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**Master of Arts in Media and Communication Degree
with a Specialization in Strategic Communication**

Project Approval Form

Candidate Joseph Verkennes has completed all the necessary master project requirements of the School of Media & Communication's Master of Arts program.

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June 27, 2017

Date

**Creating a Crisis Communication Plan for Small or Mid-Sized
Community Colleges with Monroe County Community College as the Model**

Joe Verkennes

**A master's project submitted to the faculty of
Bowling Green State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Media and Communication
with a Specialization in Strategic Communication**

Dr. Claudia Y. Owens, D.M.

June 27, 2017

Executive Summary

Community colleges need to develop crisis communication plans to protect themselves from the ramifications of crises. While colleges and universities have been diligent about ensuring that they have crisis *management* plans in place, the same cannot be said for crisis *communication* plans. The effects of crises on the reputations, operations, and finances of community colleges can include losses of enrollment, decreases in donations, reductions in government funding, accreditation issues, and the severing of key partnerships. This is because crises can negatively impact organizational reputations, which are widely recognized as valuable, intangible assets. Having a solid crisis communication plan can help a community college mitigate reputational damage incurred by a crisis.

The purpose of this project was to analyze the literature to determine the best strategies to create a crisis communication plan for small or mid-sized community colleges. Monroe County Community College in Monroe, Mich. was used as the model used for institutions that are similar in size, demographics, and mission. Evidence-based research was used to analyze how the absence of a crisis communication plan can affect a college or university following a crisis, if a crisis communication plan can positively influence how stakeholders perceive such an institution after a crisis, and what components of a crisis communication plan can positively influence the reputation of the institution. Key strategies include assembling a crisis communication team, outlining the purpose of a crisis communication plan, defining a crisis, and using the crisis definition to structure the plan and protocols. This study will contribute to the literature on communication and higher education administration, as well as supply leaders at community colleges with a blueprint for success in creating crisis communication plans to help protect the reputations of their colleges and threats to their colleges' operations and finances.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Institutions of higher learning can experience a wide variety of crises. The word *crisis* is a derivative of the ancient Greek word meaning “to decide” (Lott, 2012). A crisis can result from a single, dramatic event or a series of minor occurrences that have accumulated over an extended period (Lott, 2012). Crises take many forms, and several categories of them can be found in the research literature (Seeger, 2007). Examples include natural disasters, such as tornados, floods, and wildfires; industrial accidents, like chemical spills or explosions, and intentional events, such as active shooters or terrorist attacks, as well as a variety of other kinds of harm-inducing occurrences (Seeger, 2007).

Leaders in higher education are expected to have the ability to effectively manage crises, and college and university campuses across the nation have had to drastically revise – or create from scratch – crisis management plans that include policies and operational plans for response (Lott, 2012). An important component of a successful crisis management plan is a crisis communication plan (Lott, 2012). During a crisis, decisions often get made quickly; in the early stages of one, it is imperative to communicate information about the situation to stakeholders (Lott, 2012). Stakeholders at a college or university include any group that can be affected by an institution’s behavior (Coombs, 2007) or lack thereof. Crisis communication planning is essential in a school’s crisis management approach and should focus on this critical human element (Howard, 2015).

Statement of Problem

Institutions of higher learning are often ill prepared for crises, and major disasters quickly become stressful, hectic situations (Carlson, 2007). The problem is that even though many institutions of higher learning have a crisis *management* plan, too few tend to have a crisis

communication plan (Lawson, 2013). A prime example is Monroe County Community College in Monroe, Mich., which, although it has an emergency response plan, does not have a crisis communication plan, which leaves the institution vulnerable to reputational damage.

Organizational reputation is a cumulative evaluation stakeholders make about how an organization is meeting their expectations based on what it has done in the past (Coombs, 2007).

Crises can negatively impact reputation and affect how stakeholders interact with an organization, but Coombs (2007) states that communication before a crisis can be used to prevent damage to organizational reputation or repair it after the damage is inflicted.

For organizations, reputational assets can, among other things, attract customers, improve financial performance, attract highly talented employees and create a competitive advantage (Coombs, 2007). For higher learning institutions, the impact crises can have on potential “customers” can be devastating. When news of a crisis makes national headlines, prospective students may reconsider attending institutions associated with the crisis (Kelsay, 2007).

Significance of the Problem

It is critical that institutions of higher learning understand team organization, designate responsibilities, and train the members of their campus community to take the proper steps before, during and after a crisis; however, while having a crisis management plan is critical, there should also be a communication plan (Kelsay, 2007). Ihlen (2010) states that too often what starts as a relatively minor problem becomes a larger crisis because of poor organizational handling and communication. Over and over, organizations are prone to not pay attention to early warning signs that could have helped them avoid a full-blown crisis, and then, when they actually do address a crisis situation, it often appears that they are just making a cursory effort (Ihlen, 2010).

Cynthia Lawson, vice president of public relations and communications at DePaul University, states that colleges and universities often must experience a major crisis before they accept the fact that a crisis communication plan is critical to ensure that stakeholders understand what is happening (Lawson, 2013). If colleges and universities do not provide the information, others will step in and fill that void – and what they fill it with may not be what institutions want being released (Lawson, 2013). This can negatively impact the reputations of institutions, which can be quite detrimental because reputations are widely recognized as valuable, intangible assets.

In the event of a crisis, colleges and universities must work diligently to keep students interested in their institutions and convince them – and, often, their parents – that they are safe (Kelsay, 2007), depending on the type of crisis. Unfortunately, those charged with crisis management at higher educational institutions have been known to become too absorbed in managing the crisis, which may slow communication to stakeholders (Lott, 2012). A strong, pre-crisis relationship with stakeholders can help a college or university keep its credibility throughout a crisis and help maintain relationships (Lott, 2012).

Lawson (2013) recommends that those responsible for leading crisis management response efforts at a college or university work with the media relations office to put a crisis communication plan in place rather than handling communication themselves in isolation once a crisis occurs. During a major crisis, key college units may be too busy to issue messages; a media relations unit's sole job is communicating; therefore, members of such a group tend to be more skilled at it (Lawson, 2013).

Walsch (2011) discussed six principles that organizations should follow for any kind of crisis management, and communication is pivotal in each:

- Keep existing stakeholders informed;

- Treat the media as an ally;
- Maintain any safety issues that might come up as the top priority, with reputation management always the second-most important priority;
- Be readily available to the public;
- Adhere to full disclosure; and
- Speak through one main spokesperson.

By following these principles, an organization can stay focused in a high-stress situation while imploring that ethical behavior is followed (Walsch, 2011).

Theoretical Background

To analyze the problem of too few colleges and universities having crisis communications plans, institutions of higher learning must understand how crises can affect organizational reputation and trust, how communications plans can positively affect stakeholder perceptions following a crisis, and what should be included in such plans. Studies revealed that the theoretical approaches of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) and Image Restoration Theory (Burner, 2016) could be considered for this project.

Research Questions

1. How does the literature suggest the absence of a crisis communication plan can affect a college or university and the trust of its stakeholders following a crisis, in comparison to having such a plan in place?
2. Can a crisis communication plan positively influence how stakeholders perceive an institution of higher learning during the post-crisis communication phase?
3. What does the literature indicate are the components of a crisis communication plan that can positively influence the reputation of a two-year or four-year institution?

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to analyze the literature on higher education to determine the best strategies to create a plan for small or mid-sized community colleges to communicate to stakeholders during a crisis. Monroe County Community College will be the model used for institutions that are similar in size, demographics, and mission. Despite not having a crisis communication plan in place, Monroe County Community College has seemingly escaped significant reputational damage from crises that have occurred in the last decade, but the threat remains very real. The time has come to develop a crisis communication plan to protect the organization's reputation.

The literature specific to crisis communication in higher education is limited and focuses on crisis management as a broad topic (Burner, 2016). This project will review the limited literature available on crisis communication in higher education and synchronize it with the bevy of literature that exists on crisis communication at other organizations. This examination will provide insight on how to create a crisis communication plan that can help MCCC and similar colleges avoid the reputational damage that can accompany a crisis. The basis of reviewing and analyzing this problem will be Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Image Restoration Theory.

Definition of Terms

Crisis: A crisis is sudden, unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and also poses a threat to its finances and reputation (Coombs, 2007).

Crisis Communication: Crisis communication refers to an organization's effort to cope with an unexpected, threatening situation that requires a short response time (Walsch, 2011).

Another definition is that it is an attempt to manage, respond, resolve and, ultimately, learn from a potential turning point for an organization (Walsch, 2011).

Crisis Communication Plan: A crisis communication plan is an organization's protocol for communicating to its stakeholders with updates on a crisis (Burner, 2016).

Crisis Management Plan: A crisis management plan is a strategic system of policies and operational protocol put in place by an organization to respond various levels and stages of crises (Burner, 2016).

Demographic Model: The model for this project is Monroe County Community College, which is representative demographically of small or mid-sized community colleges with between 1,000-10,000 students that are not located in major metropolitan areas and do not have students living on campus.

Reputation: Reputation is a cumulative evaluation of an organization by its stakeholders that is based on its past behaviors and recognized as an intangible asset (Coombs, 2007).

Stakeholders: Stakeholders at a college or university are any group – such as students, employees, taxpayers, donors, vendors, or campus visitors – that can be affected by an institution's behavior (Coombs, 2007) or lack thereof.

Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

Introduction

This literature review has been designed to determine what evidence-based research indicates are the most effective crisis communication strategies for community colleges. Monroe County Community College, a college with approximately 3,200 (Monroe County Community College, 2017) students located in Monroe, Mich., will be the model used for institutions that are similar in size, demographics, and mission. Therefore, the crisis communications strategies put forth as a result of this study will be geared toward small or mid-sized community colleges – those with enrollments between about 1,000-10,000 students – that are not located in major metropolitan areas and do not have on-campus residence life. The evidence-based research in this chapter includes discussion of crisis management efforts at higher education institutions, the definition of crisis communication in higher education, crisis management and leadership at colleges and universities, internal and external crisis communication, technology use in communicating during crises, and how colleges and universities can construct effective crisis communication plans. In addition, summaries of crisis communication plans at two community colleges are included, as well as discussion of two theories that are used in the application of crisis communication efforts – Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Image Restoration Theory.

Key word searches were conducted to search research databases to find a solid mix of peer-reviewed and scholarly articles, academic dissertations, and articles written by college and university leaders, communication practitioners, and experts in the field of communication. Abstracts and articles that were not full text were not included in this literature review.

Crisis Management and Higher Educational Institutions

Parents are becoming more and more involved in the college selection process because they want to ensure that their children enroll at a college that is safe, which has increased the importance for institutions of higher learning to ensure that they have an effective crisis management plan in place (Lott, 2012). At the same time, colleges and universities have faced budget cuts and reduction in staffing due to difficult economic times, and the result can be an ineffective crisis management system that lacks the necessary resources for adequate implementation (Lott, 2012). Crises that arise at colleges and universities receive media attention that can negatively impact enrollment, as parents and prospective students lose confidence that the university is safe (Lott, 2012). Others who learn of such crises have influence on parents and students, such as family members, friends, teachers, guidance counselors, and others who can provide input on the college selection decision (Lott, 2012). Among the many factors that influence college choices are how much media attention the crisis received, the timing of the crisis in relation to the year a prospective student is being recruited, and the type of crisis (Lott, 2012).

What is a Crisis at College or University?

As noted in the first chapter, Coombs (2007) stated that a crisis is defined as an event that is sudden or unexpected, threatens to disrupt an organization's operations, and poses a threat to its finances and reputation (Coombs, 2007). A crisis can harm a wide array of stakeholders physically, emotionally, and/or financially; these stakeholders can include community members, employees, customers, suppliers and stockholders (Coombs, 2007). As also stated in the first chapter, stakeholders at a college or university are any group – such as students, employees, taxpayers, donors, vendors, or campus visitors – that can be affected by an institution's behavior

(Coombs, 2007) or lack thereof. The reputation of an organization such as a college or university is a cumulative evaluation by stakeholders of how it is meeting their expectations that is based on its past behaviors and recognized as an intangible asset (Coombs, 2007). Crises threaten the reputations of organizations because they give people reasons to think poorly of them (Coombs, 2007). The news media and Internet play a critical role, as it is through these mediums that many stakeholders will learn about a crisis, with the exception of victims or potential victims who are more likely to be directly involved in the crisis or be informed directly about it by the organization (Coombs, 2007). When an organization's favorable reputation changes to unfavorable, how stakeholders interact with an organization can change (Coombs, 2007). The benefits of a favorable reputation may be lost, and stakeholders may cut ties to the organization and/or propagate the spread of negative information about the organization (Coombs, 2007).

But how is a crisis defined when viewed more specifically in the realm of higher education? Higher educational institutions are different from each other, with each having its own organizational culture, norms, types of organizational funding, missions, and more (Lott, 2012). Lott (2012) offered a definition of crisis in higher educational institutions that was provided by Zdziarski in 2007: an event that is often sudden or unanticipated and causes disruption in the day-to-day operations of the institution or its mission. Lott (2012) also cites Laura Day, who in 2006 stated that the word "crisis" is a derivative of the ancient Greek word "krinein," that means "to decide." Day stated that a crisis compels that a decision be made, and a crisis cannot be avoided by simply not making a decision because even deciding not to decide is a decision (Lott, 2012). Decisions made by college or university administrators during crises

have come to depend on the effectiveness of a crisis management plan (Lott, 2012). The timing of the decisions has also become pivotal, as some crises demand timely responses (Lott, 2012).

