

*Lauren McCluskey*  
**A CASE STUDY**

**MALD**

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## OUR PURPOSE

This case study seeks to analyze the communication methods the University of Utah used to rebuild campus wide trust and convey that safety is a top priority after the murder of Lauren McCluskey. This research will ideally be used by other institutions to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of their own safety crisis communication.

## INTRODUCTION

On Oct. 22, 2018, Lauren McCluskey, a senior student-athlete and communications major at the University of Utah, was murdered on campus by former boyfriend, Melvin Shawn Rowland. Her murder sent a shock nationwide. How could something so tragic happen on a seemingly safe college campus? Outrage followed the shock when the news spread that McCluskey had repeatedly contacted campus police and other university resources, informing them of the situation and the fact that she did not feel safe. Following the event, the university began their crisis communication response. President Ruth V. Waktins wrote a letter to the campus community on Oct. 23, expressing tremendous sadness over the loss of McCluskey (Watkins, R. V. 2018). On the same day, the university communications team released a follow-up letter with campus safety resources and details on a vigil to honor McCluskey (see [Timeline](#)).

Campus community frustrations grew as information revealed that despite making multiple reports concerning threats from Rowland to The Patrol Division for the university, her endangerment and the severity of the situation was not effectively communicated within the university's Department of Public Safety. Additionally, no attempts were made to check Rowland's offender status due to a lack of policies or procedures in place with The Patrol Division. Instead, her case was classified as an extortion case. Additionally, in a few instances, staff members neglected to follow through with policies and procedures within their own departments.

Throughout the aftermath, the university received three large waves of backlash. The first was during the university's independent investigation. The second was the lawsuit announcement by the McCluskey family, and the third was when the university filed to dismiss the lawsuit.

## WAVES OF BACKLASH “COULD NOT HAVE BEEN PREVENTED”

After McCluskey was murdered, the university began to distance itself from the narrative. They began this method of communication on Nov. 2 when President Watkins tasked three individuals, not employed by the university, to independently investigate the series of events that led up to the murder of McCluskey (see [Timeline](#)).

In a formal letter, President Watkins included that the investigators were to “Recommend steps that should be taken to ensure the accountability of, and chain of command of, individuals responsible for the safety and well-being of all those on Campus” (University of Utah Communications. 2018).

The individuals in the committee included:

1. John T. Nielsen, Former Commissioner of Public Safety for the State of Utah and retired attorney
2. Keith D. Squires, senior vice president for government and industry relations at ANDE, as well as former commissioner of the Utah Department of Public Safety
3. Sue Riseling, executive director of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators. (University of Utah Communications. 2018).

Results of the report ordered by the university were released during a press conference held on Dec. 19. The report outlines numerous mistakes made by officers who failed to do a criminal background check on Rowland and failed to return McCluskey's calls in a timely manner when receiving messages from McCluskey (Reavy). The report tasked the university with 30 recommendations which includes, evaluating housing guest policies, enhancing University of Utah Police training, hiring a victim advocate and increasing resource awareness campus wide (University of Utah Communications. 2019).

When given a chance, reporters asked the university whether or not this could have been prevented. John T. Nielsen, a member of the committee responded with "The implication I think by most people is that they think that as soon as [his offender status] would have been reported that he would have been immediately arrested and returned to prison...That may not have been the case. So whether we can say with certainty that her death could have been prevented in this particular situation we just simply cannot do that. All we can say is that we hope that we have systems in place in the future that would lessen the probability of this kind of thing happening," (University of Utah announces actions to improve campus safety and security).

The phrase that was highlighted most often was an introductory statement from President Watkins two minutes into the press conference,

“ **This report does not offer us any reason to believe this tragedy could have been prevented.** ”

*(Salt Lake Tribune, Dec. 22, 2018)*

It's unsurprising that her comment was amplified since leadership is ultimately the source that shares company values, mistakes and opportunities for growth.

On the same day, President Watkins posted on Twitter a link to the press conference. After the campus community and individuals invested in the story responded negatively to her statement, direct communication from President Watkins' Twitter, which was once used daily, went silent. The media, however, continued to cover the story.

 **Ruth V. Watkins** @RuthVWatkins · Dec 19, 2018  
This morning we shared the review team's findings in the Lauren McCluskey case as well as our response, which includes actions we have or are taking to improve safety on our campus. Read more here: [attheu.utah.edu/facultystaff/a...@UUUtah](http://attheu.utah.edu/facultystaff/a...@UUUtah)



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## LOCAL MEDIA INFLUENCE

Initially, the local media coverage surrounding the death of McCluskey was neutral while the university expressed more concern and sadness.

As time progressed, however, most local media coverage suggested the university could have taken a more preventative approach in handling the case and offering assistance to McCluskey prior to her death. A local media source quoted McCluskey's mother, Jill McCluskey stating, it was an "unforgivable lapse of judgment and professional competency by the university and the campus police for not taking her daughter's case seriously (Reavy)." Another local source quoted McCluskey's parents, "There were numerous opportunities to protect her during the two weeks between the time when our daughter began expressing repeated,

elevating, and persistent concerns about her situation and the time of her murder (Reavy)."

