Guide to Working
With the Media
Introduction

The Office of Media and Public Relations tells the stories of the University of Mary Washington. It is our job to inform the public about the University, its people, and its programs in a way that showcases the characteristics that make UMW a great place to study, live, and work.

These stories introduce the University to new audiences and build positive recognition of the institution. In turn, we assist other parts of the UMW community with their mission, whether it’s student or faculty recruitment, fundraising, or enhancing name recognition for alumni looking for jobs or pursuing advanced degrees.

The UMW Guide to Working With the Media is intended to introduce UMW’s faculty and staff to the ways in which the Office of Media and Public Relations promotes the University of Mary Washington in the media. This guide also highlights how we can work together to enhance positive media attention for the University.

Reporting UMW News

The Office of Media and Public Relations shares news items with the media in a variety of ways. The following is a list of those ways and guidelines for submitting information to us for a news story. In all cases, the method of news sharing will be at the discretion of the news staff and determined on a case-by-case basis in order to maximize publicity for an announcement or event.

News releases: News releases are reserved for newsworthy items about the University. Because media outlets generally publish event information only in calendar form, we are reducing the number of event news releases issued. Please submit information for a possible news release three weeks in advance (or as early as you can) and include a 300 dpi photo, when appropriate.
**Calendars:** The Office of Media and Public Relations produces several calendars of public events that are targeted to specific news organizations. Currently, the office produces a calendar of cultural events and a calendar of authors who are speaking at the University. Each calendar is compiled in advance of the fall, spring, and summer semesters and is updated and re-issued to the media as new events are finalized. All public events should be submitted at least a month in advance for inclusion in a calendar and in the online University Public Events Calendar (www.umw.edu/events).

**Media pitches:** Sometimes, the Media and Public Relations staff will choose to “pitch” a story to one or more reporters rather than issue a news release. Usually, this one-on-one contact allows us to “sell” the idea to the reporter and provide immediate feedback should the reporter have any questions. Please let us know about the following items, which often result in media pitches:

- A human interest story that showcases a student’s, faculty member’s, or staff member’s unique talents or situation.
- Research studies and results.
- New scholarly publications, whether in a journal or book. (Note: While we don’t market publications to increase sales, we do market your expertise in this area, which indirectly markets a book for sale.)
- The evolution of higher education, whether it is in student life, the campus experience, new teaching methods, or something else.
- General trends in higher education, either regionally or nationally.
Expert tips: When a current event coincides with a faculty member’s area of expertise, we will suggest that person as an expert to the media. If there is breaking news within your area of expertise and you are available for comment, please contact the news office immediately so that we can put you in touch with the correct members of the media.

Press conferences: From time to time, news at the University warrants a press conference or press availability. This method of communication is reserved for major announcements or when a nationally known speaker is lecturing at the University.

Please remember that we cannot promise media coverage. The publication or airing of a story depends on a variety of factors, including the number of staff available at a media organization to work on a story, space in a publication or air time, the emergence of breaking news, or a similar story that has been reported recently.

How do I know if my story idea is newsworthy?

Please contact a member of the Media and Public Relations staff with any story ideas you have, and together we will determine if it is newsworthy. Even if the item is not deemed newsworthy by external media, we may include it on the website or within internal communications.

Generally, journalists rely on the factors below to determine whether a story idea is newsworthy:

Conflict/Controversy – Are there opposing viewpoints?
Human Interest – Does the story share something about the human experience? Does it add put a human face on a concept, idea, or current event?
Impact – How does the story affect readers/listeners/viewers?
Prominence – Does the story include a well-known person, organization, or place?
Proximity – Is the story local? Can their readers/listeners/viewers relate to it?
Timeliness – Is the story relevant today?
Unusual – Does the story relay an out-of-the-ordinary experience? Is this the first, last, biggest?
Talking To The Media

During a Media Crisis or Other Institutional Issue

As a general rule, employees are welcome to talk to a member of the media about a topic within their area of expertise. However, when faculty and staff members are asked to comment on an institutional question or an issue that relates to the entire institution, the reporter should be referred to the Office of Media and Public Relations. The Media and Public Relations staff, in cooperation with the president and the vice president for Advancement and University Relations, will determine the appropriate spokesperson on behalf of the University. The staff will refer the reporter to the appropriate source for comment.