Crisis Leadership and Management in Higher Education

Any college or university leader charged with crisis management must always be prepared for whatever uncertainty may come the way of the institution; it is imperative that a crisis management leader learn to make decisions in the face of highly uncertain situations and consider the interests of a wide variety of stakeholders who are affected by an institution's decisions and actions, and who, as a result, can impact the success of the institution (Lott, 2012). In a 2001 study of 155 higher education institutions by Zdziarski's respondents said the following:

- Of the various types of crises – natural, facility, criminal or human – fire, suicide, and campus disturbances/demonstrations occurred the most (Lott, 2012).
- About 88% of institutions reported that they had a written crisis management plan (Lott, 2012).
- Public institutions were more likely to have an overall crisis management plan, while private colleges and universities had more criminal and human crisis contingency plans (Lott, 2012).
- Most institutions identified administrators such as the vice president of student affairs, president, vice president of business affairs, university police chief, and the dean of students as coordinator of the crisis management response (Lott, 2012).
- In terms of how universities communicated their plans, about 57% reported that a written plan and additional copies were available upon request; 31% reported that the plan was communicated through drills/exercises (Lott, 2012). Institutions that had written plans

mostly responded that they offered optional crisis management training sessions so members of the campus community could learn about their plans (Lott, 2012). They also stated that they utilized campus-wide postings, student and faculty orientation sessions, campus publications, and the Internet to communicate the plans (Lott, 2012).

- Most institutions (60%) reported that no audit was done on their crisis management plans, and, for those that did do an audit, about half reviewed it only when a crisis occurred (Lott, 2012).
- Internal stakeholders who had the greatest involvement in crisis management plans were those in the public relations, student affairs, residence life, and counseling areas; external stakeholders included local police and fire officials, hospital officials, and campus clergy (Lott, 2012).

Crisis Communication in Higher Education

As stated in the first chapter, even though many colleges and universities have crisis management plans in place, too few tend to have a crisis communication plan (Lawson, 2013). Determining how the literature on higher education suggests the absence of a crisis communication plan can affect a college or university and the trust of its stakeholders is one of the research questions of this project. Another research question concerns whether a crisis communication plan can positively influence how stakeholders perceive an institution of higher learning after a crisis. The following sections provide answers to both questions by discussing how properly managed communication is key to resolving crises at colleges and universities, why a crisis communication plan is important in protecting the reputations of such institutions, and how effective internal and external communication is critical to college and university crisis

communication, including how such communication has been improved in recent years through the implementation of technology and mass modal systems.

Properly Managed Communication Needed to Resolve Crises at Higher Educational Institutions

Properly managed communication is required for organizations, including colleges and universities, to successfully resolve organizational crises, and the term “crisis communication” – a valuable tool used to resolve crises requiring prior, comprehensive planning – has long been established in the lexicon of organizational management (David, 2011). Effective crisis communication is one of the key components in successful crisis leadership, as it impacts trust and assurance among higher education stakeholders (Lott, 2012). The importance organizations give to crisis communication supports an important assertion that a crisis is not only an unpredictable event that can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes, but also the *perception* of such an event among stakeholders (David, 2011). This idea is backed up by both Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Image Restoration Theory. Situational crisis communication theory holds that when an organization – such as a college or university – is in the middle of a crisis, stakeholders make determinations about the organization’s responsibility for the crisis and its resulting negative consequences (Schwartz, 2012). The more stakeholders hold a college or university responsible for the negative results of a crisis, the more negatively they should view the institution’s reputation. Benoit’s Image Restoration Theory explains how organizations respond to accusations or negative accounts (Daniel & Littlefield, 2015/2016) through communication that is best conceptualized as an activity that is directed by goals, with maintaining a positive reputation being one of the main objectives of communication (Burner, 2016). The dissemination of information to key audiences

and the media are critical during a crisis – especially the communication of messages that protect reputation – because when apparent misdeeds occur, humans are concerned that others will think less of them, and this image threat is believed to become greater as responsibility becomes greater (Burner, 2016). By using strategic communication to reduce the perceived offensiveness of a crisis event, a college or university can deflect threats to its credibility while, at the same time, give itself the chance to strategically minimize the perceived severity of the situation (Burner, 2016). This aspect of Image Restoration Theory is congruent with Situational Crisis Communication Theory – the more individuals believe an organization, such as a college or university, is responsible for a crisis, the more at-risk the reputation of the college or university becomes (Burner, 2016; Schwartz, 2012).

The Need for a Plan

Crisis management without adequate communication can result in the loss of support of strategic publics like employees, students, and members of the community, because trust and credibility are built up over many years and can be lost abruptly and permanently (Lott, 2012). While enlightened organizations – from retailers to multinational merchants and manufacturers to colleges and universities – have a management plan for dealing with disaster, many have given little thought to how to communicate during a crisis and assure their employees that everything is under control and secure safety measures are in place (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). A simple, clear crisis communication plan is essential in the disaster-prone world of business (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). And, though many academicians may disagree, colleges and universities, whether private or public, are businesses.

A proactive approach is necessary to appropriately manage public perception during a crisis, and, with that in mind, crisis communication is communication between the organization

and its public before, during, and following the crisis (David, 2011). The communication should be strategic, planned in advance as much as possible, and designed to minimize damage to the reputation of the organization (David, 2011). In crisis situations, decisions are often made quickly; communicating about the crisis and subsequent decisions as early as possible is imperative (Lawson, 2013). One extreme example of what can happen at a college or university when crisis communication planning fails was the tragedy at Kent State University in 1970; ineffective communication between administrators, students, the university community, and external stakeholders was one of the main factors that led to that crisis (Lott, 2012).

For effective communication at colleges and universities when a crisis situation arises, the following must be in place:

- Clear guidelines;
- A clear understanding of chain of command;
- The identification of who has the final say on all matters;
- The establishment of clear channels of communication between university administrators and key representatives from outside agencies; and
- The delineation of how college and university officials will communicate with the students, staff members, media, and other critical stakeholders (Lott, 2012).

A proactive organization applies crisis communication not only while a crisis event is happening, but also before it happens and after it is over (David, 2011). Transparency, which entails an organization providing the most comprehensive, easily understandable and accurate information possible, is a highly important feature of crisis communication, because, without it, rumors and false information can spread in the media (David, 2011). In addition, they can also spread online in the blogosphere and in social media.

Crisis communication must facilitate the smooth transfer of information necessary for viable crisis management, which is a dual process involving the proper communication between members of the crisis management team, as well as between those members and the rest of the organization (internal communication), experts, and other parties involved in resolving the crisis (David, 2011). It must also guarantee as little damage to the reputation of the organization as possible (David, 2011). Internal communication is critical in this endeavor, because its aim is to preserve an organizations own members' trust and loyalty (David, 2011). Media relations and stakeholder communication are also included in the effort of maintaining organizational reputation during a crisis, and, should this process be managed properly, it is even possible that an organization may, in the long run, come out of a crisis with a better reputation than it had before (David, 2011).

Effective Internal Crisis Communication in Higher Education

Lott (2012) suggests that there is no reason for delayed communications to internal college and university stakeholders during a crisis situation. Although institutions of higher learning must comply with the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (P.L 93-380), the law expressly permits disclosures deemed to be appropriate in times of actual or potential emergency (Lott, 2012). David (2011) states that crisis communication with internal stakeholders must be characterized by honesty, openness, appropriateness, and completeness and suggests the following practical actions to ensure this during a crisis, which are all applicable to institutions of higher learning:

- Brief internal audiences about the situation as soon as possible before details of the crisis get into the media;
- Be consistent – do not say one thing and do another or offer contradictory statements;

- Ensure the compatibility of internal and external messages, because sending a piece of information only to an internal public does not guarantee that the message will not become public;
- Give all internal stakeholders the same information that is free of contradictions and discrepancies between what some members know and what others have learned;
- Politely insist that all internal stakeholders direct all requests for details and questions to the spokesperson for the most accurate, timely and appropriate information;
- Use face-to-face communication and regular briefings with internal stakeholders as often as possible, because they are extremely credible and appropriate when followed by the distribution or posting of a memo detailing the latest developments, and they encourage bilateral communication, thereby reducing rumors and the distortion of facts; and
- Encourage internal stakeholders – whenever and wherever possible – to go about their usual, daily activities because often not all of an organization's members are involved in the resolution of a crisis, and this will help mitigate economic loss and reduce unfavorable media impact in the face of a growing appetite for reporting on disruptions produced by the unfortunate event.

David (2011) also strongly encourages the use of compassion to help maintain the psychological comfort of internal stakeholders, because when unexpected negative and explosive developments arise within the organizational space, some employees – and, in the case of a college or university, students – may be affected, threatened, injured or even killed, and material damage may be present. If possible, the organization should allow for a toll-free telephone line and/or individual or group counseling sessions for internal stakeholders such as employees or students to use to confidentially express their confusions and concerns (David, 2011).

Immediately after the crisis, defusing sessions are suggested to help internal stakeholders to leave behind the stress generated by the crisis (David, 2011). Employees, students and other internal stakeholders should be encouraged to view the resolution of the problem as a shared responsibility between them and the organization (David, 2011).

The organization must recognize the contributions of internal stakeholders to the resolution of the crisis and ensure a feeling of continuity perceivable throughout the whole process (David, 2011). Management must continue communication well after public attention decreases, because not doing so will produce a loss of credibility and have long-lasting effects on internal stakeholders' and their families' morale, as some will remain affected by the events and fear that unfortunate events will reoccur; others may show great resentment against the organization, even if the organization itself is not responsible (David, 2011). Thus, post-crisis stage communication with internal stakeholders is critical, and specialized counseling may be needed to try to redirect accumulated anger and frustrations toward a positive direction (David, 2011). A key person in the organization must permanently be seen by internal stakeholders as being in charge and responsive until the crisis is over; this is vital in maintaining and strengthening trust in the organization throughout the crisis and may also help to reduce collateral damage from a belief that the process is being insufficiently managed or not managed at all (David, 2011).

Effective External Crisis Communications in Higher Education

The responsibility at colleges and universities to share information with the public typically rests with the public relations or marketing communication offices, and the credibility of these entities becomes very important in sharing accurate information in times of crises (Lott, 2012). A strong pre-crisis relationship between an institution and stakeholders – including the

media – can help a college or university to maintain its credibility during a crisis and help maintain relationships (Lott, 2012). Organizations that cannot or do not provide information during a crisis force external stakeholders to turn to other sources for information – sources that are often less credible and accurate (Lott, 2012). Crisis leaders who become deeply involved in managing the crisis can inadvertently slow communication; they must resist this in order to keep the lines of communication open with the community as much as needed (Lott, 2012). The characteristics of trust, understanding, credibility, satisfaction, cooperation, and agreement are critical for effective crisis management (Lott, 2012).

Technology Use in Crisis Communication

Crisis communication efforts at colleges and universities have been made more effective in recent years through better technology such as e-mail alerts, text messages, voice messages, and on-campus media outlets (Lott, 2012). When an active shooter was reported to be in a building owned by Northwestern University in Illinois, the university's electronic alert system was highly effective in communicating to the community, reaching 90% of students within 15 minutes (Lott, 2012). But, colleges and universities that are unprepared or underprepared to utilize technology can experience communication failures during crises that have serious consequences (Lott, 2012). In 2010, the University of Minnesota's electronic alert system failed when the university was unable to send out an email in a timely fashion about a student being shot during a robbery (Lott, 2012). The delay in communication led the university's police department to implement a system in which a person is always on-call in the event that an emergency e-mail alerts is needed (Lott, 2012). Gallaudet University issued a campus-wide alert in 2010 through e-mail that a student who was attempting to harm the campus had been detained (Lott, 2012). The alert quelled rumors, and anxiety among the campus community began to

subside (Lott, 2012). In 2011, Missouri Southern State University was hosting a high school graduation when a tornado took aim at the town, and although the 6,000 regular students had already gone home for summer break, the campus was full of visitors for the graduation (Hodgson, 2012). Fortunately, the university had an emergency communication system to make announcements inside the university buildings as well as exterior areas, which alerted the visitors and campus how and where to take shelter (Hodgson, 2012).

Research shows how vital a college or university website is to crisis communication (Lott, 2012). In 2008, Madere conducted a survey about website usage by 41 Louisiana colleges and universities for emergency communication and learned that nearly 60 percent had some safety information on their websites (Lott, 2012). She concluded that for a college or university to have effective crisis information tools, it must offer clear, fast, and easy-to-access directions to both on-campus and off-campus stakeholders and that the use of official websites to distribute information could help people adjust following a crisis and serve as a relationship builder (Lott, 2012).

The Need for Comprehensive, Mass Modal Notification Systems

A December 2011 White Paper sponsored by Siemens, "Detailed Analysis of U.S. College and University Annual Clery Act Reports," found that virtually every college and university reviewed had at least one way to communicate its campus community during an emergency, with Web-based alert systems, such as SMS/text and e-mail being used the most (Hodgson, 2012). While these systems make sense and are effective with populations that are used to doing everything on their mobile phones, they do have some limitations: they rely on individuals who must sign up for the service (Hodgson, 2012). In addition, those who participate in such systems must be reminded consistently to keep their contact info updated (Hodgson,

2012). And, in an actual crisis situation, large volumes of numbers and/or email addresses in the system can slow down the service and messages can be delayed (Hodgson, 2012).