The local news outlets framed the university as being at fault and not taking proper precautions to assist McCluskey prior to her death. Local media focused on a common theme throughout their reporting: the university could have done more for McCluskey. Framing the university to be at fault was damaging to the university's reputation and momentum for their stance on this case.

It was at this point the local news' audience may have begun to perceive the university as being dismissive and not accepting responsibility for the loss of life that occurred on campus.

## NATIONAL MEDIA INFLUENCE

On a national level, public perception of women's safety began to garner national attention in 2017 more so due to the #MeToo movement, which reached its peak in 2017 due to severe allegations against American film producer Harvey Weinstein. Following these allegations, the already coined #MeToo erupted in virality on social media, with numerous women and men coming forward against Weinstein and other men of power. This sparked a national movement allowing space and security for women and men to feel empowered to come forward and share their stories regarding sexual violence. This narrative became a hot topic for media to latch on to, and this was certainly true for the Lauren McCluskey case.

Since the #MeToo movement began, media outlets have clung to its ideology as a way to frame stories. Whether it's genuine or used simply to attract viewership, this framing tactic has been intertwined

in almost every major story, especially the Lauren McCluskey case. From the beginning, key national news leaders saw the potential to put this crisis in the same box. While the claims surrounding the case regarding the #MeToo movement are clearly valid, it's clear that this way of framing the story is a business strategy used to fuel the fire.

Every major news outlet, from Fox News to ABC to NBC, all agreed that the major issue surrounding the case was that women are not being believed or taken seriously when reporting sexual or domestic violence. Commonly used phrases by reporters include "she did everything right" to "the university didn't listen," all use the narrative that McCluskey was not taken seriously because of her gender and systems in place to help, tragically failed her. Some common phrases and themes used across various outlets include:

**"We are in 2018. These women should not have to be repeatedly trying to seek help. It should be a one time call."**

Fox News

**"She did not only what she was supposed to do, she did more than she should be required to do."**

Fox News

**"Lauren did everything right"**

ABC News

**"Lauren was "begging to be heard""**

ABC News

**"She Did Everything Right"**

Dateline Episode Title

**"Crying for help"**

ABC News

**"It feels like I'm bothering them (Lauren to Mom regarding campus police)"**

ABC News

**"Friends reporting, Lauren reporting, university "not listening""**

ABC News

**"She did what she was supposed to do."**

Fox News

**"This girl should not have had to repeatedly call."**

Fox News

**"How many times do women have to call for help?"**

Alyward, 2019

Most national outlets seem to have a similar tone. They agree that this was a "tragic failure of a system." While the university says the homicide was unavoidable, the media framed the crisis as a lack of communication on the university's part. They used imagery and verbiage that tugged on viewer's heartstrings and created an anger towards the university. News outlets questioned the university's response and way of handling the case. Former New Jersey Morris County prosecutor Bob Bianchi grieved during an interview with Fox News: "The internal review also found U of U officers didn't know how to look up background info or parole history." (see [Timeline](#)).

“

**THIS IS BASIC DOMESTIC VIOLENCE 101!**

(Fox News)

”

The media also questioned the motives of the university. Do they truly care about the wellbeing of their students, or are they mostly concerned with their image? "These entities refuse to report and properly investigate these cases because they don't want the school to seem unsafe. So they sweep things under the rug (FoxNews)." By positioning the university as the antagonist, media outlets truly damaged the university's image.

## 2

## WAVES OF BACKLASH MCCLUSKEY FAMILY LAWSUIT

As information continued to develop, the university sought to relay findings with transparency directly on their @theU website. This website is a channel of communication for the university to connect with the campus community by posting university information and timely content. The communication staff was transparent in releasing a timeline of events and dated audio recordings related to the case directly on their website to ensure that the campus community would be able to examine them in their entirety (University of Utah Communications. 2019, January 17).

Another way the university relayed transparency was heavy communication about the university's website, SafeU, introduced to students in 2017. The website contains links to trainings and on-campus resources available to students all year long. It also contains a page that details the progress the university is making on recommendations given to them from the independent investigation (Hanson, J. 2017). @theU website also began promoting a series of articles about relationship safety. These articles may have been an attempt by the university to demonstrate their eagerness to proactively communicate important information to the campus community.

One area the university was not transparent about was a looming lawsuit from McCluskey's parents. Matt and Jill McCluskey finally decided to file a lawsuit on June 27, 2019 (see [Timeline](#)). After reaching out to the university multiple times with the intention of working together, the McCluskey family received no response. They felt like they had no other choice but to sue the university. "Matt and I realized that the only way to improve campus safety is to file a lawsuit this is our last resort. To effect positive change. The university must pay a large amount so that they realize it is in their interest to believe women an act with urgency to when their female students ask for help (ABC News)." The family attorney stated, "During a press conference on Thursday, the family attorney James McConkie said Lauren's death was "preventable" and that the murder occurred because of the university's failure to respond to Lauren's repeated complaints against Melvin Rowland (ABC4)." The McCluskey family emphasized in a press conference that they would not receive any money won, but put it directly into a fund they created called The Lauren McCluskey Foundation, which contributes to campus safety, amateur athletics, and animal welfare.

