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A Qualitative Inquiry into the Role of Communication in Reputation Management During Compounding Health Crises

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This research aims to evaluate how organizations manage their reputations with publics through compounding crises. The research applies concepts of public relations and crisis management, including situational crisis communication theory and organization-public relationship management. The research investigates a case of compounding health crises at a prominent American University, and assesses how communication managers prioritized publics and issue response, coordinated their communication strategies, and revised their communication practices in the wake of the compounding crises. Interviews were conducted with the three public relations managers who managed the events, and analysis was conducted on the University's published social media content and artifacts that were obtained from the interview participants. The research reveals that relationship-management theories were only adopted by one of the communication managers, and that the communicators had divergent ideas about which publics should be prioritized. The implications for compounding health crises communication management will be discussed.

Keywords: compounding crises, public relations, reputation management, crisis communication

Adenoviruses are common viruses that present with symptoms such as coughing, fever, and sore throat (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). However, the most severe strains of the virus cause respiratory conditions which present more like bronchitis or pneumonia (National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Disease, 2018). The virus is primarily

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transmitted from person to person through inhalation of infected air vapor and contact with virus-contaminated surfaces. Surfaces containing adenovirus are not easily disinfected because adenovirus spores have a "non-enveloped" structure, which can resist common cleaning agents and live on surfaces for extended periods of time (Khanal et al., 2018). More than 100 strains (or serotypes) of adenovirus have been identified, 43 of which are known to infect humans (Graham & Prevec, 1991). Of these 43 serotypes, strains 2, 5, and 12 are the most heavily studied, but strains 3, 4, and 7 are among the most prevalent (Graham & Prevec, 1991; Russell et al., 2006). In the adenovirus case under examination, no less than 44 students were diagnosed with adenovirus. Several serotypes of adenovirus were detected during the outbreak, including strain Ad-7, which would be responsible for the death of a female freshman student (Abelson et al., 2019).

On November 19, 2018 the Health Center at a large American University issued the first of a series of emailed risk messages alerting students that an adenovirus outbreak had been identified on campus. Six students had been diagnosed with the virus within the two weeks preceding the message. The next day, another notification was issued, informing the campus community that a student had died from strain Ad-7, which is known to cause more severe symptoms (Russell et al., 2006). Later communication indicated that at least 44 students had been diagnosed with varying strains of the highly contagious virus. From November 19, 2018 through January 25, 2019, the University sent 6 emailed risk messages to students, mentioning adenovirus. A brief review of the University's adenovirus messages show that their contents primarily encouraged self-efficacy in managing symptoms and seeking medical treatment, but lacked other common fear appeals. To some extent, the email and social media messages appeared to deliberately downplay the adenovirus risk, by merging the adenovirus information in with flu season messaging. At onset, adenovirus presents similarly to the cold and flu viruses, but symptoms may more quickly become severe and persist for longer periods of time, and persons with immunodeficiencies or respiratory diseases are at elevated risk for the most severe symptoms (Echavarria, 2008).

The adenovirus outbreak came on the tails of another crisis for the University, the May 2018 death of one of its football players, who died from symptoms of heat stroke following a team practice. The University faced

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scathing public criticism and official inquiry into its athletic department's culture and failure to follow-through on safety procedures. Additional reputational damage was incurred when the University's Board of Regents overleveraged its authoritative power and attempted to force the University's President to retain the football team's athletic coach. This move caused the University to receive negative media criticism and inspired student protests, which ultimately led to the termination of the athletic coach and a review of the University's accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education's (Bahrampour & Heim, 2019).

The adenovirus outbreak was one of several crises that the University faced between May 2018 and November 2018, each of which posed considerable threat to the University's reputation and its social capital. The first crisis involved the death of one of the University's student athletes, which occurred in May 2018 and was the result of untreated heat stroke. The second crisis occurred three months later, when mold was discovered in student dormitories. When crises accumulate in short succession in this manner, and create lasting effects for an organization, they are called compounding crises (Veil & Anthony, 2017). Because the 2018 adenovirus outbreak occurred while the University was still recovering from earlier crises, it provides an opportunity to study this case through the lens of compounding crises.

