

Greenville-Spartanburg Airport Gives USC Upstate Students Unique Opportunity During Disaster Drill

October 7, 2022 2:17 PM

At 9 A.M. on Friday, October 7, the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport (GSP) began conducting a disaster drill on the northwest corner of the Milliken airfield. Students from the University of South Carolina Upstate were given the unique opportunity to hold a mock press conference during this drill.



1: Firefighters extinguishing flames from a bus that acted as a hypothetical plane in the drill (Photo provided by Michael Kossover with the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport)

At approximately 9:30 A.M., students and instructors arrived at the airport to meet a member of the airport's communication staff, Tiffany Cherry. She led students to a conference room where the airport would normally hold press conferences for disasters. In this room, students were introduced to Michelle Newman, the airport's Communications Manager. Shortly after arriving in this conference room, Newman, acting as a Public Information Officer (PIO), began the mock press conference by giving a brief press statement where the details of the hypothetical plane crash were given.

Students, acting as members of the press, were then allowed to ask questions about the plane crash. The students asked a variety of questions and were able to witness how an experienced PIO would navigate through the questions. After the press conference, Cherry, Newman, and the airport's Director of Communications and Air Service, Tom Tyra, explained the scope of their roles within the airport's operations and gave students tips on handling the communication aspect of a crisis.

Afterwards, I spoke with Tom Tyra and asked him, “What changes has the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport made in this year’s disaster drill, compared to drills held previously?” He emphasized the increased inclusion of the airport’s “mutual aid partners.” These partners include fire agencies, police agencies, and medical units outside of the airport. He said that the airport worked with them to test how fast they could arrive to the airport in the case of an emergency. He also said that the drills have helped the airport prepare their emergency responders for smaller crises that may occur.



2: Vehicles belonging to Emergency Responders participating in the drill, as seen on the airfield (Photo provided by Michael Kossover with the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport)

After arriving back at USC Upstate, I spoke to some of the other students about their experience with the mock press conference. I asked them, “What is the most important thing you learned today?” One of the students, Grace Taylor, said that the most important thing she learned was, “to be versatile.” She brought up a point that Tom Tyra made to the students where he said that it was essential to always be willing to learn something new for his job. Another student, Sharanda Simmons, said that the most important thing she learned from the experience was “to know your limits with your job” and ensuring that you don’t provide false information to the press. Overall, the disaster drill succeeded at preparing both GSP operations and USC Upstate’s students.