The Siemens White Paper states that the best way to reach the maximum number of people during a crisis situation – while ensuring the consistency of the message – is a comprehensive, multi-modal mass notification system that utilizes multiple layers of messaging options and is managed from one command center (Hodgson, 2012). However, less than 50% of colleges and universities are fully using such an approach, perhaps largely due to cost restraints in light of reduced funding for higher education (Hodgson, 2012). While these institutions colleges are doing what they can with the funding they have, the more layers they can add to their crisis notification systems, the more effective the systems will be (Hodgson, 2012).

Crafting a Crisis Communication Plan for a College or University

Determining what the literature indicates are the components of a crisis communication plan that can positively influence the reputation of a two-year or four-year institution was the final research question for this project. In the following sections, crisis communication response strategies from Coombs (2007) based on situational crisis communication theory, essential rules for crisis communications plans by McGrath and Pederson (1996), crisis communication plan tips on developing a crisis communication plan for communication professionals at colleges and universities by Whitt (2014), and Dunning's best practices for effective crisis communications at colleges and universities (Hope, 2014) are discussed.

Coombs: Strategies Based on Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational crisis communication theory holds that the crisis manager can identify the proper crisis response strategy or strategies that will offer the highest level reputational protection (Coombs, 2007). This is done by understanding the crisis situation, as situational

crisis communication theory focuses on the crisis manager assessing the level of reputational threat – the possible amount of damage that could be inflicted on the organization's reputation if no action is taken – that a crisis presents (Coombs, 2007). The reputational threat is shaped by initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation. Initial crisis responsibility involves how much stakeholders believe organizational actions caused the crisis; as stakeholders' attributions of crisis responsibility to the organization intensify, so does the reputational threat to an organization (Coombs, 2007).

Initial crisis responsibility is assessed based upon how the crisis is being framed – also known as the crisis type (Coombs, 2007). There are frames in communication and frames in thought (Coombs, 2007). Frames in communication involve how information such as words and images is presented in a message, while frames in thought involve the cognitive structures people utilize as they interpret information (Coombs, 2007). Frames in thought are shaped with assistance from frames in communication; the way a message is framed shapes how people define problems and their causes and solutions, as well as blame (Coombs, 2007). Frames are important when people make decisions because the frames emphasize specific facts or values; people who receive the framed message will focus on those factors when coming up with opinions and making judgments (Coombs, 2007). Types of crises are a frame because each crisis type highlights certain parts of the crisis and become cues for stakeholders on how to interpret the crisis (Coombs, 2007). A crisis manager attempts to shape the crisis frame by stressing certain cues, such as the fact that an external agent or force caused it, it was the result of accidental or intentional actions, or it was the result of a human mistake (Coombs, 2007). Stakeholders who are attributing responsibility for a crisis take these frames into consideration,

and situational crisis communication theory research has identified three crisis clusters based upon such attributions (Coombs, 2007):

- The victim cluster: This cluster includes instances such as natural disasters, violence, product tampering and rumor (Coombs, 2007). It has very weak attributions of crisis responsibility because the organization is viewed as a victim of the situation (Coombs, 2007).
- The accidental cluster: This includes events such as technical-error accident and technical-error product harm and challenge and has minimal attributions of crisis responsibility because the organization did not intend for the event to happen and it is considered uncontrollable (Coombs, 2007).
- The intentional cluster: This cluster includes events like human-error accident, human-error product harm, and organizational misdeed. It has very strong attributions of crisis because the event is considered purposeful (Coombs, 2007).

Crisis history involves determining whether or not an organization has had a similar crisis in the past or numerous crises in the past (Coombs, 2007). *Prior relational reputation* is an assessment of how an organization has or is believed to have treated stakeholders in other contexts – not just in crises – and is unfavorable if the organization has a history of treating stakeholders poorly (Coombs, 2007). Crisis history and prior relational reputation have a direct and indirect effect on the reputational threat posed by the crisis because both intensify attributions of crisis responsibility, and, thus, indirectly affect the reputational threat (Coombs, 2007). In addition, both factors directly affect the reputational threat in a way that is different from crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007).

Given that Situational Crisis Communication holds that the perceptions of individuals in a crisis are affected by communication, crisis response strategies have three objectives: (1) shape crisis attributions, (2) alter perceptions of the organization in crisis, and (3) reduce the negative impact created by the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

Coombs outlines the following response strategies for those leading communication efforts during a crisis:

- *Inform and adjust information:* Most of the time in a crisis, the frames used by the media are the ones most stakeholders will experience and adopt, which is why it is so important that that crisis managers offer their version of the story to the media (Coombs, 2007).
- *Deny:* These strategies should be used when there is really no crisis at all, such as in the instance of rumor or challenge crises (Coombs, 2007). Deny strategies seek to establish a crisis frame and attempt to remove any connection between the organization and the crisis, because if organization is not involved in a crisis, it will not suffer any damage from the event (Coombs, 2007).
- *Diminish crisis response:* These strategies make the case that a crisis is not as bad as individuals believe or that the organization did not have control over the crisis (Coombs, 2007). If an organization's connection to the crisis can be reduced and /or people view the crisis in less of a negative light, the harmful effects to the organization's reputation are reduced (Coombs, 2007). For example, excuse or lack of intent and/or volition strategies can be used to reaffirm that a crisis situation is accidental, and the value in this is that an accidental crisis is much simpler and less costly to manage than a crisis that falls into the intentional cluster (Coombs, 2007). It is important that solid evidence exists to support such claims, and even then they might not work because people may reject the

crisis manager's frame and continue using a different frame (Coombs, 2007). Diminish strategies are most effective when they are used to reinforce existing crisis frames (Coombs, 2007).

- *Rebuild*: Rebuild strategies are reserved for crises that present a severe reputational threat such as intentional or accidental crises in conjunction with a crisis history and/or poor prior reputation (Coombs, 2007). To change perceptions and offset the negatives generated by the crisis, managers can offer new, positive information about the organization and/or remind stakeholders of past good works by the organization (Coombs, 2007). They can also attempt to create new reputational assets by taking actions such as offering material and/or symbolic forms of aid to victims, doing things to benefit stakeholders, and offering compensation or a full apology (Coombs, 2007).
- *Bolstering*: Bolstering strategies offer limited opportunities to develop reputational assets (Coombs, 2007). Managers who have enjoyed positive relationships with stakeholders can utilize that goodwill to help protect the reputation of the organization, compliment stakeholders for their efforts during the crisis, or draw sympathy for being a victim of the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Another bolstering strategy is reminding, which uses past good works to counter-balance the current negatives from the crisis (Coombs, 2007). All bolstering strategies are best used as supplements to the strategies of informing and adjusting information, deny, diminish crisis response, and rebuild (Coombs, 2007).

Coombs (2007) states that a crisis will have a negative impact, especially one that falls into the intentional crisis cluster. During and after a crisis, some stakeholders may become angry and may even take pleasure in the organization's struggles (Coombs, 2007). Adjusting information and rebuild strategies work the best to reduce the negative impact of a crisis

(Coombs, 2007). An aspect of adjusting information is the expression of concern by the organization for victims (Coombs, 2007). Doing this – and reinforcing this compassion through compensation and/or a full apology – works to reduce feelings of anger (Coombs, 2007). A crisis can also evoke a feeling of sympathy toward the organization, and the strategy to actively take on the role of the victim via strategically placed communication reinforces the belief by stakeholders that the organization is deserving of sympathy (Coombs, 2007). The deny strategy can remove the negative impact if stakeholders accept that a crisis really did not occur (Coombs, 2007). Organizations must be consistent and in their crisis response strategies and mindful to not send mixed messages (Coombs, 2007). Employing the deny strategy while also utilizing the diminish or rebuild strategies will reduce the effectiveness of the overall response.

McGrath and Pederson: Essential Rules for Crisis Communication Plans

According to McGrath and Pederson (1996), there are some essential rules about what all crisis communication plans should contain. These rules also can be applied to colleges and universities:

- Identify all the disasters that conceivably could impact your organization (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- Identify the person who should be your organization's spokesperson and one or two alternates; arrange professional media training for all who may be considered for spokesperson (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- Analyze each relevant stakeholder constituency of the organization and organize in advance efficient vehicles to reach them (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- Distribute written instructions on how to channel media inquiries to the appropriate spokesperson (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).

- Establish a crisis communication team and delineate specific communications roles in addition to the spokesperson, such as assembling relevant information throughout the crisis, setting up and managing a briefing room, and managing internal communication (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- Set up a system for logging media and other important inquiries during the crisis, which is crucial for analysis and potential follow-up (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- Develop/organize contact lists of key stakeholders you will need to reach during and after the crisis (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- Collect and assemble in advance vital documents that may be relevant in a crisis, either as background for reporters or as quick reference (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- Make electronic duplicates of all vital communication documents and store them on a portable drive or server in a safe place off-site in the event of a disaster that forces the vital communication operation offsite (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- Ensure that the crisis communication plan is a living document that is revisited annually (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). Update contact lists, train newcomers to the organization on the rationale and procedures of the plan, and arrange refresher media training to keep the spokesperson and alternates prepared for a crisis (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- Regularly cultivate relationships with the media; community leaders; police, fire and safety officials, and others who will aid the organization in a crisis (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).

Whitt: Crisis Communication Plan Tips for College and University Professionals

Whitt (2014) outlined a number of tips on how communication professionals at colleges and universities can develop a crisis communication plan for their respective institutions:

- Understand the president's expectation of the communication/public relations department and how it should communicate when crisis could or actually does occur;
- Meet often with key college or university employees such as the president's cabinet members, deans, and department chairs, to keep them abreast of how you manage your public relations operation;
- Develop and maintain strong relations with the media that covers your institution, because reporters must know they can count on you for honest, accurate and timely crisis information;
- Consistently meet with those who handle public safety and risk management at your college or university's and with local police and fire chiefs;
- As a preventative measure, be constantly on the lookout for possible crisis situations by monitoring social media and listening to students, faculty and staff, and determine what information warrants reporting to the president and other executive campus leadership;
- Don't extend the life cycle of a crisis – confront it in a timely fashion and note how your institution plans to address the matter, because through proactive management, the crisis will be significantly reduced;
- Work on your interpersonal communication skills to keep them fine-tuned so you can always present yourself as a steady, calm, articulate, and mature voice for your college or university and, after a crisis, take note of what you can do better the next time;
- Review your plan on a regular basis to be sure it includes the most up-to-date information on key constituents, the crisis communications team, emergency personnel, local officials, media contacts and campus leadership, and web and social media accounts managed by your institution's communications and public safety offices; and

- Take time after a crisis to follow up with those involved to critique your institution's communications efforts so you can better position the institution and the communications office as trustworthy organizations during times of both calm and crisis.

Hope: Dunning's Best Practices for Colleges and Universities

Dunning offers a number of best practices for effective crisis communications at colleges and universities (Hope, 2014). She states that every institution should have a team or committee that plans for crises, and a core group of this team should be charged with deciding whether a true crisis is underway that requires the activation of the team (Hope, 2014). Deciding on the composition of the team is an important endeavor, and the chain of authority on the team should be clearly delineated, including a description of the role of each member (Hope, 2014). "The make-up of the team depends on the institution's structure, but it typically includes someone from the president's office, the general counsel if there is one on campus, communications, campus security, a liaison to the board, and athletics" (Hope, 2014, p. 6). Preparing for a crisis is very serious business and should be supported from the president on down, and the board of trustees has a role, too, because board members need to need to know the college or university is ready for any crisis (Hope, 2014). One person on the crisis communication team must be the team's and institution's spokesperson, and this would typically be the chief communication officer, but it could be someone else depending on the needs of the specific institution (Hope, 2014).

"It's important to create messaging in advance that could be used in any scenario" (Hope, 2014, p. 6). For example, if there's a death on campus because of a violent event, there is a need to speak with compassion, clarity and reason, and the initial message in a crisis situation may be brief and end with a simple statement about not having any more to share (Hope, 2014). But if

the institution is silent, that allows others to fill the void, so crisis team members need to meet regularly to practice their messaging strategies for various crises before they ever need to use them (Hope, 2014).

“If the crisis communications team has determined that a crisis is underway, it should set up a war room, and each member should fulfill his role that the group determined in advance (Hope, 2014, p. 6).” The first step for the team is to learn all the facts and calmly review what happened (Hope, 2014). Absolutely no assumptions should be made (Hope, 2014). One of the reasons advanced planning is so important is because it can help keep team members from panicking (Hope, 2014). If the fault for the crisis lies with a member of campus the team should follow the three A's: admit, apologize, and act (Hope, 2014).

“In the first 24 hours of a crisis, communication is very important for reassuring communities” (Hope, 2014, p. 6). Stakeholders will consider the content of what is said, how it is delivered, how compassionate the tone of it is, and the steadiness of the person delivering the message (Hope, 2014). Information travels quickly in today's 24/7 news cycle, and with social media everyone becomes a reporter in times of crisis (Hope, 2014). Some crisis communication team members' roles are to communicate with internal and external stakeholders using predetermined messaging (Hope, 2014). Dunning defines internal constituents at colleges and universities as staff and faculty members, students, administrators and the board, and external stakeholders as parents and other family members, friends of the institution, donors, alumni, and the local community (Hope, 2014). While internal and external messages will overlap, it is critical to reach all these audiences and that someone is on point (Hope, 2014). It is also important to ensure that other office and departments on campus are not sending their own messages about the crisis that have not been approved by the core team (Hope, 2014).

