

## **A Comparative Analysis of Mount Royal University and the University of Calgary**

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### **Abstract**

Since March 2020, COVID-19 has posed immense challenges for post-secondary institutions, staff, faculty and students. These challenges include operational decisions and processes, as well as preventative measures and increased safety protocols on campuses. Although the scale of COVID-19 is unprecedented, it can be benchmarked against the H1N1 pandemic to help craft best practices for post-secondary communication during a global health pandemic. This paper uses a thorough review of existing literature and a comparative analysis from the 2009 H1N1 pandemic to examine the risk communications responses from Mount Royal University and the University of Calgary during COVID-19 to determine the effectiveness of both institutions' strategies. The findings suggest that proactive, timely approaches to communicating are essential to mitigate uncertainty and stress among stakeholders and provide clear, consistent messaging about operational decisions and preventative measures.

**Key Terms:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Post-secondary Institutions, Risk Communications

### **Research Question**

What are the best practices for post-secondary institutions communicating to their publics during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic presents immense challenges for post-secondary institutions to communicate effectively to internal and external stakeholders. Since March 2020, COVID-19 has directly affected many post-secondary institutions, students, staff and faculty (Huffington Post, 2020). This paper uses a critical analysis approach to compare and contrast the COVID-19 responses of two institutions in Calgary, Alberta: Mount Royal University (MRU) and the University of Calgary (U of C). It is clear that both institutions were traversing in unprecedented territory through analyzing the timelines that MRU and the U of C have followed, and their key outreach channels and target stakeholders.

In this paper, I argue that while both MRU and the U of C's responses have been effective, the U of C's communications response to COVID-19 has been more effective and timely when compared to MRU's. Both institutions were able to learn from one another and previous post-secondary pandemic responses. The following analysis critiques the response strategies of both post-secondary institutions and highlights the importance of timely, transparent and frequent messaging within risk communication.

### **Literature Review**

The following review of literature examines the work of Lango (2020), Gressman and Peck (2020) and Seale et al. (2011). These pieces of literature, in the given order, provide chronological background information on COVID-19. They explain the challenges post-secondary institutions face during the pandemic and explore the role of framing theory within COVID-19 communication and dialogue.

Lango (2020) provides a comprehensive summary of the history of COVID-19. In early December 2019, a physician based out of Wuhan, China noticed multiple patients showing symptoms of a SARS-like illness. This observation was reported to the World Health

Organization (WHO) in China on December 31, 2019. It took until mid-February for the first identified case to be confirmed in the United States of America. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Shortly after, many North American post-secondary institutions took preventative measures in accordance with regional and national public health guidelines to secure the health and safety of staff, faculty and students.

Gressman and Peck (2020) conducted a simulation to understand the unique challenges faced by post-secondary institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges range from operational decisions and processes to preventative measures and increased safety protocols on campuses. Greeman and Peck (2020) note that “moving the largest classes online is an effective tool in the arsenal to stop the spread of the disease and to minimize the disruption caused by quarantining potentially exposed students” (p. 8).

Poirier et al. (2020) draw from framing theory to analyze the dialogue around COVID-19 in 12 different Canadian mainstream news sources. This article categorizes the top headlines surrounding the global pandemic into different frames including Chinese Outbreak, Economic Crisis, Western Deterioration, Health Crisis, Social Impact and Helping Canadians (Poirier et al., 2020). The article determined that the most commonly used frame for Anglophone and Francophone outlets in Canada was the Health Crisis frame. There were also existing differences between the two languages, including the Anglophone media utilizing the Chinese Outbreak and the Social Impact frames more frequently, and the Francophone media using Economic Crisis and Helping Canadians frames (Poirier et al., 2020). These frames can be compared against the frames adopted by MRU and the U of C within their own COVID-19 communications.

### **Mount Royal University's Response to COVID-19**

Mount Royal University is a mid-sized post-secondary institution that has approximately 15,000 students, with 75.2 per cent of all students originating locally, from Calgary, Alberta (Learner and Enrolment Reporting System, 2020).

Since March 2020, Mount Royal University has primarily utilized digital strategies to communicate with their stakeholder groups as part of the institution's crisis response. Email has been a core tactic; however, Mount Royal University also developed an online webpage where all COVID-19 related updates are archived and posted (Mount Royal University, 2020). There is an existing banner on the top of all university webpages, to ensure all information is easily accessible. The central COVID-19 webpage hub is largely informational and is divided into different sections, including students, employees, public and services/supports (Mount Royal University, 2020). The hub focuses on campus updates and sharing available services with students and staff.