Literature Review

Compounding Crisis

Veil and Anthony (2017) define compounding crisis as "a crisis that occurs in close succession to another (potentially unrelated) crisis before an organization has had the opportunity to rebuild its legitimacy" (p. 142). This is the only found article that provides a working definition of compounding crisis for communication scholarship. In Veil and Anthony's (2017) article, FEMA's poor response to Hurricane Katrina caused the organization to incur reputational damage and loss of social capital and legitimacy. FEMA had not fully recovered their legitimacy and reputation at the time that they experienced a second crisis, the discovery that the trailers being used to house Hurricane Katrina victims contained dangerously high levels of formaldehyde. This provided an example of the effects of compounding crisis, namely further diminishment of legitimacy and reputation. It also demonstrated how fear of spillover may cause a "pariah effect", which is when organizations – and even partner agencies – distance themselves from an organization which is experiencing the crisis first hand (Veil & Anthony, 2017).

Compounding crisis is a relatively under-explored area of study in communication. Most scholarship that references compounding crises is outside of the communication discipline, and it examines how several variables assimilate to create a heightened state of conflict or crisis

(Anagnostopolous et al., 2016; Carney, 2012; Steffen & Griggs, 2013). In most cases, the term "compounding crisis" is used to describe what is actually a spillover crisis or a cascading crisis. A spillover crisis occurs when one organization's crisis causes hardship or reputational damage to one or more other organizations; this is most likely to happen when the organizations are directly affiliated (Igenhoff et al., 2018; Veil et al., 2016). A cascading crisis happens when one event serves as a catalyst for failures in other parts of a system (Veil & Anthony, 2017; Veil & Husted, 2012).

Investigating the University's adenovirus event will extend theoretical knowledge about how compounding crises occur in a health context and will provide practical knowledge about how communicators can better manage such crises. Thus, this study will explore the 2018 adenovirus outbreak case as an example of a compounding crisis to facilitate the understandings of how the University put efforts on minimizing reputational damage and improve their organizational managements through communication. Based on this, we put forward the following research question,

RQ1: How did the University manage communication with their publics during the 2018 compounding crises?

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The management of compounding crises is more complex than that of a singular crisis and may require the involvement of professional communicators and staff from various divisions of an enterprise. Past research on compounding crises has studied it through the lens of situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2006; Coombs 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002), which provides a framework for communication aimed at mitigating reputational threat caused by a crisis.

The SCCT focuses on public perceptions of an organization following a crisis. It assumes that organizations undergoing crisis are reputation-driven and provides a menu of strategies that organizations can apply to maintain or repair their reputations (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). SCCT is commonly applied to studies related to natural or man-made disasters (Jeong, 2009; Kriyantono, 2012; Sisco et al., 2010; Utz, Schultz et al., 2013), financial crises (Cooley & Cooley, 2011; Weber et al., 2011), and health crises (Dulaney & Gunn, 2017). Recent studies have also integrated SCCT with corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices (Ham & Kim, 2019; Wigley & Pfau, 2010).

The crisis response strategies in SCCT are guided by attribution theory (Coombs, 2009), which suggests that the specific actions of individuals are the result of their interpretation of events (Jones et al, 1972; Weiner, 1974, 1986). SCCT extends this concept to explain how publics attribute cause for a crisis based on the actions of an organization (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Generally, crisis response literature recommends that organizations first attend to instructing their publics about protective actions and psychological

coping, prior to attending to the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2012; Jin, 2010; Lindell & Perry. 2012; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