“Other team members’ roles should include monitoring what is said about the crisis on social media and in the traditional media. For example, you want to know what the alumni are saying. If people are sharing inaccurate information, you should respond with facts” (Hope, 2014, p. 7). A crisis has a daily ebb and flow, and initial news accounts are often inaccurate, so the core team needs to filter through the information carefully to find out what happened, and, if the institution did something wrong, the teams needs to ask itself how the college or university can fix it (Hope, 2014). If the institution is not at fault, team members need to ensure that it gets the correct information out or others will fill the void by sharing information that might not be correct (Hope, 2014; Lawson, 2013).

If a college or university handles a crisis well, the hope is that it will emerge from the crisis with its credibility intact; however, the organization will need to work to continue to build up and sustain that credibility to be viewed as forthright, fair, and compassionate (Hope, 2014). Following the crisis, the crisis communication team should develop an editorial calendar of trust-building messaging, considering where the institution is most vulnerable and considering ways to address these areas (Hope, 2014). The nature of the crisis will dictate the college or university’s needs for reestablishing trust with certain constituents (Hope, 2014).

In addition, internal stakeholders need to know what to say about the crisis (Hope, 2014). For example, front-line admissions representatives and those in donor relations should be given guidance, and they need to have faith in how the crisis communication team is handling the crisis (Hope, 2014). Those who are in direct contact with students, such as faculty and student affairs professionals, as well as the students themselves, can help the organization regain trust by relaying messages about how although the institution is facing a difficult situation, it is being honest and respectful in how it is handling it (Hope, 2014). The board should be kept informed

in the crisis, and if it has a role in crisis communications, one member should be the spokesperson so that multiple members are not relaying conflicting messages (Hope, 2014). At some point, the institution needs to cease discussing the crisis on a regular basis, because if the college or university has handled it effectively and is still seen as trustworthy, its stakeholders will want to move on (Hope, 2014). Some stakeholders will never want to move on and let go of the crisis, but trying to convert a very small minority with extreme views is an unnecessary exercise in futility for an institution (Hope, 2014).

Existing Crisis Communication Plans: Central Oregon

Community College and Central Carolina Community College

For the purposes of this literature review, the recently updated crisis communication plans of two community colleges – Central Oregon Community College and Central Carolina Community College – were reviewed. Both plans were updated within the last five years.

Central Oregon Community College

Central Oregon Community College, located in Bend, Ore., has a crisis communications plan that is geared toward the first critical hours of a crisis through its end (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). It includes an introduction followed by sections including Definition, Initial Notification, Communications Team, Spokesperson/Communications Audiences, Fact Sheet, Internal Communications, and Postmortem (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). The following is a summary of that plan:

- During an emergency or potential crisis, persons directly involved should first cooperate fully with public safety agencies and then make contact to implement the college's Crisis Communications and Institutional Continuity plans (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). As soon as time allows, those directly involved in the crisis should notify one or

more of the following: their dean or director, the college Safety and Security Office, the public relations director (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).

- A crisis is defined as a situation that could have significant impact on its operation or standing in the public and necessitates immediate and coordinated action from the college (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).
- In the event of a crisis, it must be determined if the crisis communications plan should be implemented immediately, or if action can wait until the next working day (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). If immediate action is necessary, all appropriate college officials (whose mobile phones should always be on) should be made aware of, and – when appropriate – involved in, the crisis communications (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).
- A crisis communications team consisting of the following should be established immediately to monitor a crisis situation, provide guidance to the president and authorize communications and should initially consist of the president, director of public relations, director of human resources, and will likely expand to also include appropriate vice president, dean or directors, and the supervisor of safety and security (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). This team must determine regularly what and when information should be communicated to various audience groups (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).
- The communications manager is typically the director of public relations and will direct all communications (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). During the early stages of a crisis, specific college leaders should be responsible for communication with specific stakeholders (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). Backups should be assigned

(Central Oregon Community College, 2013). For example, the president should coordinate communications with board members, and his or her backup should be the vice president of administration; the vice president of instruction – with instructional deans as backups – should coordinate communication with the faculty; the director of public relations should coordinate communication to the media, and so on (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). This communications manager will work with individuals such as those listed above to put into place a strategy for each audience (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). No one except the communications manager should speak with the media, at least until additional procedures have been set up (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).

- An updated “fact sheet” should be prepared by the director of public relations, reviewed by the Crisis Communications Team, and then widely distributed (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).
- The Crisis Communications Team - in particular the directors of public relations and human resources – will assure that internal audiences are kept as informed as possible about developments (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). The emergency notification system of voice messages, text messages and e-mails will be used, and each vice president and dean should keep all groups under his/her management informed, especially if phones and/or electronic systems are unavailable (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). The administration should continue to have a presence on campus so that internal audiences are informed and senses that management is addressing the crisis and has it under control (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).

- After a crisis is over, the Institutional Continuity Team and the Crisis Communications Team should debrief on what worked and what did not work during the crisis (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). A written report should be developed and distributed to appropriate offices and stakeholders (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).

Central Carolina Community College

Central Carolina Community College, which has locations in Chatham, Harnett and Lee counties in North Carolina has a crisis communication plan with sections, that include What is a Crisis?, Crisis Communications Team, Crisis Communications Procedures, Release of Information, Prepared Statements, Tips for Presentations, Media Centers, Counseling Services, Campus Telephone Operators, and Human Resources (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). Central Carolina Community College's plan defines a crisis as an event or situation that can occur at any time and in any form and has a significant impact on the college community, such as an act of physical violence on campus, medical epidemic, major fire or explosion, tornado, hurricane, or manmade disaster (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

The plan states that the college's Crisis Communications Team is responsible for communicating facts and updates about a crisis situation, providing timely information to affected audiences about potential emergency situations and protective actions, identifying audiences that should be informed about the situation (students, parents, faculty, staff, Board of Trustees, alumni, donors, media, general public), coordinating cooperative efforts with responding agencies, minimizing rumors, and restoring order and protecting confidence in the college (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). Locations are established as to where the team will assemble, depending on the crisis location, with primary and secondary locations

identified for each of the three counties served by Central Carolina Community College (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). Three members of the team the president or vice president who will have decision authority, along with one of the college's public information officers and the college's security director or his/her designee, will report to the respective county's emergency operations center to coordinate with the respective county and city emergency officials, depending upon the severity of the crisis (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The plan states that the Crisis Communications Team includes the following college employees and also provides specific names and addresses: president; executive director of marketing and communications; director of communications; director of campus security and safety; vice president of administrative services; vice president of student services; vice president of student learning; director of human resources; provost, Chatham County; provost, Harnett County; vice president of economic and community development; associate vice president of student learning and strategic planning; director of Dennis Wicker Civic Center, and the President's Office administrative assistant (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

According to the plan's Crisis Communications Procedures section, in a crisis situation, the Crisis Communications Team will gather information, assess the situation, develop an action plan and work in conjunction with emergency operations agencies, including their public information officers (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The section outlines the following specific steps:

- *Designate a spokesperson.* The president or appropriate vice president should be the first choice for spokesperson, but the executive director of marketing and communications and/or the director of communications may also be designated as such (Central Carolina

Community College, 2017). All employees should refer all requests for comment to the spokesperson (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

- *Develop a fact sheet, official statement, and news release.* These will be developed by the Marketing and Public Affairs Department and approved by the president or appropriate vice president (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).
- *Protect privacy.* The college must strive to protect the right to privacy of students and employees as outlined in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).
- *Do not compromise criminal proceedings.* When responding to inquiries concerning a criminal charge or pending criminal investigation, caution must be exercised not to compromise these proceedings, and the college may need to consult legal counsel in such circumstances (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).
- *Communicate with internal and external audiences.* The official statement and updates about the situation will be communicated to internal audiences via all campus emails, the college's opt-in alert system, and the college's social media channels (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). External audiences will be communicated with via news releases, official statements, and/or individual interviews; in extreme situations only, a press conference may be necessary (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The Marketing and Public Affairs Department will coordinate all communications with the media, and all information released to external audiences will be coordinated with responding emergency agencies to ensure accuracy (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The website will provide ongoing updates to external audiences, and, only in extreme situations, a media center or centers will be established and media will be

directed to these locations to work and receive information (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The president will decide whether shooting by television and newspaper photographers will be allowed, and, if so, the executive director of marketing and communications and/or the director of communications will accompany photographers as necessary (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The use of an internal photographer should be considered to either help media or to document events for campus archives or potential litigation (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

The Release of Information portion of the Crisis Communication Plan reiterates that the release of information by the college during a crisis must strictly adhere to federal privacy guidelines and further states that in the event of injury or death, the college will not release any names until after family/next of kin are notified (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). In the Tips for Presentations section, the plan states that overall objective of all released information is to protect the college's integrity and reputation and offers these guidelines for spokesperson: 1) Be prepared with a written statement and do not attempt to provide spontaneous comments; always be sure all information released is accurate and verified, straightforward and without jargon, and do not talk off the record (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). 2) Know that it is not imperative that all questions be answered, don't answer inappropriate questions, and in a situation involving multiple media members, do not allow one person to ask the majority of the questions (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). 3) Make arrangements for the distribution of information (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

The Media Centers section of the plan provides additional details on as-needed centers in extreme situations where all media personnel will be directed to assemble to work and receive

information (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). At such a center or centers, the spokesperson will issue periodic statements (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The plan outlines specific center locations to be used unless those facilities are located in a dangerous zone (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). In extreme emergencies, local emergency officials and their public information officers, with the assistance of college public information officers, will determine where media will assemble (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

Counseling Services is a section of the Crisis Communication Plan that discusses how grief counseling and other supportive measures may be available depending on the nature of the crisis, and that communications materials for these types of services may be provided to the Marketing and Public Affairs Department for dissemination pending approval from the Crisis Communication Team (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

The Campus Telephone Operators section of the plan recommends that the Crisis Communications Team prepare a response narrative for use by those who answer general phone inquiries to the college (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). In addition, a separate response should be prepared for relatives calling about specific students or employees (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The final section of the plan, Human Resources, states that the Crisis Communications Team will also provide the Human Resources Department with a similar response for relatives seeking information about students or employees (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Situational crisis communication theory and image restoration theory are the theoretical frameworks for this master project because the attribution of responsibility by individuals during

a crisis involving a college or university has a direct impact on that college or university's reputation among its stakeholders. The more individuals believe an institution of higher learning is responsible for a crisis, the more at-risk the reputation of that institution becomes. Application of these theories will increase the likelihood that the crisis communication plan recommendations for Monroe County Community College and colleges similar to it presented later in this paper will be effective in mitigating potential reputational damage in the case of future crises.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory: An Application of Attribution Theory

Schwartz (2012) states the effect of communication on organizational reputation and stakeholder behavior before, during and after crises is not well understood because research on crisis communication is limited to mostly case-based and descriptive forms. Thus, communication professionals find difficulty in developing communication strategies that are backed by research to protect their respective organizations from reputational harm in crisis situations (Schwartz, 2012). In the 2000s and 2010s, attribution theories were proven useful for gaining an understanding of how and why stakeholders' attitudes towards organizations are affected by crises; how stakeholders attribute causes and responsibility for crises to certain organizations has been a focal point because these stakeholder attributions were found to greatly affect organizational reputation (Schwartz, 2012). The roots of attribution theory are helpful in understanding why applying it to the study of organizational crises makes sense (Schwartz, 2012). In 1958, Heider posited that individuals have a core need to reduce uncertainty about how they perceive their environment and may attempt to do so by attributing certain causes to behavior they have witnessed to make themselves more confident about what they observed (Schwartz, 2012). This is especially true for unanticipated events – including organizational

crises – that are believed to be personally relevant and threatening (Schwartz, 2012). Such events are likely to trigger spontaneous attributional activity (Schwartz, 2012). Situational Crisis Communication Theory was introduced by Coombs and Holladay in 2004 and is the most systematic, well-founded application of attribution theory (Schwartz, 2012). The basic assumption of Situational Crisis Communication Theory is that during organizational crises, stakeholders make assumptions about whether a particular organization is responsible for the crisis and its resulting negative consequences (Schwartz, 2012). The more they hold an organization responsible for the negative results of a crisis, the more negatively they should view the organization's reputation.

This is an idea that is based directly on insights from attribution theory, because there is solid evidence from social psychologists that attributions of responsibility shape feelings and behavior towards persons: When one individual witnesses a negative outcome of the behavior of another individual and holds this person responsible for this negative outcome, this creates strong feelings of anger and negative views of the person (Schwartz, 2012). This same is true for organizations. Because organizational crises typically involve perceived negative outcomes that result from the action – or inaction – of an organization, stakeholders' judgment of the organization will be impacted by their attributions of responsibility upon that organization (Schwartz, 2012). Increasing levels of organizational responsibility are moderate to strongly related to more negative perceptions of organizational reputation, which is a valuable asset that can be jeopardized by crises (Schwartz, 2012). This is dependent on stakeholders' perceptions, attributions, and an organization's response to a crisis (Schwartz, 2012). Coombs used attribution theory as rationale for evidence-based guidelines for the selection of strategies to address organizational responsibility during crises – matching the appropriate crisis response

strategy with a particular crisis (Schwartz, 2012). These strategies were culled from corporate apologia, corporate impression management, and image restoration theory (Schwartz, 2012).