President Watkins responded to the lawsuit with a brief letter titled, Statement in Response to Lawsuit. "While there are differences in how we would characterize some of the events leading to Lauren's tragic murder, let me say again that we share the McCluskey family's commitment to improving campus safety. We continue to address the recommendations identified by the independent review of the university's safety policies, procedures and resources, and we are making ongoing improvements designed to protect our students and our entire campus community." Again, while the independent review and recommendations were mentioned, any specific "ongoing improvements designed to protect" students were not elaborated on.

On July 16, perhaps in response to negative stakeholder response, Police Chief Dale Brohpy announced his retirement (University of Utah Communications. 2019, July 16.) On the same day, the university announced that it had begun searching for a new director of public safety.

## LOCAL MEDIA INFLUENCE

Local reporters and stories framed the university negatively by focusing on the university's lack of responsibility and preventative measures taken to prevent McCluskey's death. The university's Department of Public Safety was specifically under fire.

The Daily Chronicle is quoted saying:

"It's disturbing that three university employees of the Department of Safety were given awards for how they conducted themselves before and after Lauren's death. When confronted about the awards that were given, Chris Nelson, spokesperson for the university said that these awards were not meant to be self-congratulatory to the department's handling of the McCluskey case ... I viewed it as an attempt by the Department of Public Safety to better recognize the important work they're doing. Yet, a student who needed their help, who they were supposed to make sure was safe, is dead" (Reese).

These comments made by local media created a sense of fear in other students and raised concern for their safety on campus. University students also created an Instagram account to share their personal experiences feeling unsafe at the U.

Some questioned whether the university should even have a police force or if it should instead be

covered by the city's officers. A student wrote on the Instagram account, "I'm terrified to be anywhere on campus outside of business hours (Tanner)." Comments in the Salt Lake Tribune Editorial sheds light on university students' safety and concerns. The author claims, "Waktins would be helping her students, her institution, her state and herself by issuing a more heartfelt and meaningful apology and working with all those involved to rebuild a feeling of safety and trust on campus (Salt Lake Tribune Editorial)."

McCluskey's death created new spheres of concern on campus that before demanded little attention. Comments from the local news coverage brings into the spotlight the question the nation is already grappling with at the heart of seismic cultural movements like #MeToo. Friedman, author of a Desert News article emphasizes, "These movements protest not just the criminal acts of the perpetrators themselves, but the ways in which power structures – Hollywood, college campuses, the criminal justice system – have served to protect perpetrators and suppress, ignore, or dismiss victims (Friedman)." The local media showed a persistent negative framing encouraging sentiments of fear in the readers and the community, specifically college students.

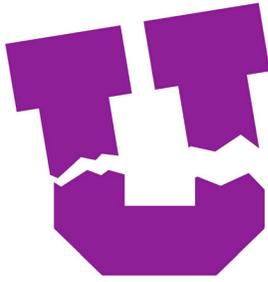
## NATIONAL MEDIA INFLUENCE

National media also framed the story to question students' safety on university campuses. Several media outlets directed the question "is your child safe?" to parents of students, creating a new area of apprehension. Debbie Dujanovic, former investigative reporter and spokesperson for the Salt Lake City FBI office and now KSL talk show radio host, raised a concern to parents: "What should be scaring every parent is that this could be going on at any campus across the country ("The Murder of Lauren McCluskey," 2019)." Parents started wondering what the institution in charge of their child was implementing, if anything, to ensure this doesn't happen.

# 3

## WAVES OF BACKLASH FILE TO DISMISS

On Sept. 20, 2019, The U announced that October would spotlight safety at the university: "President Ruth Watkins designated October as SafeU Month and tasked a working group with overseeing a month-long emphasis on safety-related improvements and resources along with ways all campus community members can contribute to a culture of safety" (Adams, B., & Wood, S. September 2019). This initiative may have had a more positive rollout if the third wave of backlash had not occurred. The university filed a motion Sept. 20, asking a judge to dismiss the lawsuit filed by McCluskey's parents (Gardiner)



On the night of Sept. 24, members of the Associated Students of the University of Utah (ASUU) wrote a resolution condemning the language used in the lawsuit to dismiss. That same evening, a new Instagram “Unsafe.U” posted for the first time. The bio for this Instagram reads “Un Safe U raises awareness of safety issues at the University of Utah. Not affiliated or endorsed by the University of Utah.” The #unsafeU was also used on Twitter. On Sept. 25, the U published a response to ASUU’s outrage regarding the motion to dismiss. An official statement regarding the motion to dismiss was not posted prior or post filing. Jill McCluskey also shared the ASUU resolution on twitter “The Associated Students of the University of Utah are standing up for what’s right. Please read their resolution” (@jjmclluskey 2019).

Tensions continued to escalate when an article was published on Medium with a list of demands and a viewpoint into how the public was perceiving the campaign. “While SafeU has brought in some new education, awareness, and resources, it is primarily a well-crafted public relations campaign. At best, the effective components of this initiative should have been in place years ago. At worst, the ineffective parts threaten the legitimacy of this entire plan” (unsafeU. 2019).