Since March, Mount Royal University has also utilized its existing social media accounts on Instagram and Facebook to provide students, faculty, staff and the public with pertinent updates regarding COVID-19. All social media posts direct back to the COVID-19 webpage, where more information and FAQs are available. The official MRU Instagram account has over 7,500 followers, and this is an effective direct tactic to connect with stakeholders including students and employees, as well as the public (Mount Royal University, 2020). Mount Royal University's Facebook page has over 19,000 followers, and the institution consistently mirrors their critical COVID-19 updates on both accounts to ensure consistency among the different social networks (Mount Royal University, 2020).

Mount Royal University has also incorporated framing theory to organize discourse

about COVID-19. Poirier et al. (2020) discuss the framing of COVID-19 in a Canadian news-media context, focusing on both Anglophone and Francophone outlets. Poirier et al. (2020) note that both Anglophone and Francophone outlets focus largely on crafting content through a Health Crisis frame. This frame aligns with the context seen within MRU's updates, involving keywords such as symptoms, health declaration, and pandemic (Mount Royal University, 2020). Mount Royal University's first COVID-19 communications to staff, faculty and students were released on March 3, with an influx of updates and changes to instruction arriving shortly after. (Mount Royal University, 2020). A timeline of key dates within MRU's response is useful to understand the frequency of their communications (see Figure One).

**Figure One: Key Dates for Mount Royal University's COVID-19 Updates**  
**Source: (Mount Royal University, 2020)**

- **March 3:** General update email to all students and employees outlining on-campus precautions.
- **March 16:** First communications directly to students - all face-to-face lectures are cancelled. Instructors will reach out to students for further information.
- **March 26:** Temporary amendment to grades policy - students have the option to select pass/fail.
- **March 26:** Campus updates (parking, lockers), more information about transitioning to online
- **April 7:** Announcement regarding in-person exams. All exams facilitated online.
- **April 16:** Reminder to stay home, and stay healthy.
- **April 22:** Announcement about campus closures Thursday, April 23 until Sunday, May 3 (inclusive)
- **May 14:** Announcement about uncertainty in fall, decision to be made by June 30.
- **June 1:** Early decision made regarding fall, primarily using online delivery with limited exceptions.
- **Oct 2:** Decision for winter 2021, same as fall 2020.

### **University of Calgary's Response to COVID-19**

The University of Calgary is the largest post-secondary institution in Calgary, with over 250 programs and 33,000 registered students (University of Calgary, n.d.). Since March 2020,

the University of Calgary has focused its efforts on utilizing digital communications to share timely COVID-19 updates and effectively reach their different publics. Core tactics employed by the university include developing an online COVID-19 dashboard that shows the number of cases on campus, as well as FAQs, information for staff and students, mental health support and community support (University of Calgary, 2020b).

The University of Calgary's first COVID-19 communications to staff, faculty and students was released on March 11 (University of Calgary, 2020b), and they were one of the first institutions in Alberta to announce the transition of in-person classes to online learning.

The University of Calgary has also incorporated framing theory to organize discourse about COVID-19 within their communications. Poirier et al. (2020) discuss the framing of COVID-19 in a Canadian news-media context, focusing on both Anglophone and Francophone outlets. Poirier et al. note that Anglophone outlets focus largely on crafting content through a Health Crisis and Social Impact frame. These frames align with the context seen within the U of C's crisis updates, involving key terms such as community connection, uncertainty and preventing the spread (University of Calgary, 2020b).

The University of Calgary continues to prioritize student wellbeing, offering an online mental health hub for COVID-19 specifically. The hub offers remote counselling for students, faculty and staff, and outlines support and external resources for all three stakeholder groups.

A timeline outlining the key dates within the university's response is useful to understand the frequency and structure of their communications to their community (see Figure Two).

**Figure Two: Key Dates for the University of Calgary's COVID-19 Updates****Source: (University of Calgary, 2020b)**

- **March 11:** Update for UCalgary community - monitoring the spread and taking preventative action.
- **March 13:** Announcement after consultation with experts (switching to remote learning).
- **March 14:** Monitoring continues, more detailed plans for alternate forms of course delivery.
- **March 15:** Campus updates - no class. Classes will resume virtually, on Tuesday, March 17.
- **May 14:** Announcement of mixed-delivery classes in fall.
- **June 3:** Sharing re-entry protocols for those who must come to campus.
- **June 8:** Directing students to FAQ page.
- **July 29:** Announcement of new COVID-19 dashboard to communicate campus cases.
- **Aug. 12:** Sharing updates regarding access to campus buildings.
- **Sept. 24 :** Instruction in winter 2021 will be delivered through a blend of in-person and online.