Coombs states (2007) that situational crisis communication theory extends upon its base in attribution theory to predict the reputational threat that a crisis presents and to inform possible actions that can be undertaken to protect reputational assets. The crisis is the negative event that prompts stakeholders to evaluate who or what is to blame for the crisis (Coombs, 2007). For example, stakeholders might ponder whether the crisis was due to situational factors or something the organization could or should have exerted control over (Coombs, 2007). Coombs (2007) states that extant research shows a link between attribution theory and crises and that attribution of crisis responsibility by stakeholders has consequences for an organization because if they judge that an organization is responsible, the organization's reputation is harmed and stakeholders become angry. As a result, they may disassociate from the organization and /or spread negative word of mouth, and management would be well served to ensure that both of these negative outcomes do not occur (Coombs, 2007).

Image Restoration Theory

In 2005, Benoit introduced image restoration theory to explain how organizations respond to accusations or negative accounts (Daniel & Littlefield, 2015/2016). Benoit offers image restoration strategies that are built on assumptions that communication is best conceptualized as an activity that is directed by goals, and maintaining a positive reputation is one of the main objectives of communication (Burner, 2016). He says that in situations important to people, they carefully plan what they say, but in other situations they do not, citing communication theory literature to support his claim that rhetoric is goal-directed (Burner, 2016). Maintaining a positive reputation is critical during a crisis, as leaders must deal with the

crisis at hand and simultaneously protect reputation (Burner, 2016). This includes leaders' professional reputations, as well as the reputations of their respective organizations. The dissemination of information to key audiences and the media are critical during a crisis, especially the communication of messages that protect reputation because, as Benoit says, when apparent misdeeds occur, humans are concerned that others will think less of them, and this image threat is believed to become greater as responsibility becomes greater (Burner, 2016).

In 2008, Dardis and Haigh found that image-restoration strategies can have considerable impact on how people view an organization that is involved in a crisis situation (Burner, 2016). They came to this conclusion through a study in which they created a fake recall of snack foods (Burner, 2016). Participants in the study read a news article and press release related to the snack food recall (Burner, 2016). The news article used for their study was a real article with the company name and product information changed (Burner, 2016). The researchers included only basic, neutral facts and no quotes (Burner, 2016). Five groups of participants were then given a news release to read; the first five paragraphs of the release were identical for all five groups, but the sixth paragraph – a quote from the fictional company president – was different for each group based on the image restoration strategy to which they were assigned (Burner, 2016). These included corrective action, evasion of responsibility, mortification, reducing offensiveness, or denial (Burner, 2016). The final paragraph of the release was the same across all groups with the exception of the one that included the reduce offensiveness strategy, which offered a full refund (Burner, 2016). After reading both documents, participants in the study completed a questionnaire (Burner, 2016). Based on the results, Dardis and Haigh concluded that reducing the offensiveness of the event is the wisest choice for organizations in the midst of a crisis, as it was the most effective course of action on all five of the dependent measures in the study, which

included attitude toward the corporation, reputation of the corporation, and the ability, credibility and positioning of the corporation (Burner, 2016). Reducing the offensiveness of the event consistently outperformed denial and evade responsibility strategies (Burner, 2016).

Summary

This literature review resulted in the identification of strategies used by organizations, with a focus on institutions of higher learning, to effectively communicate to stakeholders before, during, and after crisis situations occur to successfully navigate those situations and mitigate reputational damage. It was important to find and analyze information that can be directly applicable to community colleges. Using situational crisis communication theory and image restoration theory as the theoretical frameworks, this literature review found that the more individuals believe an institution of higher learning is responsible for a crisis, the more at-risk the reputation of that institution becomes; thus, not having a crisis communication plan in place can negatively affect a college or university and erode the trust of its stakeholders. However, colleges and universities that have effective crisis communication plans in place can positively influence how stakeholders perceive their respective institutions of higher learning after a crisis. Why properly managed communication is necessary to resolve crises at colleges and universities and maintain reputation post-crisis and how effective internal and external communication, including how such communication has been improved in recent years through technology and necessary mass modal systems, was discussed. In addition, crisis communication response strategies from Coombs (2007) based on situational crisis communication theory, essential rules for crisis communications plans by McGrath and Pederson (1996), crisis communication plan tips on developing a crisis communication plan for communication professionals at colleges and universities by Whitt (2014), Dunning's best practices for effective crisis communications at

colleges and universities (Hope, 2014), and the crisis communication plans of two community colleges were reviewed. The next chapter in this mater's project is a discussion on the study's conceptual model, which will offer the view that there is a critical need for community colleges such as Monroe County Community College to have a comprehensive crisis communication plan in place to address a myriad of possible crises. It will give a conceptual discussion of the strategies and elements that should be included in such a crisis communication plan.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Model

Introduction

The objective of this conceptual model is to use the evidence-based literature presented in chapter two to graphically display the concepts, frameworks and relationships that address the research questions for this master's project. Figure 3.1 depicts why having a crisis communications plan in place is necessary for institutions of higher learning. Figure 3.2 is the conceptual model of this master's project. This model is derived from scholarly research and articles written by college and university leaders, communication practitioners, and experts in the field of communication, as reviewed in the second chapter. It depicts effective elements for success in the development of a crisis communication plan that can positively influence the reputation of a community college similar in size, demographics, and mission to Monroe County Community College in Monroe, Mich.

Assumptions

More institutions of higher learning – and for the purposes of this study, community colleges similar to Monroe County Community College – need to have crisis communication plans to protect their reputations and navigate crises; therefore, for this study, the following are plausible assumptions and accepted as true.

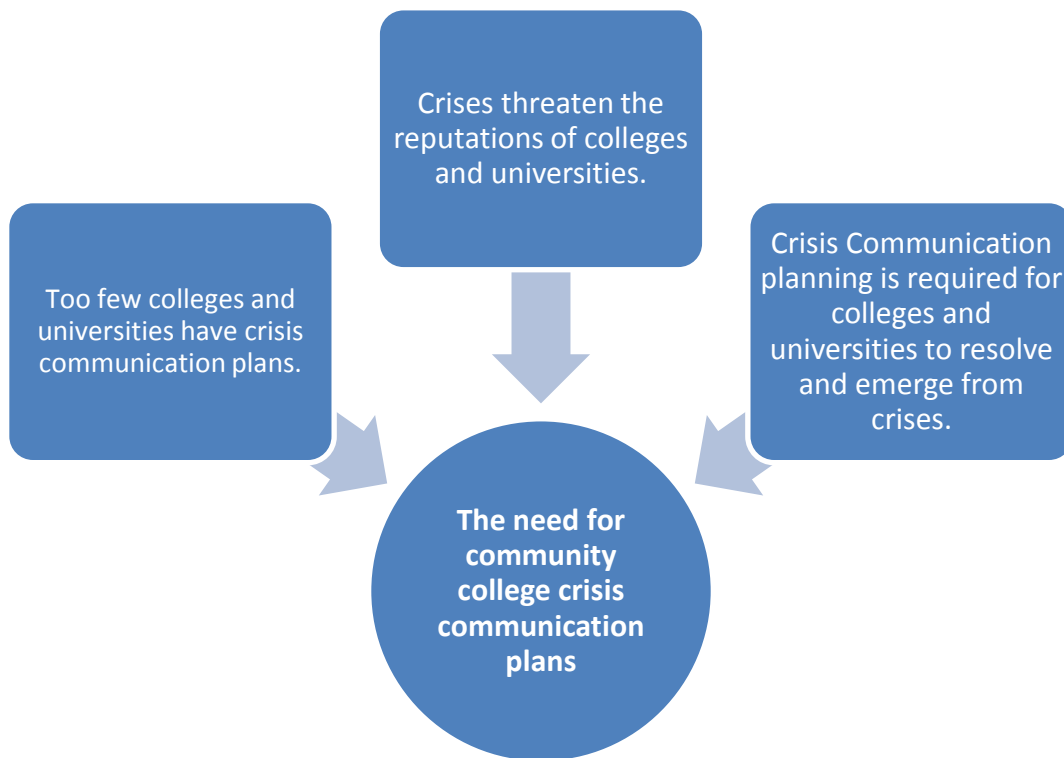
1. Even though many colleges and universities have crisis management plans in place, too few tend to have a crisis communication plan (Lawson, 2013)
2. Crises threaten the reputations of organizations such as colleges or universities because they give stakeholders reasons to think poorly of them (Coombs, 2007; Lott, 2012).

3. Proper crisis communication planning is required for organizations such as colleges and universities to successfully resolve and emerge from organizational crises; such planning is critical to successful crisis leadership, as it impacts trust and assurance in the minds of higher education stakeholders (David, 2011; Lott, 2012).

Components of Conceptual Model

Figure 3.1 depicts why community colleges need crisis communication plans.

Figure 3.1: The Need for College and University Crisis Communication Plans



Too Few Colleges Have Crisis Communication Plans

Those in higher education leadership are charged with the responsibility of managing crises effectively, and in response to the numerous crises at college and universities that have received national attention, many institutions have created or made wholesale changes to crisis

management plans (Lott, 2012). These operational plans for crisis response should include a crisis communication plan (Kelsay 2007; Lott 2012), but too few tend to include one (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996; Lawson, 2013). The model institution for this project, Monroe County Community College, has an emergency response plan but no crisis communication plan. McGrath & Pedersen (1996) state that even though sophisticated organizations typically have a plan for managing a crisis – including 88% of colleges and universities, according to a 2001 study (Lott, 2012) – many have not done the due diligence required to effectively communicate during a crisis (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). They have no plan in place to ensure that their employees – among other stakeholders – understand that everything is under control (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). In order to come to the realization that a communication plan is necessary, colleges and university leaders often must first experience a major crisis (Lawson, 2013).

Crises Threaten the Reputations of Colleges and Universities

The college or university selection process involves not only students and parents – parents who are becoming more and more involved because they want to ensure the safety and security of their children – but also others such as family members, friends, teachers, and guidance counselors, who influence parents and students about the college selection decision (Lott, 2012). Stakeholders such as those mentioned above evaluate how an organization such as a college or university is meeting their expectations based on its past behaviors, which cumulatively forms its reputation (Coombs, 2007). A sudden or unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and also poses a threat to its finances and reputation is a crisis (Coombs, 2007). For an organization like a college or university, a crisis can cause a change in reputation from favorable to unfavorable (Coombs, 2007). This, in turn, can affect how stakeholders interact with the organization, costing it the benefits a favorable reputation

provides, and stakeholders may cut ties to the organization and/or propagate the spread of negative information about the organization (Coombs, 2007). For colleges and universities, disruptions to operations and threats to their reputations and finances caused by crises can result in negative consequences such as losses of enrollment, decreases in donations, reduction in government funding, accreditation issues, and the severing of key partnerships.

Crisis Communication Planning Required for Colleges and Universities to Resolve and Emerge from Crises

Comprehensive crisis communication planning is critical for colleges and universities and other organizations (Lott, 2012; David, 2011; McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). This is because in their efforts to resolve crises, having a crisis communication plan in place can help such institutions in managing the perceptions of stakeholders during a crisis; it is a key component in crisis leadership because it is pivotal in efforts to avoid negative impacts on institutional performance and other negative outcomes (David, 2011; Lott, 2012). Communication to stakeholders is critical during a crisis to deflect threats to credibility while, at the same time, give the college or university the opportunity to minimize the perceived severity of the situation (Burner, 2016). Decisions are often made quickly during crises, so communicating about it as early as possibly is imperative (Lawson, 2013). There should be absolutely no delay in communication (Lawson 2013; Lott, 2012). Effective crisis communication at colleges and universities establishes clear guidelines for the understanding of chain of command, how college and university officials will communicate with stakeholders (Lott, 2012), channels of communication between university administrators, and key representatives from outside agencies (Lott, 2012; David, 2011). Internal stakeholders should be briefed about a crisis as soon as possible before details of the crisis get into the media, and in dealing with internal audiences, colleges and universities should

be face-to-face as much as possible, consistent and free of contradictions (David, 2011).

