011

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Student organizations often seek advice about media engagement. While students do not need staff permission to engage with the media, they often express appreciation for guidance. This document is meant to inform student groups who request more information about media involvement with their organization.

For additional support, please contact Katherine Cutler (kc2731@columbia.edu) or Public Affairs.

### Common Myths about Engaging with Media

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The following three “myths” have surfaced with regularity among student organizations. Students should understand the realities of working with the media BEFORE they decide to engage.

**Myth #1:** Because we have been approached by the media, we are obligated to respond.

*FALSE! Reporters can be persistent, but you are NEVER under any obligation to respond or provide your reasoning.*

**Myth #2:** By providing factually correct information and carefully worded statements, we can control the outcome of the story and ensure it is in our favor.

*FALSE! Remember that even the most factually accurate statements may be interpreted differently or printed out of context. You should not expect to control the outcome of the story.*

**Myth #3:** If the media misinterprets our response or takes our words out of context, they will be held accountable and we will be able to do something about it.

*FALSE! It is unlikely there will be any recourse, except in the most extreme cases.*

### Advice for Student Organizations Considering Media Engagement

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- As a student organization, it is your decision whether or not to engage with the media.
- Engaging with the media does NOT mean guiding the message or directing the story. Even with the best intentions, information can and will be interpreted in any number of ways.
- Media coverage can be a very powerful tool; and it can work both for and against your organization. Therefore, you should strongly weigh the pros and cons of engaging with the media BEFORE you make a decision. Consider the following questions:
  1. What are you trying to accomplish?
  2. How can the media, and this particular media outlet, help you achieve these goals?
  3. How might your message be misconstrued? How would this impact your organization?
  4. How has this reporter/media outlet portrayed similar stories in the past?
- Regardless of the reporter’s persistence, it is always within your right to decline to respond. You do not need to provide a reason; a simple “no comment” is plenty. Anything more you say could be interpreted or printed.

- If you do respond, please remember that you would be doing so on your own behalf and NOT on behalf of Columbia or Student Affairs. You should also discuss this with the rest of your group, to determine whether the statement would be on behalf of the organization or individual members.
- If you respond initially, you are not obligated to engage in any follow-up conversations. You are always at liberty to walk away from the situation.

### **Advice for Student Organizations Considering Media Presence at an Event**

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- Consider how press may change the dynamics at your event. For example, attendees or presenters may be more inhibited in terms of what they ask/say. How might this impact the goals or success of your event?
- All presenters or speakers at the event should be consulted IN ADVANCE and should be “ok” with media presence. They should also understand what this means in terms of potentially being quoted.
- There will inevitably be additional logistical considerations, and these will need to be managed through the event review process. Don’t underestimate the extra time and work involved.

### **Advice for Student Group Advisers Contacted By Media Directly**

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- Student Affairs does not respond to media on behalf of students or student organizations.
- We would never provide student contact information to a reporter. Rather, you can share the media inquiry with the student organization’s leaders and ask them to contact the reporter directly if they would like to engage.
- Some cases require that we put the reporter in contact with a student. This is done only with a student’s written permission. Permission is usually obtained via Public Affairs or the Dean of Student Affairs Office, as there is standard language we use for this outreach.

### **When to Request Additional Support**

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In the following circumstances (this list is not exhaustive!), additional input from Public Affairs or the Dean of Student Affairs Office may be warranted:

- When the media outlet is a national or international news source;
- When the media outlet would like to conduct student interviews or otherwise profile students on campus (*Columbia’s press policies: <http://news.columbia.edu/pressroom/825>*);
- When the student organization wants to do proactive outreach to major media outlets;
- When the student organization decides to invite (or permit, as the case may be) media to attend an on-campus event;
- When the student organization is collaborating with Student Affairs or another administrative office on the particular project or initiative (*for example, NSOP*); or
- When the media is inquiring about an issue that has already received widespread media attention (*for example, last semester’s drug arrests or the Kingsmen flier incident*).