The students affiliated with unsafeU sought to address their demands with President Watkins by Oct. 21. Students also announced in a follow up article on Oct. 15 that they would be “holding a walkout to present our declaration to the University administration.” The university responded with their own statement applauding students exerting their right to protest. They also took the opportunity to mention “Many of the items noted in the Declaration of Protest have been, or are in the process of being, addressed... Nonetheless, we know the work of making campus safer is a journey, and that this work will never be finished. Dialogues are an important part of this process (University of Utah Communications. October 2019).”

The walkout went according plan and 100 students protested at the steps of the John R. Park Building. That same day, a statement was released announcing that Dan Reed, senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Lori McDonald, Vice President for Student Affairs, spoke to students affiliated with the unsafeU “Declaration of Protest” article. During this meeting, leadership agreed to “carefully review the students’ suggestions, which groups requested actions in three areas: accountability, transparency and resources (Reed).”

Student leaders at the university have condemned the administration in a surprising public statement — “criticizing how it handled fears reported by track-star Lauren McCluskey, denied responsibility after her murder, and created an atmosphere where students now worry campus police won’t protect them (Tanner).” “Students are angry,” said Devon Cantwell, a doctoral candidate and senator for the ASUU who wrote the resolution. “We continue to be. And we were just really disturbed by some of the statements that the university has made” (Tanner).

On Sept. 25, the school said that its response to the McCluskey family’s lawsuit has been misinterpreted by the local media (see [Timeline](#)). “Nowhere in the motion does it state that the university’s officers had an obligation to protect McCluskey from her attacker,” wrote Phyllis Vetter, general counsel at the university in a letter sent to all those in student government (Tanner).

Matt McCluskey testified in court in support of Utah State Bill 134, which requires public universities to offer programs on sexual assault, stalking, and domestic violence. It was passed on March 29, 2019.

This investigation is still ongoing, and will be for a long time. Students and the community aren’t satisfied with the status of the case and the university’s efforts, and are making that known.



**The University of Utah is on the wrong side of history in how they handled  
Lauren’s case and how they responded to Lauren’s death.**



**JILL MCCLUSKEY**  
(ABC News)

In summary, after McCluskey was murdered, the University began to distance itself from the narrative. As a result, most local media coverage suggested the university could have taken a more preventative approach in handling the case and offering assistance to McCluskey prior to her death. On the national news level, the media framed the crisis as a lack of communication on the university's part.

As information continued to develop, the university sought to relay findings with transparency directly on their @ theU website and by heavily communicating the university's website, SafeU, introduced to students in 2017. At this point, (see timeline, p. 16) the university had lost control of the narrative because they didn't seek to control it to begin with. This created new spheres of concern on campus that before demanded little attention. In addition, Jill McCluskey finally decided to file a lawsuit on June 27, 2019. After reaching out to the university multiple times with the intention of working together, the McCluskey family received no response. They felt like they had no other choice but to sue the university.

The overall lack of communication and cooperation along with dismissive acts of the university led to a scrambled reaction that has severely affected their reputation. If the university had been prepared with an approach that was proactive, methodical, and well planned, this case study may have reported a different story.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The university and the Salt Lake City police department did not coordinate their crisis communication during the events leading up to her murder. This unusual and unprecedented relationship between the university and the SLC police department has since created an insurmountable amount of distrust by the public of the university and their policies and procedures for events similar to McCluskey's. It should go unsaid that mandatory effective communication and coordination throughout a case similar to McCluskey's is a necessity to help prevent future public perception issues. At the time of the crisis, after McCluskey was murdered, the university appeared to be less concerned about the cause or responsibility of the crisis and more concerned with keeping their responsibility out of the narrative.

While the university has been apologetic about what happened to Lauren, they have not specifically apologized for their negligence while she was still alive. Language such as "critical to our educational objectives" (Beniwal, Sahiba, October 2018), "highest priority at all of our campuses" (Avi-Yonah, Sherah S) and "the safety of our students is our top priority" (Albeson, Jenn. May 2019) are the common responses that most universities have when faced with similar crises. While these are great priorities to have and implement after a tragedy, why not implement them before?



### **INFORM + EDUCATE STUDENTS**

It is recommended that the university take immediate measures to launch and promote a bold culture change alongside its existing USAFE initiative. A fresh and healthy image that portrays a genuine sensitivity can be promoted in the media for establishing programs similar to the Green Dot Bystander Education Program at the University of Dayton Ohio. This program encourages participants to brainstorm and roleplay strategies that can help diffuse risky situations (Howard, Beth, August 2015). Improving resources for victims is a great start, but also informing students about what support and reporting options are available before an attack can be achieved by requiring students to receive online training in what behaviors are unacceptable.

Additionally, many colleges across the nation are revisiting the traditional disciplinary process for the attacker, which often involves investigations and hearings by inexperienced panels of faculty and students. While the university tasked a review team to review the events leading up to McCluskey's murder, a move to outsource all future assault cases and hiring experienced investigators would help eliminate any negligence or bias within the reporting process. This has been proven effective at the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, and Stanford. Princeton and Harvard lowered the required standard of proof in these cases to the widely used "preponderance of the evidence" standard that is recommended by the Department of Education (Howard, Beth, August 2015).