**Comparative Analysis - Case Study**

The scale of the COVID-19 pandemic is globally unprecedented; however, for the purpose of this analysis, it can be benchmarked against the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. In April 2009, a novel influenza virus emerged in the United States of America, and quickly spread across the globe (CDC, n.d.). Seale et al. (2011) analyze the awareness and receptiveness towards the communications response from an Australian university, the University of New South Wales during the H1N1 pandemic in 2009. Seale et al. discuss an online survey that the university distributed to their different publics, faculty, general university staff and students. Each of these three publics had different levels of reception to the institution's messaging tactics.

From April 30, 2009 and onward, the University of New South Wales provided

information to its publics on updates regarding the pandemic and its impacts on the institution (Seale et al., 2011). At the time of the pandemic, the University of New South Wales had over 40,000 students, significantly more than MRU and the U of C (Seale et al., 2011). Utilizing this case study to benchmark against the responses of MRU and the U of C provides a helpful framework for analyzing best practices in pandemic communications.

Seale et al. (2011) note that it can be challenging to communicate effectively during a pandemic, as “university officials seek to navigate a middle ground between inciting unnecessary fear and promoting complacency” (para. 15). This existing challenge also ties into delayed messaging, as seen in MRU’s response timeline. Given the complexity of COVID-19, the university’s crisis team needed to consider all factors and potential impacts to protect the health and safety of faculty, staff and students.

Seale et al. conclude that developing specific communication messages and strategies for different stakeholder groups on campus, such as students and staff, should be taken into consideration since the study found that different groups utilized preferred communication methods. The survey findings clarified the value of electronic communication, including email as an efficient way to reach students and staff (Seale et al., 2011). This tactic was utilized by both MRU and the U of C in response to the pandemic.

Both Mount Royal University and the University of Calgary also incorporated Smith’s (2013) informational model to craft their strategic messaging and communicate with staff, faculty and students (p. 197). Due to the severity and ever-changing nature of the pandemic, communicating through a one-way, public informational funnel allows the institutions to directly reach their stakeholders and ensure messages are clear and easily understood. To emphasize some control over the dialogue, both Mount Royal University and the University of Calgary

crafted frequently asked questions to address concerns students, staff and faculty would likely have regarding COVID-19 (Mount Royal University, 2020).

### **Looking Forward: Winter 2021**

The second-wave of COVID-19 can be seen across Canadian provinces, and in Alberta, virus case numbers are at a record-high, well surpassing the numbers from April 2020 (CBC, 2020). As of November 7, 2020, both Mount Royal University and the University of Calgary have confirmed that the majority of their classes in the upcoming winter semester will be also facilitated through online learning (Dormer, 2020). Both universities informed their publics through email communications as well as a statement published on their COVID-19 webpages.

Learning from their communications the previous semester, both universities ensured they followed timely communications to reduce uncertainty and stress amongst students, faculty and staff. Mount Royal University is primarily offering classes online, whereas the U of C is offering a mix of in-person and online courses (University of Calgary, 2020a). There is an existing list of these classes available for students to view, so they can make necessary preparations.

### **Conclusion**

It is important to remember the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially involving the constant evolution of regulations and restrictions. COVID-19 requires a multi-faceted approach on behalf of post-secondary institutions. The research within this paper shows that best practices for post-secondary institutions communicating during a pandemic include following public health guidance to prevent the spread of the virus as well as timely and frequent ongoing communications to key stakeholder groups to mitigate stress and uncertainty. The University of Calgary's initial response to halt in-person classes on March 13 was more

proactive than MRU, as MRU waited until March 16 and made their announcement reactively, following the requests of Alberta Health Services on March 15 (Mount Royal University, 2020).

The U of C's COVID-19 hub is extensive and has a large quantity of resources for students, including wellness and mental health resources, academic support and financial relief (University of Calgary, 2020b). The University of Calgary should re-organize its online portal for easier access to updates/archived messaging. MRU's online COVID-19 webpage is very accessible and easy to access and navigate through; however, it falls short in terms of actively promoting student wellness and mental health resources, which are especially vital during the pandemic (Anderson, 2020). In order to continue to provide students, faculty and staff with the best support possible, Mount Royal University should maintain ongoing communication with public health experts to support timely responses in the future, and update their online portal to prominently feature accessible mental health resources, links, and tools to promote physical and mental wellbeing. Both universities should continue to consult with public health experts to ensure they are following all necessary protocols and should prioritize the wellbeing of students, staff and faculty within their COVID-19 communications.

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