



COVID-19 Case Study: Response to Higher Education Institutions

How Empathia's Black Swan Solutions supported colleges and universities with responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

The Background

Campus health concerns and safety protocols. Virtual versus in-person classes. Athletic events, performances and graduations. From the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities faced extraordinary challenges charting a safe course forward for students, faculty and staff.

In early 2020, institutions worked to meet the academic needs of students, while maintaining safe learning – and living – environments. This was complicated by the implementation of international travel restrictions, local and state emergency health declarations, state shelter-in-place/stay-at-home orders and guidance issued by the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

As the virus's impact spread across the globe, the need for clear, consistent and up-to-date communication with students, faculty, staff, parents and the larger community, became a critical component of institutions' crisis response activities.

The Challenges

As with any crisis or disruptive event, institutions' internal call centers, campus health centers and student services departments began experiencing large, sustained call volumes as a result of COVID-19. In late January 2020, Empathia began supporting colleges and universities across the country with the influx of pandemic-related calls.

Many of the initial inquiries were related to students studying abroad. From the students and their families, there were questions regarding possible travel restrictions when returning to the United States, as well as the impact returning could have on their academic status. From the campus community, there were questions about potential health risks these students posed as they returned to campus and how the institutions were addressing those risks.

As the virus began having a greater impact on the United States, the focus of inquiries shifted from study abroad students to the larger student body. Even before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, institutions were flooded with calls from concerned stakeholders, overwhelming internal campus resources.

Students, parents, faculty and staff were searching for information on a range of general topics, including exposure risk, testing procedures, quarantine guidelines and safety protocols, as well as on academic concerns, such as modified course grading scales, virtual classes, tuition refunds and housing issues. Community members were requesting updates on the institutions' plans to protect the local area from outbreak risks.

Continued high call volumes and the developing nature of the virus led to staffing and logistical obstacles for campus resources, including maintaining consistent messaging across departments and organizing information in a meaningful way to help drive the institutions' overall response.

The Support

24/7 Crisis Contact Center

Empathia's 24/7 stand-ready incident response contact center activates within 60 minutes or less of initial notification with the capacity to address more than 5,000 calls per hour.

Most of our college and university clients activated the incident response contact center to serve as the primary initial point of contact for incoming calls. A small number of clients utilized the contact center as an after-hours resource to relieve internal staff. The scalability of our dedicated contact center allows Empathia to flex staffing to meet the needs of the institutions we serve.

Using verified information provided by the institutions, our crisis specialists provided accurate and up-to-date information to callers seeking general information. Our contact center's team of crisis responders adapted often as the virus's impact continued to spread and the needs of our clients evolved.

By addressing general inquiries from students, parents, faculty and staff within the contact center, the institutions were able to focus on the more critical inquiries, as well as ongoing response planning and coordination.

One university's local sheriff's department expressed gratitude to the institution for implementing a dedicated call center and coordinated response plan, easing the burden on the department's call volumes.



Information Management

Empathia's proprietary Disaster Information Management System (DIMS®) is an integrated application containing the features and capacities necessary to manage the high volume of people-associated information generated by large-scale critical events. It combines the functions of incident management software with databases that manage demographic characteristics.

Throughout the COVID-19 activations, DIMS served as a crucial collaboration and data-sharing tool. It allowed Empathia and institution responders to quickly gather data trends, update critical information in real time and predict call volume surges.

Reputation Management

Access to timely, accurate information is vital during a crisis. In the early months of the pandemic, many stakeholders were obtaining inaccurate information from news outlets, by word-of-mouth or through social media resources not affiliated with the colleges or universities.

The Black Swan incident response contact center assisted the institutions by providing callers 24/7 access to the most up-to-date, verified information and emotional support. These steps can help foster and maintain goodwill and deter negative publicity and social media backlash.

The Impact

16

College and university activations in 2020 due to COVID-19

10,500+

Total inbound calls handled by the incident response contact center for these institutions

4.6 Minutes

Average length of time callers spent communicating with our crisis specialists

30 Seconds

Average queue time experienced by inbound callers

30%

Calls received outside typical campus call center hours

77% of all calls handled by Empathia's team required no further assistance from the institutions.



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When you find yourself at the intersection of challenges and compassion, contact us to learn more about our employee assistance, student support and crisis management services. Contact our team at 866.332.9595 or sales@empathia.com.

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