## PROACTIVE vs. REACTIVE

Often times, the life of a student can cause feelings of isolation or depression. This can result in the student not knowing where to turn when domestic or sexual violence occurs in their life. The University of Michigan and Michigan State have created a Special Victims Unit within their campus police departments, which has resulted in a more sensitive approach and treatment of victims, while also giving the detectives better evidence gathering. Women often assume they will get more careful and sympathetic treatment if they take their case to the administration than to the police, but in the absence of clear policies, they frequently don't get satisfaction. (Howard, Beth. August 2015)

Proactive policies and procedures are key to eliminating a reactive response that is often perceived as insensitive and disingenuous. A product of the university's lack of proactivity is that students at the U once felt safe, but now they don't anymore. This is demonstrated in the recent social media account @unsafe.u which highlights student safety concerns at the university. Administrators of the Instagram account said, "Our main goal is two-fold: One, to provide a centralized platform to share student experiences, concerns, and stories on campus safety issues. We want to provide a community for students to feel believed and supported; and two, we are advocating for a settlement to be reached with the McCluskey family. We believe this to be essential to the campus healing and that a settlement will represent justice for Lauren (Hills, V., September 2019)." In conjunction, the university revamped their safeu.com website following McCluskey's murder. This website existed previously, but was not being actively used as a tool to promote campus safety. Following McCluskey's murder, the university reignited the site with helpful tips, tools, and information that now serves as a great resource for any safety issues or concerns on campus. This example serves as another way the university reacted to the crisis without any proactive policies or procedures to support it.



## BE THE NARRATOR

This unsettling feeling of being unsafe on campus is due in large part to the way the media covered the McCluskey case, focusing primarily on what happened before she was murdered, rather than after. It is also correlated to the way the university has handled the case since McCluskey's murder, which has allowed the media to highlight the ways in which the university failed to react to McCluskey's reports and portrayed the University in a very unflattering, yet honest light. This caused the university to prolong their response, resulting in the public perceiving them to be even more insensitive. A recommendation for future responses: if you want the story to be told a certain way, you have to be the narrator.

The best public relations practices suggest using a chain model where information is relayed to internal stakeholders. It is best practice to not have your stakeholders find out about information from other sources. It is suggested through this lens that this third wave of backlash could have been prevented if the university communications team had consulted with legal counsel to communicate the motion prior to the media outlets picking the story up. Instead, they lost control of the narrative and the word that stood out most falls in line with the issues brought up during the investigation of McCluskey's death -- Dismissed.

Before a crisis, developing true and equal partnerships with organizations important to the university, such as the local police department, will help ensure a partnership that demonstrates the measures taken for campus safety. Acknowledging stakeholders, including the media, as partners when managing a crisis will safeguard the narrative of the story, as well. However before a crisis, strong and positive primary and secondary relationships with these stakeholders ensures a direct line of communication that will not be easily broken when a crisis does occur. Part of developing this relationship involves listening to your stakeholders, holding power to account, and ensuring that contact will remain in times of uncertainty. Avoiding certain or absolute answers to the public and media until sufficient information is available is key to controlling the narrative while also maintaining an image of transparency and full disclosure. This goes hand-in-hand with not over-ensuring stakeholders about the impact the crisis may or may not have moving forward. The public needs useful and practical statements of self-efficacy during a crisis.

Responding to crises with routine solutions is not the answer; this type of response sounds, feels, and looks scripted. Threat is perceptual and should not guide an organization's response to a crisis, effective crisis communication acknowledges that the positive parts of the narrative arise from the organizational crises (Ulmer, Robert. 2019).



## TARGET RESPONSIBILITY

Communicating early and often, while showing remorse for the crisis, goes a long way in the eyes of the public. Little to no interaction with the public emphasizes the need to consider how to communicate to the public long before a crisis occurs. In addition, quickly considering the potential opportunities associated with the crisis and framing them for the public will allow the university or organization to effectively respond to tragedy before the media sheds light on it in a negative and harmful way. Accepting that a crisis can start quickly and unexpectedly is crucial. Quick and consistent communication, regardless of whether the organization has critical information about the crisis while also being careful not to heighten the ambiguity, is imperative to avoid deceiving or distracting the public. The university should be prepared to defend their interpretation of the evidence surrounding the crisis, rather than avoid it. Without good intentions prior to a crisis, recovery is difficult or next to impossible as is proven in this case. If the university didn't believe they were responsible for the McCluskey murder, they needed to build a case for who was responsible and why. Through simulations and training, the university can prepare for uncertain situations similar to McCluskey's.

## IN CONCLUSION

The constraints of the university appear to involve a lack of knowledge about the severity of the problem, an inability to understand how their student body would be affected by the crisis, how the public would be affected, unavailability of accurate or appropriate information, and an inability to make decisions under stressful conditions; perhaps due to President Watkin's short time in her position. Communicating during the wake of McCluskey's murder has proven to require a degree of communication unlike any other. Effective communication has become very difficult for the university due to their lack of communication before McCluskey's murder, and immediately following.