About Your Area of Expertise

When a member of the news media contacts a faculty or staff member to comment on a topic within the employee’s area of expertise (e.g., a faculty member’s academic research or area of academic specialization), the employee may answer questions immediately, if so desired. However, if the faculty or staff member prefers to give some thought to the questions before answering, or if she or he has questions about the interview and how to respond, the Office of Media and Public Relations recommends the employee take the reporter’s telephone number and return the call as soon as possible. Faculty or staff faced with this situation may then contact a Media and Public Relations staff member who will be glad to share information about the reporter, the angle the story is likely to take, other stories the reporter may be researching or writing at the time, and any other background information that may be helpful in advance of the interview.

While it is optional for a faculty or staff member to contact the Office of Media and Public Relations before to talking with a reporter about the employee’s area of
expertise, it is very important that the Office of Media and Public Relations be notified immediately after the employee has spoken with a reporter. The office monitors and tracks the progress of all UMW-related stories to help reporters find sources and gather facts and images, when appropriate. Knowing to whom a reporter has talked will assist in the tracking process. In addition, an archive of print and broadcast news stories about the University of Mary Washington is maintained by the Office of Media and Public Relations, and these stories are emailed to members of the Board of Visitors and other important groups.

Media Interviews: Faculty and Staff
Frequently Asked Questions

When contacted by a reporter, can I respond immediately and directly to the reporter?

Yes, when a member of the news media contacts you for expert comment, you may answer questions immediately, if so desired. The decision to grant an interview is yours.

But if you feel the questions are outside your area of expertise – or if you’re asked to comment or provide information on an institutional question or an issue that relates to the entire institution – please refer the reporter to the Office of Media and Public Relations.

Can I take time to give thought or prepare answers to the reporter’s questions?

Don’t feel under pressure to speak immediately to the reporter if you’d like to gather your thoughts.

Consider taking the following steps: (1) Ask the reporter if you can call back in 10 or 15 minutes. (2) Obtain the reporter’s name and telephone number. (3) Ask about the reporter’s deadline. (4) Try to return the call in 10 minutes or so – or else you may end up playing phone tag or miss the opportunity to be included in the story.
Even when commenting within your area of expertise, taking a few moments will allow you to decide on key points you want to make. Anticipate likely questions. Jot down a few talking points.

*If I have questions about the interview, the reporter, or how to respond, what should I do?*

You may contact the Office of Media and Public Relations to get any information a staff member may have about the reporter, the angle the story is likely to take, other stories the reporter may be researching or writing at the time, and any other background information that may be helpful in advance of the interview.

*Is it possible to find out in advance what questions a reporter will ask?*

Media representatives often work under deadlines. But they sometimes have the time to email questions in advance. If a reporter is referred initially to the Office of Media and Public Relations, the staff can ask the reporter to provide a general idea of his or her area of interest and to offer at least a few questions.

*Can I go “off the record” or offer remarks “for background” so that a reporter understands the context of my remarks?*

Do not say ANYTHING to the reporter that you do not want printed or broadcast. There is no safety in speaking “off the record,” “for background,” or “not for attribution.” It is ALL on the record.

That being said, sometimes a reporter will call a faculty member or administrator for background information about a complex issue. Even though the information you provide may not appear in the media, it is important for a faculty member or administrator to take calls like this one because your willingness to help encourages the reporter to contact you or another UMW employee in the future for comments. Building relationships with reporters is a key aspect of promoting the University in the news media.
What can I do to prepare for a successful interview?

