When a reporter calls

Preparation is key to becoming comfortable with media calls and interviews. Here are some tips to help you prepare to work with reporters.

- **Tell the truth.** Never lie. Always tell the truth. If you don't know or aren't sure, say so; don't guess. Your credibility is at stake. Being truthful does not mean telling all you know. Use good judgment.

- **For the record.** Anything you say to a reporter is fair game for a story. If you don't want it reported, don't say it. Asking a reporter to go "off the record" is seldom appropriate. Don't ask reporters not to report something after you say it. Assume you are "on the record," even after the interview officially ends and you are chatting.

- **The media's role.** Telling all sides of a story is the media's job, even if views are unpopular. Don't expect reporters to present only your perspective and never tell a reporter how to report a story. Don't expect a reporter to make you look good; make yourself look good by providing clear, concise information.

- **Know who's calling**. When a reporter calls, ask questions to determine who you're talking to, who they work for and what they need. If you don't know a reporter, get his/her name, employer and phone number. Ask what story he/she is working on and what information she/he is seeking from you.

- **Respond promptly.** Reporters live by tight deadlines so respond promptly. But beware of giving a "quickie" response if you have inadequate information. If a reporter catches you unprepared, find out what he/she is looking for and offer to call back. Gather your thoughts, anticipate questions, plan your response and then return the call. If you have an appointment for an interview, be there. Dodging a reporter won't make the story disappear; it will be reported without your perspective.

- **Be prepared.** Doing your homework makes you a better source and less nervous. Before an interview, anticipate possible questions and think through answers. Ask yourself: What does this audience want to know? How can I best explain this? Is this a controversial or sensitive topic? How will my answers be perceived? Gather background materials for the reporter that help reinforce details.

- **Key points.** Before interviews, identify the three main points you want to make. For each point, develop three responses that support or help communicate that point. Work on making key points in 20 seconds or less. Come up with a couple of 10-second or under responses. Keep it simple.

- **Lead with the bottom line.** Always provide key facts or points first. Limit your message to no more than three key points. Your key message can get lost in too much detail and technical information. Add details if time allows.

- **Talk slowly.** The reporter will write furiously as you talk. Some will use tape recorders. Talk slowly and be clear. Leave nothing to chance.

- **Short, sweet, stop.** Keep your answers brief. Discipline yourself to provide concise answers featuring your key points. Radio or TV reporters often must tell a story in 20 seconds to a minute. The average soundbite is about seven seconds. Answer the question and stop talking. Don't keep talking to fill the silence.

- **Don't babble:** Listen to questions and think about your answers before you start talking. Don't ramble. It's OK to pause briefly to gather your thoughts before answering.

- **Avoid no comment:** "No comment" sounds suspicious. If you really can't comment, explain why. "We're gathering that information and will provide it when it's finalized." Or "Our policy doesn't allow us to comment on personnel matters." It's OK to say you don't know and offer to find out.

- **But know when to say no.** If the reporter asks for comment or information beyond your expertise or your purview, say so in a positive way. Direct them to the appropriate spokesperson. Don't be baited into commenting on questions like: "I know you can't speak for the university, but what do you think personally?"

- **Dump the jargon.** Technical, scientific terms and acronyms are confusing or meaningless to the public. Be a translator by using simple language and examples. Relate your information in ways everyday folks can appreciate: why is this important and what does it mean to their lives, families, pocketbooks or community?

- **Be proactive.** Answer reporters' questions and volunteer information to make key points. Reporters may welcome another angle or idea, but offer ideas as suggestions, not directives. Most reporters won't let you see a story before it appears, but always invite them to call back for help or clarification.

- **Summarize thoughts.** After discussing the subject, concisely summarize key points in everyday language. "My major points are: 1. ... 2. ... 3. ..." This may plant the idea of a story outline in the reporter's mind.

- **Potential pitfalls.** Always have the facts before commenting. Stick to what you know even if this disappoints a reporter. If you are unprepared or unqualified to answer, refer reporters to someone who can help. Avoid personal views or speculation. Don't let reporters put words in your mouth. Reporter: "So you're saying ..." You: "No, let me clarify ..." Do not repeat inaccuracies, even to correct them.

- **Identify yourself.** Don't assume a reporter knows who you are or what you do. Provide your name, title, department and university name, and names of other people or programs you discuss.

- **Don't assume reporter knowledge.** Never assume that a reporter is knowledgeable just because he/she is covering the story. Most reporters are generalists who cover diverse topics and have little time to background themselves on breaking stories before reporting them. Provide simple information to help out.

- **Feedback.** It's OK to tell reporters when they do a good job. If they make a mistake, weigh what's at stake. If it's a major error in fact, tell the reporter or editor, but don't quibble over minor misunderstandings.