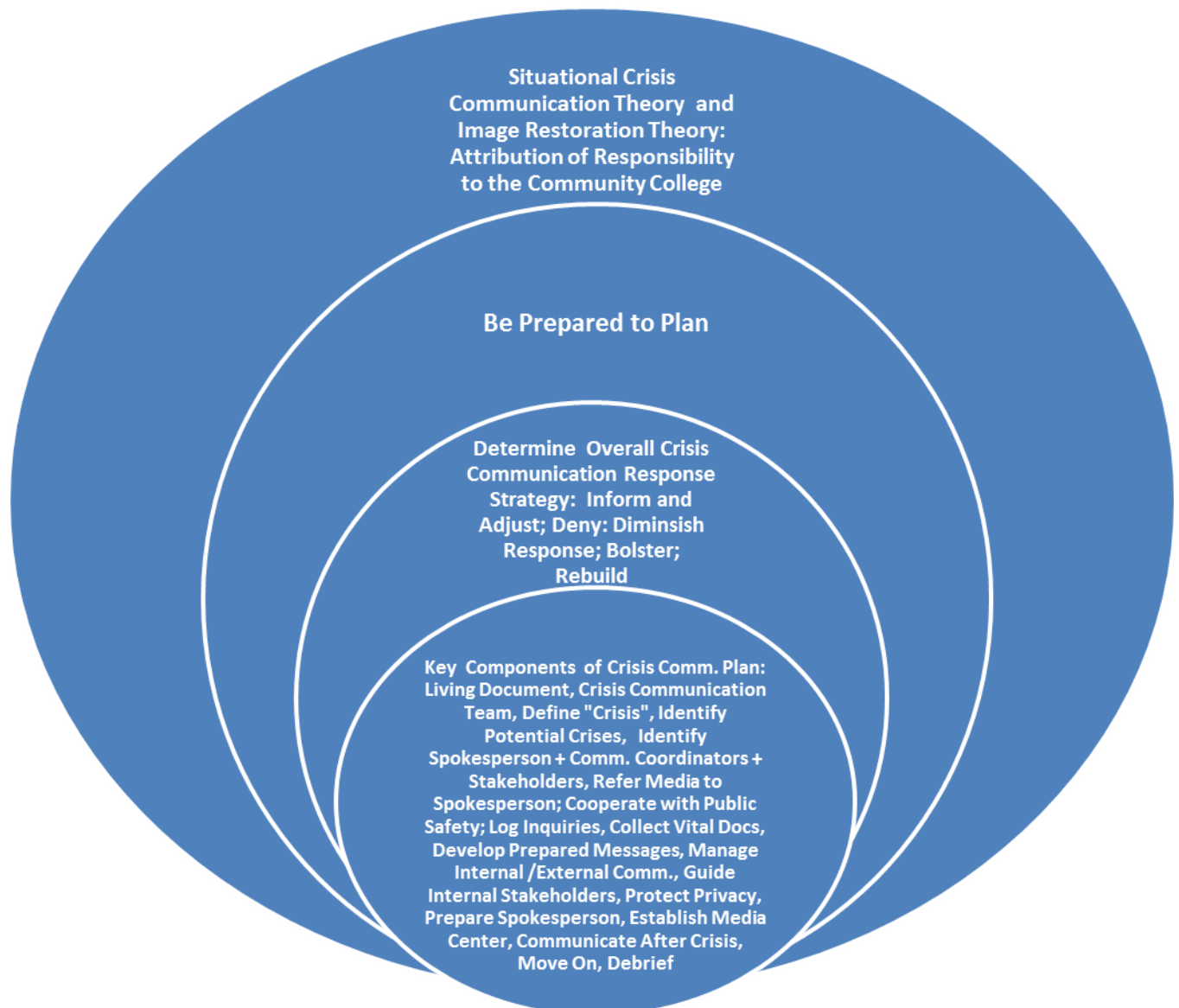
Colleges and universities should be as forthcoming with information about a crisis situation as they can with external stakeholders (Lott, 2012). This is because these stakeholders will likely to turn to other, less credible sources for information to fill an information vacuum (Lott, 2012).

The public relations or marketing communication office is usually charged with sharing crisis information with external stakeholders, because crisis leaders who are deeply involved in managing a crisis can inadvertently slow communication (Lott, 2012). Better technology such as e-mail alerts, text messages, voice messages, and on-campus media outlets have been used effectively in recent years to bolster the crisis communication efforts of colleges and universities (Hodgson, 2012; Lott, 2012), and the best way to reach the maximum number of people during a crisis is a comprehensive, multi-modal mass notification system that utilizes multiple layers of messaging options and is managed from one command center (Hodgson, 2012).

Strategies and Elements of a Crisis Communication Plan That Can Positively Influence the Reputation of a Small or Mid-Sized Community College

The conceptual model depicted in Figure 3.2 indicates the strategies and elements of a crisis communication plan that can positively influence the reputation of a small or mid-sized community college. The review of the literature indicated that two theories – situational crisis communication theory and image restoration theory – provide a useful theoretical framework for creating effective components of a community college crisis communication plan. These two theories are the beginning elements of the conceptual model of this study. The conceptual model also includes communication response elements and strategies from Coombs (2007), McGrath and Pederson (1996), Whitt (2014), Hope (2014), Central Oregon Community College (2013), and Central Carolina Community College (2017).

Figure 3.2: Strategies and Elements of a Crisis Communication Plan That Can Positively Influence the Reputation of a Small or Mid-Sized Community College



Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Image Restoration Theory Components

Situational crisis communication and image restoration theory provide the theoretical basis for the necessity of a crisis communication plan at a small to mid-sized community college. This component of the conceptual model demonstrates how the attribution of responsibility by individuals during a crisis involving a community college has a direct impact on that institution's reputation among its stakeholders, because the more individuals believe an institution of higher learning is responsible for a crisis, the more at-risk the reputation of that institution becomes (Burner, 2016; Schwartz, 2012). Situational crisis communication theory holds that when an organization is experiencing a crisis, stakeholders assess the organization's responsibility for the crisis and its negative consequences; thus, the more stakeholders hold a college or university responsible for the negative results of a crisis, the more negatively they should view the institution's reputation (Schwartz, 2012). Image restoration theory states that humans are concerned that others will think less of them, and this image threat is believed to become greater as responsibility becomes greater; therefore, a college or university can use strategic communication in a crisis situation to deflect threats to its credibility while, at the same time, give itself the chance to strategically minimize the perceived severity (Burner, 2016). This aspect of image restoration theory is congruent with situational crisis communication theory. Attribution of responsibility during a crisis (Burner, 2016; Schwartz, 2012) makes a crisis communication plan an extremely valuable tool for a community college.

Situational crisis communication theory also can be used to help a community college decide upon the best crisis response strategy to protect its reputation by assessing the level of reputational threat that a crisis presents (Coombs, 2007). This involves determining initial crisis

responsibility – how much stakeholders believe organizational actions caused the crisis – which is assessed by crisis type (Coombs, 2007). A crisis manager attempts to shape the crisis frame by stressing certain cues about the type of crisis, which can be classified within three clusters: victim, accidental or intentional. Crisis history involves determining whether or not an organization has had a similar crisis in the past or numerous crises in the past, and prior relational reputation is an assessment of how an organization has or is believed to have treated stakeholders in other contexts; both affect the reputational threat posed by the crisis because they can intensify attributions of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007). Situational crisis communication holds that crisis response strategies should (1) shape crisis attributions, (2) alter perceptions of the community college in crisis, and (3) reduce the negative impact created by the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

Determine Overall Crisis Communication Response Strategy

The first thing a community college should do when facing a crisis is to determine the overall response strategy. Coombs (2007) identified five response strategies for those leading communication efforts during a crisis, including *inform and adjust information*, which means colleges and universities should offer their version of the story to the media; *deny* when no crisis actually exists; *diminish* crisis response by communicating that a crisis is not as bad as individuals believe or that the college or university did not have control over the crisis; *rebuild* when a crisis presents a severe reputational threat by attempting to change perceptions and offset the negatives generated by the crisis, and *bolster* using limited opportunities to develop reputational assets. The latter should only be used to supplement other strategies (Coombs, 2007).

Be Prepared to Plan

There are a number of things that college and university communication leaders can do to make the development of a crisis communication plan a smoother process. These include understanding the president's expectation of the communications/public relations department in a crisis, meeting often with key college or university employees who would be involved in a potential crisis, working on interpersonal communication skills to keep them fine-tuned (Whitt, 2014), and developing and cultivating strong relations with the media that covers the institution (Whitt, 2014; McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).

Key Components of a Community College Crisis Communication Plan

The review of the literature identified a number of key components that should be addressed in the development of any community college crisis communication plan:

- **Ensure Plan is a Living Document.** Ensure that the crisis communication plan is a living document that is revisited annually (Whitt, 2014; McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- **Establish a Crisis Communication Team.** Establish a crisis communication team and delineate specific communications roles in addition to the spokesperson, such as assembling information pertaining to the crisis, assembling and coordinating a briefing room, and managing internal communication (Central Carolina Community College, 2017; Hope, 2014; Central Oregon Community College, 2013; McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). The crisis communication team makes the final decision that a crisis is actually happening (Hope 2014; Central Oregon Community College, 2013), and, if so, it should set up a command center and members should begin to fulfill their predetermined roles (Hope, 2014). The first step for the team is to gather and review all the facts and calmly

review what occurred (Hope, 2014). The team is responsible for communicating facts and updates to affected audiences about potential emergency situations and protective actions, identifying audiences that should be informed, coordinating communication efforts with responding agencies, and minimizing rumors (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

- **Define “Crisis.”** Both Central Oregon Community College (2013) and Central Carolina Community College (2017) begin their crisis communication plans by defining what constitutes a crisis at their respective institutions. This is important information for all college leaders and stakeholders to understand.
- **Identify All Potential Crises.** Identify all the crises that conceivably could impact the organization (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- **Identify Crisis Communication Coordinators.** The communications manager is typically the director of public relations and will direct all communications (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). During the early stages of a crisis, specific college leaders should be responsible for communication with specific stakeholders (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).
- **Designate a Spokesperson.** Identify the person who should be the organization's spokesperson and one or two alternates; arrange professional media training for all who may be considered for spokesperson (Central Carolina Community College, 2017; Hope, 2014; McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). The president, appropriate vice president, or the director of communications are recommended choices for spokesperson (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

- **Identify Stakeholders.** Analyze each relevant stakeholder constituency of the organization and organize in advance efficient vehicles to reach them (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). Develop/organize contact lists of key stakeholders who will need to be reached during and after the crisis (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- **Refer Media Inquiries to the Spokesperson.** All media inquiries and requests for comment should be forwarded to the spokesperson (Central Carolina Community College, 2017; McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- **Implore Cooperation with Public Safety Agencies.** During an emergency or potential crisis, persons directly involved should first cooperate fully with public safety agencies and then make contact to implement the college or university's emergency response and crisis communications plans (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).
- **Log Inquiries about the Crisis.** Set up a system for logging media and other important inquiries during the crisis, which is crucial for analysis and potential follow-up (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- **Collect Vital Documents.** Collect and assemble in advance vital documents that may be relevant in a crisis, either as background for reporters or as quick reference (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). Make electronic duplicates of all vital communication documents and store them on a portable drive or server in a safe place off-site in the event of a disaster that forces the vital communication operation offsite (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).
- **Develop Prepared Messages.** Creating messaging in advance that could be used in any scenario is important, and the initial message in a crisis situation may be brief and end with a simple statement about not having any more to share (Hope, 2014). Once a crisis occurs, an *official statement* and *news release* should also be prepared (Central Carolina

Community College, 2017), as well as a regularly updated “*fact sheet*” (Central Carolina Community College, 2017; Central Oregon Community College, 2013). Prepared messages should be developed by the communications department and reviewed by the crisis communications team and then widely distributed (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).

- **Manage Internal Communication.** Ensure internal audiences are kept as informed as possible about developments via use of opt-in alert systems and direct communication from respective vice presidents and deans/directors to all groups under their management (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). The official statement and updates about the situation should be communicated to internal audiences via the college’s opt-in alert system, all-campus emails, and the college’s social media channels (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). Campus telephone operators should be prepared with a response narrative for use by those who answer general phone inquiries to the college, as well as a separate response for relatives calling about specific students or employees (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).
- **Guide Internal Stakeholders on How to Communicate.** Internal stakeholders need to know what to say about the crisis (Hope, 2014). For example, front-line admissions representatives and those in donor relations should be given guidance (Hope, 2014). Those who are in direct contact with students can help the organization regain trust (Hope, 2014). The board should be kept informed of the crisis, and one member should be the board spokesperson so that multiple members are not contradicting each other (Hope, 2014).

- **Manage External Communication.** The communications department should coordinate all communications with the media, and all information released to external audiences must be coordinated with responding emergency agencies to ensure accuracy (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). External audiences should be communicated with via news releases, official statements, and/or individual interviews, but news conferences will only be used in extreme situations (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The website should provide continuous updates (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).
- **Protect privacy.** The college must strive to protect the right to privacy of students and employees as outlined in federal regulations (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). It must also be cautious not to release information that could compromise criminal proceedings; it may be necessary to consult legal counsel in such circumstances (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The college should not release any names in the event of injury or death until after family/next of kin are notified (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The Crisis Communications Team should provide the Human Resources Department with a prepared response for relatives seeking information about students or employees (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).
- **Prepare the Spokesperson.** The spokesperson should always be prepared with a written statement, never try to provide spontaneous comments, always be sure all info is accurate and verified, never use jargon, and never talk off the record (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The spokesperson should understand that not all questions need to be answered right away or at all, and in a situation involving multiple media

members, one person should not be permitted to ask most of the questions (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

- **Establish a Media Center, as Needed.** A media center should be established only in extreme situations; this is where all media personnel would be directed to assemble to work and receive information (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The spokesperson would issue periodic statements at such a center, and multiple or off-campus centers might be needed in certain situations (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). Extreme emergencies may dictate that local emergency officials and their public information officers work with college PR officials to determine where media will assemble (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).
- **Promote Counseling Services.** The availability of grief counseling and other supportive measures may be available depending on the nature of the crisis; these should be promoted by the communications department after approval by the crisis communication team (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).
- **Communicate After the Crisis.** Following the crisis, the crisis communication team should plan and communicate continuous trust-building messages; areas in which the institution is most vulnerable should be addressed by these messages (Hope, 2014). The nature of the crisis will dictate these needs (Hope, 2014).
- **Determine the Appropriate Time to Move On.** At some point, the institution needs to stop discussing the crisis on a regular basis, because if the community college has handled it effectively, its stakeholders will want to move on (Hope, 2014).
- **Debrief After the Crisis.** After a crisis is over, the crisis communication team should debrief with those campus leaders who led the crisis management response on what

worked and what did not work during the crisis (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). A written report should be developed and distributed to appropriate offices and stakeholders (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).

Summary

In this chapter, the literature on crisis communication has been depicted in a conceptual model that can be of help for community colleges that need to develop crisis communication plans. The conceptual model showed why community colleges need crisis communication plans, as well as the strategies and elements of a crisis communication plan that can positively influence the reputation of a small to mid-sized community college. The next chapter will describe the key recommendations for developing a crisis communication plan for small or mid-sized community colleges, with Monroe County Community College in Monroe, Mich. serving as the model for institutions that are similar in size, demographics, and mission.

