

Media Relations in Higher Education

Proven Strategies for

**Working with
Your Student Press**

BROADSIGHT  **TRACKER**

Most media relations teams at universities and other higher education institutions spend more time and energy dealing with the student press than any other media outlet.

We know this because our [Broadsight Tracker](#) data shows it. One leading Western Canadian university had 192 issue-related media enquiries in 2023, and 64 of them came from the student newsroom. That's one-third of requests.

If you need any more reason to have a plan for the student press, consider these:

- When it comes to institutional matters, student journalists will dig where mainstream journalists won't.
- Smart mainstream news outlets monitor the student press for story ideas, and can turn a student-driven story into national news.

- Student media's influence is greatest with audiences that are important to your institution: students, faculty, and other members of the campus community.
- Student journalists are often quite inexperienced, which brings an extra element of risk to your engagement with them.

For higher-education communications professionals, the relationship with student press is important and sometimes challenging. Yet it doesn't always get the strategic thought it deserves.

This guide aims to change that. We asked media relations professionals from institutions across Canada, including five U15 universities, for their tips on dealing with the student press.

Their answers provide insights that you and your team can put into practice today.

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Establish Internal Standards for Engagement



You're going to get a lot of requests from student media.

Internally, establish your criteria for which types of requests your office will accommodate. Focus on requests from established news outlets, including student media. (Student journalists working on class assignments is another matter—you can decide whether you have the capacity to accommodate those, but stick to your decision.)

If a student request meets your criteria, assign it priority as you would any other media request. Consider the news outlet's potential impact among your target audience, and the value of the topic to the university.

**Outlet's potential impact
among target audience**

- Interview with senior leader
- Provide new response
- Provide current, already approved response
- Share existing public-facing messaging
- Decline to respond
- No response

Value of the topic to your institution

Establish Internal Standards for Engagement (cont'd)



Whenever possible, limit your engagement to providing existing materials rather than a custom response tailored to their questions. Don't assume students have seen meeting minutes, policy pages, or other content buried on your institution's website. Point them in the right direction. If you have existing messaging on their topic, use that.

If you have no existing material to provide, you can always decline to comment. However, a custom response may be warranted if any of the following apply:

- the request deals with critical student issues (e.g. health/wellness, sexual violence)
- you're concerned about the potential for errors in the coverage
- the story could lead to wider media coverage of reputational concern

Does the request tick any of these boxes?



Critical student issues



Potential for inaccuracy



Wider media interest

If so, consider a custom response.

Get an Early Start on Relationship-Building



One of the challenges of student media is that their staff and leadership turn over regularly. Proactively reach out to leadership early in their tenure and meet with them. Do this at least once a year, if not more.

During these meetings, establish best practices for communication. Set clear expectations and outline your procedures for handling media requests. This includes defining who requests should be directed to, response times, and how requests will be prioritized.

You may ask to have all student media requests flow through a single point of contact such as their managing editor, and that's the person who will receive your responses.

You could also put a limit on the number of weekly requests.

Some offices provide a 'Tips for Reporters' sheet at the beginning of term that spells out names of senior leadership. To interview them, they have to go through your office. Explain that those leaders have demanding schedules and travel a lot, so a quick turnaround is unlikely.

“While you won’t always agree with each other, getting to know the editor and reporters on a professional basis will help when circumstances get rocky. You don’t want your first contact with an editor to be over a disputed story or a reporter’s conduct.”

**Director of Marketing and Communications
at a Western Canadian university**

Maintain Regular Communication



Keep lines of communication open with student media through regular meetings and updates. This helps in building trust and ensuring that student journalists have the support they need when covering complex issues.

A little personal contact goes a long way. Don't be afraid to call instead of emailing. It can be more effective, and it reminds students that institution staff are human beings, too.

Include Them!



Student media should be on your media list for all news releases and advisories.

Whenever possible, share big institutional announcements with them under embargo, especially if you are doing so with other media. Of course, first make sure they know how an embargo works and that they're committed to respecting it.

Invite them to any interesting on-campus events they might consider newsworthy, such as a strategic plan presentation, or a student town hall meeting on a contentious topic.

Don't forget about them when responding to issues. It's easy to get preoccupied with major media, but breaking news is of no less interest to students. This will strengthen your relationship with editors.

Provide Guidance and Support



As exasperating as it can sometimes be dealing with the high volume of requests from student media, remember that they are students. They are honing their craft and learning. Try to be patient and understanding.

Some student journalists are more mature and have worked in professional settings. Others are straight out of high school and more familiar with writing on a phone than working a professional email. They may communicate in very different ways than you're accustomed to.

(think lowercase letters and emojis 🙄).