Before conducting the interview, think about the subject and develop a few key points that you want to convey. It is helpful if they are communicated in a short, concise way to be quotable. During the interview, keep answers succinct, but do not respond with “yes” or “no” answers – such responses are not likely to appear in print or in a broadcast. And, it’s OK to have notes in front of you for the interview.

It’s the reporter’s job to ask the tough questions. Don’t get defensive or lose your temper. If your topic is controversial, it’s helpful to anticipate the most difficult questions that could be asked and have responses prepared. Also, if you are confronted with a difficult or possibly negative or off-track question, bring the reporter back to your key points by responding with a positive statement that includes a fact followed by a key message. When you answer, don’t repeat a negative question. Steer answers back to your talking points by saying, “What’s important to remember is…” or “What I can tell you is…”

If you are asked a run-on question, answer individual questions one at a time or choose the part that you want to answer. You can always repeat the question back to the reporter to ensure you correctly understood and fully responded to the question.

Respond to questions in a way that will be understood by a general audience. If you are talking about a complex issue, try to use a metaphor to relate the information to something everyone is familiar with. Also, avoid using culturally, sexually, or politically insensitive language or anecdotes – it’s easy to be quoted out of context.

Finally, make sure the reporter has the correct spelling of your name, your title, and the full name of the University.
Is honesty always the best policy?

Yes. Never try to fool a reporter. Say only what you want to say. Better than saying “no comment” is explaining why you cannot answer. If a reporter’s questions indicate he has some misinformation, please offer clarification.

If you’re unsure of an answer to a question, do not guess and do not speak for another person. Do offer to get the information or refer the reporter to someone who knows the answer or who can gather the information.

What can I do to help ensure that a reporter will quote me correctly?

Here are a few things you might consider doing to improve the likelihood that you’ll be quoted accurately:

1. Try to avoid speaking faster than someone can write or type. Do not feel compelled to continue speaking if there is a pause; a reporter may need a lull in a conversation in order to finish jotting down what you’ve said.

2. At the end of an interview, ask a reporter if he has any questions. Consider encouraging a reporter to call back if necessary to clarify a point, double check a quote, or get additional information. Or, encourage a reporter to contact Media and Public Relations staff as additional questions arise.

3. A few reporters may be willing to read direct quotes back to a source. Before an interview begins, you may ask a reporter if he is willing to read back direct, or verbatim, quotes at the end of your conversation. Do not ask to see a copy of the story in advance of publication so you can correct it.

Can I ask any questions?

You are free to ask the reporter questions. Who else is a reporter talking to? When will coverage be broadcast or published?
Do I need to notify Media and Public Relations before or after I’ve had contact with a reporter?

If you choose to speak with a journalist, please alert the Media and Public Relations staff immediately after the conversation.

The Office of Media and Public Relations tracks the progress of all UMW-related stories to help reporters find sources and gather facts. Knowing to whom a reporter has talked will assist in the tracking process, and it allows the office to provide the reporter with all pertinent information.

What should I know about a broadcast interview?

The most important thing to remember for radio or television interviews is to speak in sound bites. Before the interview, develop a few points that you want to convey in the interview and prepare to communicate them concisely. Consider rehearsing your comments. It’s also important to use words that a general audience will understand and not to speak in jargon. (Vivid, descriptive quotes can be beneficial.)

In a television interview, make sure you are comfortable before the interview so that you do not fidget on camera. Also, do not swivel or rock in your chair, engage in nervous movements (like clicking a pen), or chew gum. Dress in a dark, solid top/shirt/jacket, and avoid flashy jewelry in order to present a professional appearance on camera.

When on camera, it’s important to have a conversation with the interviewer and not the camera. It will make you look more at ease, and it will help to quell any nerves you may have. Remember that any comments – even those made when cameras or tape recorders are not rolling – can be used as part of the story, so don’t say anything you wouldn’t want to appear on air.
In a live radio interview, it’s important that you know if the reporter/station will call you – or if you’re supposed to call in yourself, and at what time the phone call will take place. Finally, broadcast news often changes depending upon the day’s breaking news. Do not take it personally if your interview is bumped or canceled.