Chapter 4: Recommendations

Introduction

The evidence-based research analyzed for this study addressed a problem that faces many colleges and universities: too few tend not to have crisis communication plans in place (Lawson, 2013), which leaves them vulnerable to reputational damage (Coombs, 2007). Specifically, this study identifies the best strategies to create a plan for small to mid-sized community college to communicate to stakeholders during a crisis, with Monroe County Community College in Monroe, Mich. serving as the model for institutions that are similar in size, demographics, and mission.

This study's systematic review methodology included analyzing scholarly studies, expert opinion articles, grey literature, and existing community college crisis communication plans. This study's three research questions assisted in the identification of information that provided insight on community colleges and crisis communication planning, as well as any gaps in the literature. The research questions guided the research, which included scholarly studies (Schwartz, 2012; David, G., 2011; Ihlen, 2010; Coombs, 2007; Seeger, 2007; Daniel, E. S., & Littlefield, 2015/2016), expert opinion articles (Howard, 2015; Hope, 2014; Whitt, M. C., 2014; Hodgson, 2012; Kelsay, 2007; Carlson, 2007; McGrath, J., & Pedersen, 1996), community college crisis communication plans (Central Carolina Community College, 2017; Central Oregon Community College, 2013), and grey literature dissertation and thesis studies (Burner, 2016; Walsch, D., 2011; Lott, 2012).

Because the master of arts in media and communication degree with a specialization in strategic communication is based on the scholar-practitioner concept, the research for this project was designed to culminate in recommendations that provide practitioners at small and mid-sized

community colleges with effective strategies and best practices to create crisis communication plans for their respective institutions. In this chapter, key recommendations are offered that are the result of a synthesis of the findings that emerged from a systematic review methodology. Challenges associated with developing a crisis communication plan at a community college are also discussed.

Key Recommendations

David (2011) and Lott (2012) state that proper crisis communication planning is a necessity for organizations such as colleges and universities to successfully resolve and emerge from organizational crises; this planning is critical to successful crisis leadership because it impacts trust and assurance in the minds of higher education stakeholders. This section will provide key recommendations based on the findings of the review of the literature that will serve as a model for community colleges that are similar in size, demographics and mission to Monroe County Community College to use in developing an effective crisis communication plan.

Recommendation One – Assemble a Crisis Communication Team

A crisis communication team at an organization such as a community college is responsible for communicating facts and updates to stakeholders about potential crises, identifying audiences that should be informed, coordinating communication efforts with responding agencies, and working to minimize rumors (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). Specific roles for its members should be delineated (Central Carolina Community College, 2017; Hope, 2014; Central Oregon Community College, 2013; McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).

The first step for a small or mid-sized community college in developing a crisis communication plan should be to assemble a crisis communication team and outline member

roles. These individuals should also lend their expertise to the development of the crisis communication plan. They should also have specific crisis management or communication roles in addition to situational crisis communication strategy (Central Carolina Community College, 2017; Hope, 2014; Central Oregon Community College, 2013; McGrath & Pedersen, 1996).

Examples of individuals at Monroe County Community College who should be considered for inclusion on such a crisis communication team include the following:

- President
- Vice president of student and information services
- Vice president of administration
- Vice president of instruction
- Chief of security
- Director of marketing and communication,
- Director of campus planning and facilities
- Executive assistant to the president and Board of Trustees
- Manager of information systems
- Director of human resources
- Registrar

Table 4.1 on the following page illustrates possible roles for these individuals in the event of a crisis at Monroe County Community College; these example roles could be used a model for community colleges looking to put together a crisis communication team. A number of the roles identified in Table 4.1 are explained in more depth throughout the rest of this chapter.

Table 4.1:

Examples of In-Crisis Roles for Crisis Communication Team Members

Director of Campus Planning and Facilities	Provide information to crisis communication team relating to the status of facilities.
Vice President of Student and Information Services	Responsible for overall crisis response and early internal crisis communication with Student Services employees.
Executive Assistant to the President and the Board of Trustees	Responsible for administrative support for crisis communication team.
Manager of Information Systems	Provide information to crisis communication team relating to the status of college computer networks and systems.
Director of Human Resources	Responsible for employee privacy concerns and inquiries about employees, assistance with internal communication, and coordination of counseling services.
Chief of Security	Assist with overall crisis response.
President	Responsible for final decisions on crisis communication activities and communication with Board of Trustees.
Director of Marketing and Communications	Serves as chief spokesperson during a crisis and coordinator of all crisis communication activities.
Registrar	Responsible for student privacy concerns during a crisis, including responses to inquiries about students.
Vice President of Administration	Serves as alternate spokesperson and crisis communication coordinator; responsible for early internal crisis communication with employees in administrative area.
Vice President of Instruction	Responsible for early internal communication with full- and part-time faculty.

Recommendation Two – Outline the Purpose of the Crisis Communication Plan; Define a Crisis and Use this Definition to Structure Plan

The purpose of a crisis communication plan at a college or university is to provide protocols for communicating to college stakeholders with updates on a crisis (Burner, 2016). It

is intended to supplement an emergency/crisis management plan, which is a strategic system of policies and operational protocol put in place by a college to respond various levels and stages of crises (Burner, 2016). A crisis communication plan for a community college should offer rationale for stakeholders as to why the plan exists, as well as a specific definition for what a crisis entails for the specific college. This rationale and definition should be developed by the crisis communication team.

Coombs (2007) defines a crisis as a sudden, unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and also poses a threat to its finances and reputation. Lott (2012) offers a definition given by Zdziarski in 2007: A crisis at a college or university is an event that is often sudden or unanticipated and causes disruption in the day-to-day operations of the institution or its mission. Lott (2012) also offers Laura Day's definition, who in 2006 stated that a crisis at an institution of higher learning compels that a decision be made – a crisis cannot be avoided by simply not making a decision because even deciding not to decide is a decision. These definitions are rather broad. Therefore, it is recommended that the final definition used by a community college be made more precise and stronger by explaining the connection between a crisis and reputation and providing examples of potential crises.

The reputation of an organization such as a community college is a cumulative evaluation of the college by its stakeholders – such as students, employees, taxpayers, donors, vendors, or campus visitors – that is recognized as an intangible asset that can be affected by its behavior (Coombs, 2007) or lack thereof. Crises at a community college can be grouped into four categories with examples noted in parentheses – natural (tornado, earthquake, flood, fire), facility (plumbing failure, server failure, falling debris from building) criminal (sexual assault, murder, violent threat) or human (employee error, medical emergency, sexual harassment, lawsuit) (Lott,

2012). Defining a crisis in this fashion allows a community college to structure its crisis communication plan to respond to crises that fall into each of the four categories, all of which require different response times, prepared responses, and other strategies. The crisis communication team should compile an exhaustive list of all the possible crises that fall into each category, as individual crises that fall into the same category may require different communication responses.

Recommendation Four – Assess Potential Reputational Threats

Once the crisis communication team has compiled the list of all possible crises and categorized them, the members should assess possible reputational threats to the community college posed by individual categories – and in some cases, individual events – by evaluating the responsibility of the college in particular situations (Coombs, 2007). Reputational threat is shaped by initial crisis responsibility, the history of crises involving the community college, and the prior relational reputation of the college (Coombs, 2007). To determine a college's possible initial crisis responsibility for a potential crisis category or event, the crisis communication team must attempt to determine how much its stakeholders would believe the actions of the college would have caused such a crisis, because the more these individuals believe the college is responsible, the more threat there is to its reputation (Coombs, 2007). The crisis communication team should assess initial crisis responsibility for potential categories of crises or individual events by answering the following questions:

- *Would the college be considered a victim?* A college is the victim of a crisis in the case of events such as natural disasters, violence, product tampering and rumor (Coombs, 2007). In cases such as these, stakeholders' attributions of crisis responsibility to organizations are very weak. (Coombs, 2007).

- *Would the category of crisis or individual event be considered accidental?* This includes events such as technical errors and technical-product harm that have minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2007). A community college would not have intended for an event such as one of these to happen; it would be considered uncontrollable (Coombs, 2007).
- *Would the category of crisis or individual event be considered intentional or human error?* If an event falls into this category, the attribution of blame upon a community college would be very strong because the crisis would be the result of an accident caused by human error or organizational and/or employee misdeed (Coombs, 2007).

After determining the college's potential initial crisis responsibility for as many categories and individuals events as necessary, the crisis communication team should assess the community college's crisis history by evaluating its past crises (Coombs, 2007). The team should also assess the college's prior relational reputation – how it has or is believed to have treated stakeholders in other contexts (Coombs, 2007).

Recommendation Three: Develop Planned Crisis Communication Response Strategies

After assessing reputational threats, the crisis communication team should use this information to determine planned response strategies for potential crisis categories and, when necessary, individual events, using Coombs's (2007) response strategies for those leading communication efforts during a crisis as a guideline. These planned response scenarios should be detailed in the crisis communication plan. This is critical for community colleges because, according to Coombs (2007), any crisis will have a negative impact, especially one that falls into the intentional crisis cluster, and crises can make stakeholders angry and some may even take pleasure in an organization's struggles (Coombs, 2007).

- In any crisis situation, a community college should *inform and adjust information*. This means that it should offer its version of the story to the media and its stakeholders, which is vital because during a crisis most stakeholders will experience and adopt how the media frames the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Community colleges should also express concern for victims (Coombs, 2007). Expressing concern and possibly reinforcing it through compensation and/or a full apology work to reduce feelings of anger (Coombs, 2007). In addition, a crisis can also evoke a feeling of sympathy toward the college, and a strategy to actively take on the role of the victim through strategically communicated information can reiterate the idea stakeholders may hold that the college is deserving of sympathy (Coombs, 2007).
- If no crisis actually exists, such as in a rumor situation, a community college should employ a *deny* strategy to attempt to remove any connection between it and the purported crisis (Coombs, 2007). A deny strategy is a strategy that refutes that a crisis exists. If a college is not actually involved in a crisis, it will not suffer any damage from the event (Coombs, 2007).
- If a crisis is not as bad as individuals believe, or a college does not have control over a crisis, a community college should employ *diminish response strategies*, because if its connection to the crisis can be reduced and /or people view the crisis in less of a negative light, the harmful effects to reputation are reduced (Coombs, 2007). These strategies are intended to limit how much responsibility stakeholders allocate toward an organization during a crisis and could include tactics such as providing information to excuse the community college or showing lack of intent in an effort to reaffirm that a crisis situation is accidental (Coombs, 2007). An accidental crisis is much simpler and less costly to

manage than a crisis that falls into the intentional category (Coombs, 2007). There must be solid evidence to support such claims (Coombs, 2007).

- If a crisis at a college is deemed to pose a severe reputational threat, such as those that fall into the intentional or accidental category, *rebuild* strategies may be necessary; these are strategies that attempt to alter perceptions and mitigate the negatives caused by a crisis (Coombs, 2007). These should be considered if a severe reputational threat is in conjunction with a crisis history – that is, if a college has previously had a similar crisis or numerous other past crises – and poor prior reputation (Coombs, 2007). Rebuild strategies are intended to repair organizational reputation and could include offering new, positive information about a college; reminding stakeholders of past good works by a college, attempting to create new reputational assets by taking action to aid victims, doing things to benefit stakeholders, and offering compensation or a full apology (Coombs, 2007).
- *Bolstering*: Bolstering strategies are used to enhance reputational assets on a more limited basis than rebuild strategies, and community colleges should typically only use them during a crisis to supplement the other crisis response strategies of informing and adjusting information, deny, diminish crisis response, and rebuild (Coombs, 2007). Bolstering strategies can include using a college's goodwill to help protect its reputation, complimenting stakeholders for their efforts during the crisis, and reminding stakeholders of past good works to counter-balance negatives from a crisis (Coombs, 2007).

Community colleges must be consistent in their crisis response strategies so that they do not send mixed messages (Coombs, 2007). For example, a college should not refute that a crisis actually exists (deny strategy) while also attempting to limit how much responsibility

stakeholders allocate toward an organization during a crisis (diminish response strategies) – because this sends conflicting messages and will reduce the effectiveness of the overall crisis communication strategy (Coombs, 2007). Adjusting information (offer an organization's version of the story) and bolstering strategies (enhancing reputational assets in a limited fashion) complement each other, though, and can be used together (Coombs, 2007).

Recommendation Five: Determine a Location for a Command Center

Included in a crisis communication plan for a community college should be instructions for the location of a command center where, in the event of a crisis, each member would begin to fulfill his or her predetermined role (Hope, 2014). An alternate location should also be determined. If a college has multiple campuses, command center locations should also be identified for those (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). Should the crisis require the evacuation of a campus, a college should work with local public safety officials to establish a remote command center.

Recommendation Six: Name a Spokesperson and Crisis Communication Coordinators

The crisis communication team should identify the person who should be a community college's spokesperson in the event of crisis, and one or two alternates should also be named; professional media training should be arranged for all who may be considered for spokesperson (Central Carolina Community College, 2017; Hope, 2014; McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). The president, appropriate vice president, or the director of communications are recommended options serve as spokesperson (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). All media inquiries and requests for comment should be forwarded to the spokesperson (Central Carolina Community College, 2017; McGrath & Pedersen, 1996), who should always follow these guidelines:

- Always be prepared with a written statement;
 - Never attempt to offer comments without first being prepared;
 - Be sure all information being provided is accurate and verified;
 - Never use jargon;
 - Never talk off the record;
 - Understand that not all questions need to be answered right away or at all; and
 - Do not let one media member dominate a situation involving multiple media members
- (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

A college's director of communications manager should coordinate all communications during a crisis (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). Other college leaders, however, should be responsible for communication with specific stakeholders early in a crisis (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). For example, at Monroe County Community College, it would be logical for crisis communication coordinators to include the vice president of instruction, who would communicate with faculty; the vice president of administration, who would communicate with employees in the administration area, and the vice president of student and information systems, who would communicate with student services employees and students. In addition, MCCC's president would communicate with the Board of Trustees and other boards.