During this crisis, tremendous constraints to communicate effectively have been placed on the university, yet their stakeholders needed critical information in order to make informed decisions. This information was not provided until much later than it needed to be. Through the analysis and research of this case study, institutions around the country can evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses of safety crisis communication in contrast to the U. Our goal to analyze the communication methods of the university used has produced a number of opportunities the university missed or simply ignored. Their lack of transparency in an effort to remain out of the narrative, has instead shed new light on the university's lack of effective communication and severe neglect in their policies and procedures regarding campus safety. While this has been an opportunity for the U, let this case study serve as a guide for other institutions to use proactively, rather than reactively, to a crisis that hits close to home.



**Lauren McCluskey's family and friends are in my thoughts today as we mark one year since her death.**

**This tragedy revealed problems at the U and we have worked to make meaningful changes to improve campus safety. There is more work to do and we welcome the participation of everyone on campus—our students especially—in this vital process.**

**Your voices, your ideas and your help are needed. I want everyone to feel safe on our campus and I know other university leaders share my concern. We are grateful for your input on how safety can continue to be addressed.**

**Transformation of a campus culture is not an easy or quick process, but it is one to which we are fully committed. We must—and will always—have safety as a top priority, evolving our approaches to respond to new challenges. As we continue this journey, we will always be remembering Lauren.**



*(Watkins, Ruth V., October 2019).*

# Lauren McCluskey

## CASE TIMELINE

2018

SEPTEMBER

**Sept. 2** Lauren met Melvin Shawn Rowland and began a relationship with him.

**Sept. 26** McCluskey called two of her friends and was “very sad” she said Rowland would not let her “hang out with friends.”

**Sept. 30** Two of McCluskey’s friends told staff at University of Utah dorms that they were scared about Rowland’s control over her, about how he talked about guns and stayed often in her room.

OCTOBER

**Oct. 9** Lauren learned Rowland’s real identity—including his actual age and the fact that he was a registered sex offender. At that point she decided to end the relationship.

**Oct. 10** Campus dispatch was contacted by Jill McCluskey, Lauren’s mother, who requested a campus security escort to help her daughter retrieve her vehicle from Rowland.

University Police contacted Lauren and she initially declined the assistance, stating that Rowland was going to drop the vehicle at her apartment and she felt comfortable having him do that. A dispatcher told Lauren she would have security officers near the building just in case and asked her to call back if the situation changed. *(UNews)*

**5 PM** Lauren called back and stated her car had been dropped off at the parking lot at Rice-Eccles Stadium and that she needed a ride to pick it up. A security escort responded and gave Lauren a ride to pick up her car. *(UNews)*

**Oct. 12** Lauren contacted University Police to report having received suspicious messages that she believed were from friends of Rowland.

The reporting officer asked Lauren if she felt in danger or threatened by the texts. She stated she did not, but that she felt his friends were trying to lure her somewhere.

The officer told her to not go anywhere that made her uncomfortable and to call back if she received additional messages or contact. *(UNews)*

**Oct. 13 | 9:22 AM** Lauren again contacted University Police to report receiving additional messages she believed were from Rowland and/or Rowland’s friends. The messages demanded money in exchange for not posting compromising photos of Lauren and Rowland on the internet. Lauren stated she sent \$1000 to an account as demanded in hopes of keeping the photos private.

A report was taken, a criminal history was pulled and the case was assigned to a detective for follow up on possible sexual extortion charges. *(UNews)*

**Oct. 16** A parole agent spoke with Rowland — but did not know about McCluskey’s allegations because university police had not communicated with Adult Probation and Parole.

**Oct. 16-19** The campus detective assigned to McCluskey’s case worked on other investigations. *(The Salt Lake Tribune)*

**Oct. 19** The formal investigation of the extortion charges began. A detective contacted Lauren to gather additional information about the extortion, to identify all suspects possibly involved and to seek an arrest warrant for Rowland and/or his acquaintances responsible for the alleged crime. *(UNews)*

# OCTOBER

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**4:48 PM** A frustrated McCluskey called the Salt Lake City police department to ask for help. Salt Lake City's dispatch tells her to call campus police, which she does. A detective returns her call and says she will not be back at work until Oct. 23 — which will turn out to be the day after McCluskey's slaying.

**Oct. 19-22** Security video showed Rowland at various locations on campus. *(UNews)*

**Oct. 22** McCluskey sends three screenshots, presumably to campus police, "showing Rowland's criminal history and his offender details." *(The Salt Lake Tribune)*

**10:39 AM** Lauren emailed police to report having received an additional text from a spoofed number claiming to be Deputy Chief Rick McLennon requesting she come to the police station.