"I offer the senior editors off-the-record background briefings on anything they care to ask about. I sometimes offer them proactively to try to avert coverage I sense is going to be of poor quality, go down a bad tangent or require corrections. They don't take advantage of this enough."

**Director of Media Relations
at a top Ontario university**

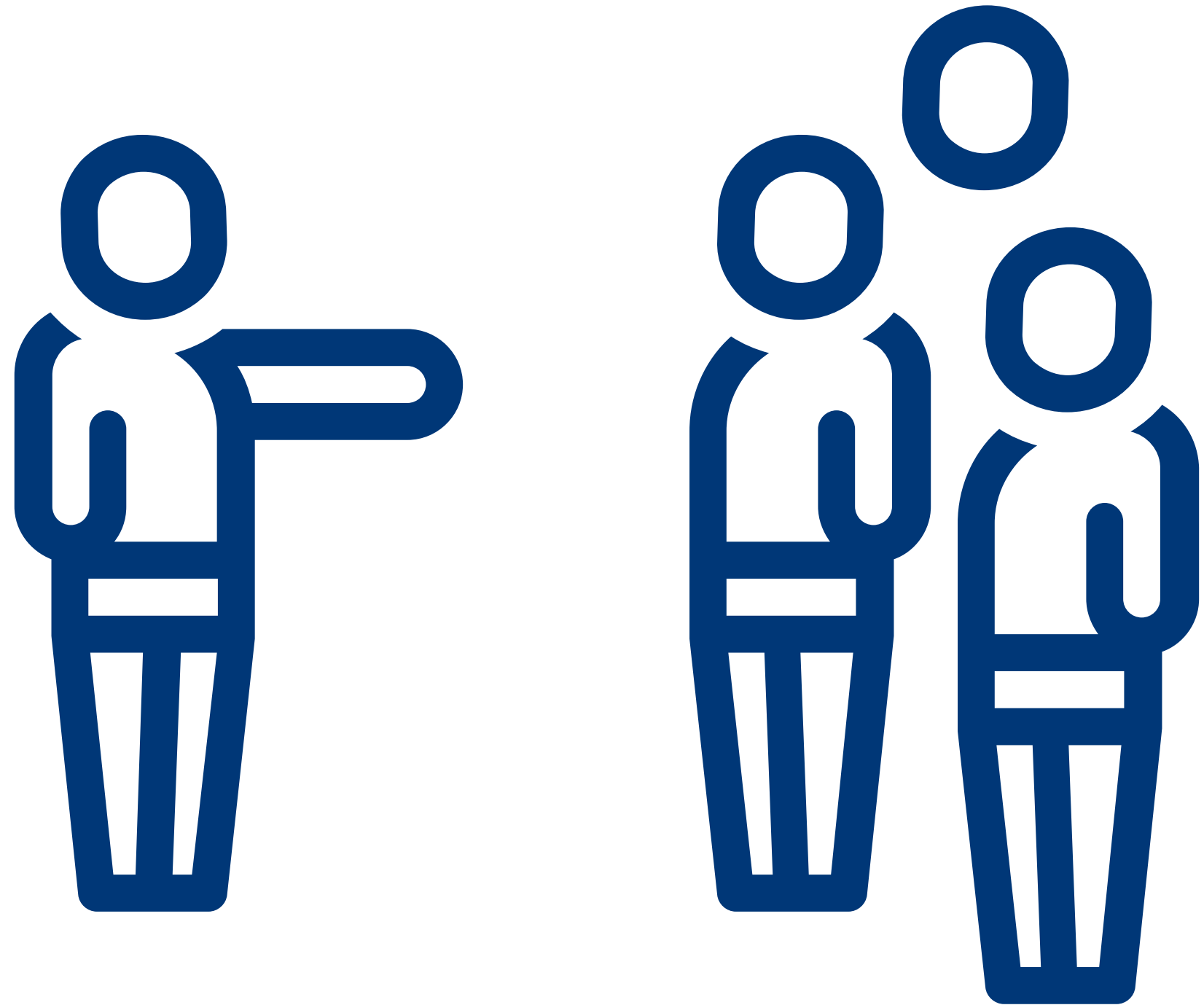
Make Them Do The Work



You can give student journalists a little coaching, but don't do their job for them. If the answers to their questions can be found on a web page or with a little bit of searching, let them know and send them back. But if they ask, "Is this the right person?" then direct them accordingly.

Encourage them to do background research and clarify questions before submitting interview requests. Student journalists often ask for an interview with Person X about Topic Y without providing any more information. If it's a broad topic, insist that they come up with specific lines of questioning before you arrange the interview.

This not only improves the quality of their inquiries but also helps them understand the complexity of your institution's operations.