**What recourse do I have when an article or broadcast incorrectly quotes me or attributes inaccurate information to me?**

You should promptly notify the Media and Public Relations staff of any concern you may have.

If warranted, a member of the Media and Public Relations staff can bring a problem to the attention of the reporter, which may help ensure the reporter does not repeat the error in the future. In certain cases, a staff member might request a clarification or even a correction, depending on the circumstances.

Remember, too, that reporters do not write headlines or photo captions. Usually an error in one of those places has been made by someone who is not as familiar with the story.

*I talked to a reporter, but I was not quoted in the published article. Why?*

Often, a reporter will use information that you provide as background to help him write about a complex issue he may know little about. Also, though a reporter may quote you in the article, your quote may later be deleted by an editor to make room for breaking news or because of other space considerations.

Regardless, consider every interview as a step in establishing a relationship with the reporter. If you were prompt to respond to a reporter’s call or email and were helpful in providing information, the reporter is more
likely to call you again when he needs an expert in your area. And that could lead to more exposure for you and UMW in the future.

_Do I have to talk to media?_

No, you don’t have to speak to reporters. You may have a very demanding schedule. But if you do have time to speak to a media representative, media coverage can provide benefits to you and your academic department or program, as well as the University in such areas as student and faculty recruitment, institutional prominence/name recognition, and fundraising. If you don’t have time to talk, please inform the reporter or a Media and Public Relations staff member right away so that the reporter can find another source for his or her story.

**Media Resource Guide To Faculty Expertise**

The Office of Media and Public Relations maintains a website of media resources. This listing includes any full-time faculty member who wishes to have their biographical profile and areas of expertise published on the website and shared with the news media. This site is helpful for both the Media and Public Relations staff and members of the media to quickly identify a faculty expert to serve as a news source. To be included in the online Faculty Experts Guide or to update your information, contact the Office of Media and Public Relations.

In addition, when news breaks within your area of expertise and you are available to comment on it, please contact a member of the Media and Public Relations staff _immediately_. The news office will work to connect you with the appropriate regional or national reporters.
Opinion-Editorial Pieces

Opinion-editorials (op-eds) are opinion essays written by experts that are typically published on the page opposite the editorial page in newspapers. Op-eds provide an opportunity for faculty members to use their expertise on topics in the news to clarify or correct what has been reported in the press, to provide a new perspective on the issue, or to call for further action. Publication of op-eds written by faculty can call attention to the quality of UMW faculty and indirectly highlight the quality of the academic program.

The Office of Media and Public Relations assists faculty in placing op-ed articles in local, statewide, and national newspapers. By regularly working with op-ed editors, the Media and Public Relations staff remains up-to-date on current trends in newsrooms and has current contact information for the major op-ed editors.

Op-eds appear in general-circulation newspapers and are designed for all audiences. The writing level of an op-ed page may be slightly above that of news pages (generally seventh to ninth grade level), but not much higher. Op-eds often have an 800-word limit. The Office of Media and Public Relations can assist faculty by providing editing advice and information about journalistic style. Op-eds need to follow the Associated Press style guide and accepted journalistic writing practices, which are different from the requirements of academic journals. The Media and Public Relations staff also can be helpful in suggesting topics, narrowing a topic, editing, rewriting, and other tasks.

Public Records

As a state institution, the University of Mary Washington is governed by the Virginia Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and certain information must be provided to anyone who asks, including members of the public and the news media. However, as an institution of higher education,
the University is also governed by federal and state laws that limit the type of information that can be divulged about students and employees.

The Media and Public Relations staff participates in annual training sessions led by the Virginia Attorney General’s Office about the state’s FOIA and also stays current with changes in relevant federal laws, including the Federal Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA). Personnel in the office are available to consult with faculty and staff members should the news media seek information about individual students or employees.
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