**3-6 PM** Rowland spent the afternoon waiting for Lauren with some of her friends in the residence hall. *(UNews)*

**8:20 PM** Rowland confronted Lauren, who was on the phone with her mother, in a parking lot outside her residence hall. In the altercation, she dropped her cell phone and belongings. He dragged Lauren to a different spot in the parking lot where he forced her into the back seat of a car he had driven to campus. He shot her in the car multiple times. *(UNews)*

**8:23 PM** Dispatch received a call from Matt McCluskey, Lauren's father, stating he believed his daughter was in trouble, relayed what her mother had heard on the phone, and requested that officers respond. *(UNews)*

**8:32 PM** Police responded to the parking lot, located Lauren's belongings and began searching her dorm, surrounding area and the parking lot. Additional resources were mobilized. *(UNews)*

**8:38 PM** Rowland was picked up by an acquaintance and leaves campus. *(UNews)*

**9:55 PM** During a search of the parking lot, police discovered Lauren's body in the backseat of a vehicle. *(UNews)*

**9:56 PM** A secure-in-place alert was sent campus wide that stated there had been a shooting on campus. *(UNews)*

**10:09 PM** Alert sent with suspect information. Updates were sent approximately every 30 minutes reiterating the secure in place order. *(UNews)*

**11:46 PM** Alert sent lifting secure-in-place order after University Police determined suspect had left campus. *(UNews)*

**Oct. 23** University releases "A Tragic Loss on Campus", President Watkins' message to the campus community, the day after Lauren McCluskey was murdered.

- UofU holds vigil and mentions safety resources: "Vigil Info and Safety Resources"
- KSL.com releases story, "That was the last I heard from her': Mother of Slain U. Student Speaks Out."

**12:01 AM** Alert sent identifying shooting suspect as Melvin Rowland. *(UNews)*

**12:46 AM** Salt Lake Police located Rowland and engaged in a foot pursuit. He entered Trinity A.M.E. Church, 239 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., and as police entered the church he shot himself. *(UNews)*

**12:47 AM** Alert sent saying Rowland had been located and is no longer a threat. *(UNews)*

**LATER ON** University Police Chief Dale Brophy told reporters that his officers could not find Rowland in the days before the shooting. He incorrectly said Rowland had walked away from a halfway house (a statement the university later corrected).

**5:06 AM** University of Utah Director of Athletics tweets statement announcing Lauren's death. *(CNN News)*

**8:47 AM** Jill McCluskey tweets statement announcing Lauren's death. *(CNN News)*

**9:50 AM** University of Utah Athletics tweets statement announcing Lauren's death *(CNN News)*

- FoxNews releases story
- CNN releases story
- ABC releases story
- NBC releases story

**Oct. 24** The Department of Corrections revealed that a parole agent had spoken to Rowland on Oct. 16 — unaware that four days earlier, McCluskey had begun calling university police to accuse him of harassing her. *(The Salt Lake Tribune)*

**Oct. 25** In an emotional press conference, Brophy revealed for the first time that Rowland had extorted McCluskey on Oct. 13, threatening to release compromising photos of the two if she didn't pay \$1,000, which she did. Brophy also revealed that Rowland stalked McCluskey on campus for at least three days before killing her, and spent three hours before the shooting hanging out with her friends in her residence hall. Brophy also said Rowland, after shooting McCluskey, called another woman to pick him up, and they went to dinner and back to her place so he could shower. He said that woman and the man who had loaned Rowland the gun contacted police after seeing media reports about the slaying.

- University of Utah President Ruth Watkins said she would ask an outside investigator to review university police protocols, but the review would not examine the decisions of individual officers. She had not chosen the investigator.
  - Gov. Gary Herbert, in his monthly news conference, announced he had ordered an investigation of the Utah Department of Corrections and the Board of Pardons and Parole.
  - The state's Division of Occupational and Professional Licensing announced it was investigating "unlicensed activity" by Diamond Security Group, a company that hired Rowland — under the alias Shawn Fields — as a bouncer at Salt Lake City restaurants. It had a security contract with London Belle, where Rowland met McCluskey. FOX13 has reported Rowland had also worked as a bouncer inside Maxwell's East Coast Eatery. Black Diamond Security Group said on Oct. 25 that it had ended its relationship with Rowland about a month earlier. Within a few hours, DOPL issued a citation and a cease-and-desist order against Black Diamond, saying the company was not licensed to provide security. Rowland had been hired under another name and the company did not run a background check on that name, the Utah Department of Public Safety later found.
  - More of Rowland's violent past was uncovered: An attempted sexual assault of a teen girl in 2004, a 2012 parole hearing in which he admitted to raping the teen and two other women, and a 2016 admission that he had threatened that "if an agent were to come conduct a field visit, he might become violent." *(The Salt Lake Tribune)*
  - The University of Utah releases "Timeline of Events in Lauren McCluskey Case"
  - The University of Utah releases "Campus shooting update"
  - President Watkins posthumously awards a degree in communication to Lauren by presenting the degree to her family.
  - The University of Utah releases "A Statement from President Watkins"
  - "I have asked our Campus Safety Task Force to reconvene under the leadership of an outside, independent expert to examine every aspect of campus safety and security."
- KSL.com reports story, "U. police reveal Lauren McCluskey's reports about her killer."