Recommendation Seven: Devise Systems for Managing Crisis Inquiries and Vital Documents

A community college crisis communication plan should include provisions for logging all inquiries by the public and the media during a crisis for follow-up and analysis after the crisis (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). Media inquiries should be tracked by the communications office

and led by the director. General inquiries should be tracked by the department in charge of student services or the admissions office. All community colleges keep vital documents that may be relevant in a crisis. While many such documents may be contained on a college's website, there may be other documents that should be collected and duplicated so they are available should a crisis occur (McGrath & Pedersen, 1996). The college leader in charge of the transparency section of the college's website – at MCCC, this is the vice president of administration – should be charged with coordinating this portion of the crisis communication plan.

Recommendation Eight: Prepare Messages in Advance

Creating messages in advance that could be used in any crisis scenario is important (Hope, 2014) for community colleges. These messages should be written right into a crisis communication plan. All prepared messages should be developed by the communications coordinator, reviewed by the crisis communications team for inclusion in the crisis communication plan, and widely distributed to all internal and external audiences in the event of a crisis (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). The initial message in a crisis situation can be brief and end with a simple statement about not having any more to share (Hope, 2014). Below are examples based on those used in the Central Carolina Community College (2017) crisis communication plan that could be modified by other for use in various situations:

- *General statement:* “A (what happened) at (location) involving (who) occurred (date and time) (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The situation is under investigation, and we will provide more information as soon as it becomes available (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).”

- *Natural, criminal or facility crisis statement:* “A (what) took place (time) at (location) (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The (who) were involved. The college has implemented its (crisis management plan name), which places the highest priority on the health and safety of everyone in our campus community (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The college is working closely with emergency personnel and public safety officials (if applicable) (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). Additional information will be supplied as soon as it is available and will be posted on our website (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).”
- *Human crisis statement:* The general statement on the previous page should be utilized, but care should be taken that privacy is protected per federal regulations.
- *Empathy statement:* “(College name) understands the concerns you may have about the (what) that took place (time) at (location), and our thoughts and prayers are with (who) (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). We are doing everything we can to (action: work with local authorities, determine what happened, etc.) at this time (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). Our first priority is the safety and well-being of our (employees, students, our community, etc.) (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). As more information becomes available, we will provide updates to the media and via our website (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

Immediately after a crisis has occurred, a community college should send out an *official statement* based on the above prepared samples and begin preparing a *news release* and *fact sheet*; the fact sheet would be regularly updated as the crisis evolves (Central Carolina Community College, 2017; Central Oregon Community College, 2013).

Recommendation Nine: Include Protocols for Internal and External Communication

A community college should include specific protocols within its crisis communication plan for internal and external communication (Central Carolina Community College, 2017; Central Oregon Community College, 2013). The following *internal communication* activities are critical:

- *Keep internal stakeholders informed.* A college should ensure that the following internal stakeholders are kept as informed as possible about developments during a crisis via the use of its opt-in alert system, all-campus emails, college social media channels and direct communication from respective vice presidents (Central Carolina Community College, 2017): students, full-time faculty, staff, administrators, adjunct faculty, board of trustees, and other boards (alumni, foundation).
- *Implore internal cooperation with public safety agencies:* During an emergency or potential crisis at a community college, those involved should first cooperate fully with public safety agencies and then make contact to implement the institution's crisis management and crisis communications plans (Central Oregon Community College, 2013). This directive should be communicated to stakeholders not only in a crisis communication plan and during a crisis, but also regularly throughout the year.
- *Prepare internal stakeholders for external communication:* Phone operators, administrative assistants and all others who answer incoming phone lines at a community college should be prepared with a response narrative developed by the communications coordinator for use for general crisis inquiries to the college (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). A separate response should be prepared by the director of human resources for relatives calling about specific employees (Central Carolina

Community College, 2017), and another should be prepared by the registrar for inquiries about specific students. In addition, specific internal stakeholders should be prepared with what to say about the crisis, such as student services personnel and faculty, because those who are in direct contact with students can help the college regain trust (Hope, 2014). All internal communication would be coordinated by the communication coordinator in consultation with the vice president of student and information services and the director of human resources; all messaging should be reviewed by the crisis communication team and detailed in the crisis communication plan.

- *Protect Privacy.* During a crisis, a community colleges must strive to protect the right to privacy of students and employees per federal regulations (Central Carolina Community College, 2017), and this charge should be handled by the registrar (student privacy) and director of human resources (employee privacy). A college must also be careful to not to release information that could jeopardize criminal proceedings, and legal counsel could be consulted in such circumstances (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). In the event of injury or death, a college should not release any names until family/next of kin have been notified (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

The following are key communication activities for *external communications* when a crisis hits a community college:

- *Inform external stakeholders.* The communications coordinator should coordinate all communications with the media and other external audiences, and all information released to external audiences should be coordinated with responding emergency agencies to ensure accuracy (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The communications coordinator should also work with the director of human resources and

registrar to ensure all communications are accurate and privacy is protected. The crisis communication team should review messaging as circumstances allow. External audiences for community colleges include entities such as the media, prospective students, parents of current and prospective students, residents/taxpayers, business leaders/employers, legislators, donors, and friends and alumni of the college. All information released should be communicated via news releases, official statements, fact sheets, and/or individual interviews, but news conferences should only be used in extreme situations (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). A college's website should provide continuous updates (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

- *Establish a Media Center in Extreme Situations.* A media center where all media personnel would be directed to assemble to work and receive information should be established only in extreme situations (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). The communications coordinator would issue periodic statements from the center (Central Carolina Community College, 2017). In some extreme emergency situations, local emergency officials and their public information officers may work in conjunction with the communications coordinator to determine where media should assemble (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).
- *Promote counseling services.* Depending on the nature of the crisis, a community college may make counseling and other supportive services available and should promote this service (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).
- *Communicate after the crisis.* Following a crisis, a community college should plan and communicate continuous trust-building messages to address areas in which the college is most vulnerable as dictated by the crisis (Central Carolina Community College, 2017).

However, at some point, the college should stop discussing a crisis on a regular basis, because if it has been effectively handled, the college's stakeholders will want to move on as well (Hope, 2014).

- *Debriefing.* After a crisis is over, a community college's crisis communications team should debrief about the crisis communication response, including what worked and what did not work during the crisis, and a written report should be developed and distributed to appropriate offices and stakeholders (Central Oregon Community College, 2013).

Challenges

Challenges associated with developing and implementing crisis communication plans at colleges and universities are largely associated with budget cuts and reduction in staffing due to difficult economic times (Lott, 2012). This can result in ineffective crisis management systems that lack resources necessary for adequate implementation (Lott, 2012). The model community college for this master's project, Monroe County Community College, has lacked a crisis communication plan because of major staff and budget reductions in the area responsible for developing such a plan, the Office of Marketing and Communications. In addition, over the last decade, the areas responsible for implementing such a plan have also undergone staff cuts or remained stagnant. Only in the last year have these areas begun to receive funding to bring them back to the levels of the mid-2000s. As community colleges are more able to focus and prioritize staff and budget resources on managing crises, they will be better equipped to develop and implement crisis communication plans to limit interruptions to day-to-day operations and protect their reputations and finances.

Summary

The findings culled from the evidence-based research of this master's project indicated that too few colleges and universities have a crisis communication plan in place (Lawson, 2013), leaving them vulnerable to reputational damage (Coombs, 2007). This study's findings determined the best strategies to create a plan for small or mid-sized community colleges to communicate to stakeholders during a crisis, with Monroe County Community College in Monroe, Mich. serving as the model for institutions that are similar in size, demographics, and mission. The findings for this study were used to determine the most effective strategies to include in such a crisis communication plan, which are included in this chapter. These strategies were culled from a robust, systematic review of research on crisis communication. This project resulted in the acquiring of knowledge about how community colleges can assemble a crisis communication team, outline the purpose of a crisis communication plan, define a crisis, and use the definition to structure such a plan that includes protocols for:

- Planned crisis communication response strategies;
- A location for a command center;
- The naming of a spokesperson and crisis communication coordinators;
- The coordination of systems for managing crisis inquiries and vital documents;
- The preparation of messages in advance of a crisis; and
- The development and coordination of internal and external crisis communication.

This chapter concluded by addressing challenges associated with developing and implementing a crisis communication plan at colleges and universities. The final chapter of this project will discuss any gaps in the literature, unanticipated findings discovered in the research, review limitations, and provide a summary of the study.

Chapter Five: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

This study analyzed literature relevant to crisis communications and higher education to determine the best strategies to create a plan for small or mid-sized community colleges to communicate to stakeholders during a crisis. The evidence-based research provided knowledge as to how small and mid-sized community colleges that are similar in size, demographics, and mission to Monroe County Community College in Monroe, Mich. can create a crisis communication plan that can help them avoid the reputational damage that can accompany a crisis.

This chapter is a discussion of any gaps in the literature, findings that came out of the research that were not anticipated, limitations, and a summary of the study.

Gaps in Literature

It became apparent during the systematic review of research for this master's project that while there is an abundance of research on organizational crisis communication response strategies for crises in general, there is limited research on how organizations should communicate strategically in specific crisis situations. In addition, there is a lack of literature that expounds on the specific roles leaders at colleges and universities should undertake in crisis communications. And, although there is literature available on situational crisis communication theory and image restoration theory, more research should be undertaken on how these theories can be applied in crisis communication efforts at colleges and universities, and, more specifically, community colleges. Despite these gaps in the literature, there was evidence-based

research uncovered during this study to address the research questions and analyze the problem in a critical fashion; however, there is a need for additional research.

Suggested Additional Research

In future studies, the following questions could be addressed:

- How should the content of a crisis communication plan at a college or university differ from that of other organizations?
- How should a crisis communication plan at a community college differ from such plans at four-year colleges or universities?
- How should a college or university go about including protocols in a crisis communication plan for specific crises or categories of crises?
- What specific roles should college and university leaders play in crisis communication, and how can they best fulfill these roles?

Unanticipated Findings

While the evidence-based research on crisis communications at organizations such as colleges and university is focused heavily on communicating *during* a crisis, David (2011) recommends continued communication well *after* the crisis because some will remain affected by the events and fear their recurrence, and others may be resentful of the organization even if the organization itself is not responsible. The need for strategic communication *after a crisis is over* was not anticipated when this study commenced, but was ultimately included in the study's key recommendations for community colleges embarking on developing crisis communication plans. Not continuing to communicate post-crisis will produce a loss of credibility for colleges and universities and have long-lasting effects on internal stakeholders' and their families' morale

(David, 2011). For these reasons, post-crisis stage communication with internal stakeholders is critical for organizations such as colleges and universities (David, 2011).

Limitations

There is a great deal of research available on crisis communication at organizations in general; however, there is limited literature specifically focused on crisis communication at colleges and universities. This lack of research is even more prominent when searching for literature on crisis communication at community colleges.

Conclusion: Significance to Scholarship and Practice

Institutions of higher learning are often poorly prepared for crises (Carlson, 2007), and even though many have a crisis *management* plan, too few, such as the model for this project, Monroe County Community College in Monroe, Mich., tend to have a crisis *communication* plan (Lawson, 2013). Despite not having a crisis communication plan in place, it is possible for community colleges to escape significant reputational damage from crises, but it is only a matter of time before the reputational threat to institutions such as these becomes very real if they remain unprepared. The time has come for community colleges such as MCCC to develop crisis communication plans to protect themselves from the ramifications of crises, including the disruption of their operations and finances and sully of their reputations (Coombs, 2007). For an organization like a community college, a crisis can affect how stakeholders interact with it, as they may cut ties to it and/or propagate the spread of negative information about the organization (Coombs, 2007). Crises can result in losses of enrollment, decreases in donations, reduction in government funding, accreditation issues, and the severing of key partnerships. Comprehensive crisis communication planning is critical for organizations like community colleges (Lott, 2012; David, 2011; McGrath & Pedersen, 1996) to help them manage the perceptions of stakeholders

during a crises and avoid negative impact on institutional performance and other undesirable outcomes (David, 2011; Lott, 2012). This study identified and described the most effective strategies that should be used in developing such a plan, including:

- Assembling a crisis communication team
- Outlining the purpose of a crisis communication plan
- Defining a crisis
- Using the crisis definition to establish procedures for:
 - Establishing a command center location
 - Naming a spokesperson and communication coordinators
 - Managing crisis inquiries and vital documents
 - Preparing messages in advance of a crisis
 - Developing and coordinating internal and external crisis communication

By using strategic communication to reduce the perceived offensiveness of crisis events, community colleges can deflect threats to their credibility caused by crises while, at the same time, giving themselves the ability to strategically minimize the perceived severity of crisis situations (Burner, 2016). This is a significant study because it will add to the literature on communication and higher education administration, as well as supply leaders at community colleges with a blueprint for success in creating crisis communication plans to help protect their reputations and threats to their operations and finances.

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