Educate Them About Institutional Processes



Make sure students understand that your responses may require input from multiple stakeholders, and that's why immediate answers aren't always possible.

Many student journalists have a misconception that institutional responses come only from the person to whom they're attributed. Let them know that many people around the table are providing input due to the complexity of institutional decisions.



Respect Journalistic Integrity, Enforce Journalistic Standards



Understand and respect the independence of the student press. Open dialogues about the responsibilities and impacts of their work are crucial, but attempts to control or interfere are inappropriate.

Point out when journalistic standards, guidelines and ethics are not respected. You can point to guidelines from major journalism associations (at right), so they know it's not just you saying this. Point out conflicts-of-interest (e.g. a student who works in a certain department covering a story about that department), single-source stories, and the selective use of journalistic best practices.

Ask for corrections promptly, as many times as you need to.



Society of Professional Journalists



International Federation of Journalists



Canadian Association of Journalists

Get to Know Their Instructors



If the student journalists represent the journalism program at your institution, it can be helpful to know their instructors, their background and what they expect from students covering campus topics. Offer to do a guest lecture on media relations and how your department works with journalists.

"Our media relations staff were getting inundated with student journalists writing stories as an upper-year assignment with the intent to get published in the student newspaper. Many had unrealistic expectations about whom they could interview and when," said the director of marketing and communications at a Western Canadian university. "By meeting with the instructor and department head, we agreed on a process that included more story pitch vetting by the instructor, and we gave a guest lecture to explain how media relations works from 'the other side.'"

Offer Professional Development



Offer to co-host workshops or panels to provide student journalists with skill development opportunities. This could be a panel or hands-on workshop that includes a colleague from another institution, or one of your journalist contacts. The topics could be anything from reporting on short deadlines, to ethical use of unnamed sources, to pitching stories to editors.

They'll benefit from the training, but so will your institution.

Offering these sessions jointly helps build a relationship with the paper's editor and staff, and bridges the "us vs. them" mentality.

Manage Requests Efficiently



The screenshot shows the BROADSIGHT TRACKER interface. At the top, there's a header with the logo and a dark blue bar. Below it, a table lists various media requests. The table has columns for Topic, Type, Unit, Lead/Expert, Outlet, Journalist, Campaign, Team Members, and Status. The Status column uses color coding: yellow for 'In Progress' and green for 'Completed'. The bottom of the interface shows pagination information: 'Rows per page: 50' and '1-50 of 1103'.

Topic	Type	Unit	Lead/Expert	Outlet	Journalist	Campaign	Team Members	Status
University of low-cost home program	Issue Simple Statement	UP Students	Andrew Papp	Ukrainian	Katerina Delorme		Theresa Fletcher	In Progress
Building projects on campus	Tactic Issue Response, Tactic Media Request, Issue Information Consultation, Issue Issue Notification	UP External, UP Finance and Operations	Jensen Adams, Michael White, Grant Miller, John Miller	Ukrainian	Julian Ford		Matthew Rasmussen, Priscilla Carlson	In Progress
UP (UC) Engineering	Tactic Issue Response, Tactic Media Request	Applied Science	Sheryl Smith French	Ukrainian	Wendy Jaraman		Lui Xia Liu	In Progress
Upgradable vehicles	Tactic Issue Response, Tactic Media Request	UP Students	Lavonne Mathews	Ukrainian	Tony Carter		Lui Xia Liu	In Progress
Have cancelled in Vancouver	Issue Simple Statement, Issue Story Kit	UP Students	Samantha Ford, Lavonne Mathews	Ukrainian	Wendy Zheng		Matthew Rasmussen	Completed
Work (UC)	Tactic Media Request	UP Students	Mark Toot	Ukrainian	Nguyen Quang		Matthew Rasmussen	Completed
Incidence viral rate increase	Issue Issue Notification, Tactic Issue Response, Issue Simple Statement	UP Students	Andrew Papp, Samantha Ford, Robin Cook, Sarah Antoinette Brown	Ukrainian	Bernice Wong		Theresa Fletcher	Completed

Use shared documents or a system such as [Broadsight Tracker](#) to track media requests, manage workload, and communicate status updates efficiently. This helps you prioritize requests and ultimately helps student reporters meet their deadlines.

Broadsight Tracker is a tool created for media relations teams by media relations professionals.

It helps your team track their media and issues-management work from start to finish, so you can stay organized, collaborate easily, and quickly generate analytics that demonstrate your value to the organization.

For a free demonstration, email info@broadstighttracker.ca.

The advice in this document came from an informal survey of media relations professionals at Canadian post-secondary institutions. None of them requested that their advice be attributed. A few preferred to remain anonymous.

We thank them all for their valuable input. They know who they are.

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