**Oct. 26** University of Utah trustees talked in a hastily arranged closed-door meeting about "the competence" of university police and administrators in the wake of McCluskey's death. *(The Salt Lake Tribune)*

## OCTOBER

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**Oct. 27** Two women who had briefly dated Rowland earlier this year described to The Salt Lake Tribune his pattern of lies and manipulation — including falsehoods about his age and not disclosing his criminal record. (*The Salt Lake Tribune*)

**Oct. 29** Released police records revealed Rowland was suspected — but never charged — with burglarizing two women he dated in 2015. (*The Salt Lake Tribune*)

- University of Utah’s magazine The Continuum publishes “Determined, Genuine and Kind: The Legacy of Lauren”

## NOVEMBER

**Nov. 2:** University of Utah Announces Review Team

President Watkins’ Message to Campus: “We’re committed to learning, taking actions that enhance safety and security and, in every possible way, preventing something like this from happening again on our campus.”

- Watkins changed course, announcing that the independent review she described in Oct. 25 news conference would look at “actions taken by individual officers” in the week before McCluskey was killed.

**Nov. 5** UofU publishes “Standing in Solidarity” it features several other schools wearing red or holding moments of silences in honor of Lauren.

**Nov. 5** “Campus Safety Resources”

**Nov. 13** Jill McCluskey, Lauren’s mother, wrote in a tweet that “the person who lent Lauren’s killer the gun needs to be prosecuted.”

## DECEMBER

**Dec. 19** UofU publishes “Actions to Improve Campus Safety”

- The independent review team released its report; the review of Utah Department of Corrections and the Board of Pardons and Parole was also released. Watkins said the report about university police “does not offer any reason to believe” that McCluskey’s slaying could have been prevented. “Instead, the report offers weaknesses, identifies issues and provides us with a road map for strengthening security on our campus,” she said. But Nielsen listed multiple significant missed opportunities, including the reports to housing officials by McCluskey’s friends and the days when the detective assigned to McCluskey’s case was off and the work was not assigned to another officer.
- Among its recommendations, the review said the campus Department of Public Safety is understaffed; that it needs to hire a victim advocate; that it needs to develop a coordinated working relationship with existing victim advocates elsewhere on campus; that it needs to train all of its officers about interpersonal violence issues; and it needs to adopt a lethality assessment already used by many other Utah police departments in interpersonal violence cases.

**Dec. 20** Fox 13 reports “Mom of murdered student blasts University of Utah police.

- Fox 13 reports “Family: ‘We respectfully disagree’ that U of U student’s murder could have been preventable

**Dec. 22** The Salt Lake Tribune does an editorial piece on McCluskey’s death. “Tribune editorial: Lauren McCluskey’s death was preventable.”

2019

## JANUARY

**Jan 10** The Salt Lake Tribune releases a story, “Despite renewed criticism from the mother of slain student Lauren McCluskey, the University of Utah sticks to its plan for improving safety - without discipline.

**Jan. 17** University of Utah releases “Audio files in Lauren McCluskey Case”

## FEBRUARY

**Feb 11** Article on @theu - "What Love Looks Like and What it Does Not"

**Feb. 12** University of Utah publishes an edited transcript of a Board of Trustees meeting discussing progress on implementation of the independent reviews investigation. "Campus Safety Recommendations"

## MARCH

**March 25** "Firearms on Campus" + "Healthy Relationships" (@theu)

**March 29** Utah State Bill 134 was signed into law, which requires public colleges to offer programs on sexual assault, stalking, and domestic violence. Matt McCluskey testified in court. (NBC News)

## MAY

**May 30** The Deseret News releases a story, "What really happened to Lauren McCluskey? The inside story of her tragic death."

## JUNE

**June 10** Dateline episode "She Did Everything Right" aired

**June 27** "Statement in Response to Lawsuit"

- ABC 4 story, "Lauren McCluskey's parents file \$56 million lawsuit against the University of Utah."
- McCluskey family files lawsuit against the University of Utah

## JULY

**July 4** The Daily Chronicle releases story, "Reese: The University of Utah Failed Lauren McCluskey."

**July 26** "Online Security" (@theu)

## AUGUST

**Aug. 16** "U to Invest Millions in Safety" (@theu)

**Aug. 30** "Relationships 101" (@theu)

## SEPTEMBER

**Sept. 20** Utah Attorney General filed for the dismissal of Lauren McCluskey's case on behalf of the University of Utah. Rather than settling, the school is pushing for a full dismissal of the case and charges against them. (The Daily Chronicle)

- UofU announces that October is #SafeU month

**Sept. 24** The first post on unsafeU Instagram is posted

**Sept. 25** "University Statement Regarding Student Government Resolution" (@theu)

**Sept. 27** "Campus Housing Safety Updates" (@theu)

**Sept. 30** "Campus Safety Statistics" (@theu)

## OCTOBER

**Oct. 14** Students publish an article titled "Declaration of Protest" (Medium.com)

**Oct. 16** "Response to unsafeU Declaration of Protest" (@theu)

**Oct. 21** "Statement from Dan Reed, senior vice president for Academic Affairs, and Lori McDonald, vice president for Student Affairs, on the student petition" (@theu)

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