SCCT offers four categories for strategic post-crisis communication: denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering. According to Coombs (2012), denial strategies seek to dissolve any appearance of an association between the organization and the crisis, while diminishing strategies seek to reduce perceptions that the organization has control over the crisis. Rebuilding strategies aim to "improve the organization's reputation" (p. 156), and bolstering strategies focus on building positive relationships between the organization and its publics. These strategies may be applied individually or in combination, so long as they are not juxtaposed against the organization's claims about their position relevant to the crisis type; meaning whether the organization is a victim, whether the crisis was an accident, or whether the crisis resulted from the organization's intentional actions (Coombs, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Denial should only be applied when the organization is facing a paracrisis, which are unfounded rumors that may or may not be circulated in an online space (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Diminishing strategies are best applied when the organization is the victim or the crisis is the result of an accident; rebuilding when a crisis was accidental or preventable; and bolstering can be applied in any scenario (Coombs, 2012; Sellnow and Seeger 2013).

The Halo Effect

Crisis communication experts believe that organizations in crisis may be able to avoid reputational damage when they have amassed significant social capital and developed a positive reputation prior to the crisis (Barton, 2001; Davies et al., 2003). This concept is often referred to as the halo effect because social capital and a favorable reputation serve as a buffer during crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Experiencing a crisis may cause an organization's social capital to decrease, but organizations that have accumulated enough social capital typically will not incur significant reputation damage (Ulmer, 2001). Organizations will usually seek to regain all lost social capital post-crisis. However, compounding crises often complicate recovery of social capital because multiple crises occur in short succession (Veil & Anthony, 2017).

The Velcro Effect

Coombs and Holladay (2001) suggest that publics will give organizations with no crisis history or relationship history the benefit of the doubt and reputation damage is unlikely to occur; this essentially creates a neutral effect. However, when organizations do have a crisis history or a poor relationship history prior to a crisis, then the organizations are likely to incur negative or unfavorable reputations. Coombs and Holladay (2001) refer to this as the

Velcro effect; they explain "a performance history is like Velcro; it attracts and snags additional reputational damage. Anyone with Velcro on their coat will recognize this effect" (p. 335). Organizations experiencing a Velcro effect must be more proactive in their response to publics than organizations experiencing a neutral response or halo effect.

One limitation for applying SCCT to this study is that it predominately focuses on post-crisis communication and does not fully account for how organizations manage communication mid-crisis. In order to fill this gap, the basic principles of organization-public relationships (OPR) and excellence theory (Grunig et al., 2006) allow for a deeper analysis of mid-crisis communication.

Organization-Public Relationships

Some scholars define organization-public relationships (OPR) as mutually beneficial partnerships between organizations and their publics, which are facilitated by two-way symmetrical communication. The concepts of OPR rest upon relationship management theory, which was first introduced to public relations scholars in the 1980s and 1990s (Ferguson, 1984; Ledingham et al., 1997). In OPR, public relations is a management function and practitioners are tasked with building, nurturing and maintaining relationships with their publics. Relationship management was pioneered by scholars of interpersonal communication, who framed relationships as being dyadic and dialogic. Scholars take two main stances toward the roles of dialogic relationships in OPR. The first camp considers dialogue to be a process, derived from antecedents, which guarantees desired outcomes for the organization (Botan & Taylor, 2004). The second camp insists that dialogue should be the outcome or end result of the OPR process (Paquette et al., 2015; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

As mentioned before, compounding crises have been studied by scholars in many disciplines, there is a dearth of research which addresses this topic in communication scholarship. However, these theories provide us an opportunity to fill out the gap in the past literature and bring attentions to investigate the compounding crises from a communication perspective. Thus, we ask the following research question,

RQ2: How, if at all, did the University's crisis communication management practices change following the compounding crises?

Method

The research questions for this study considered how the University's communication managers may have applied crisis communication and relationship management theories, frameworks for communication which are intended to mitigate reputational threats caused by a crisis, and whether or not the University's communication practices changed in the wake of the compounding crises. These questions were answered through qualitative

interviews with three of the University's public relations managers, who were assigned pseudonyms during the interview transcription stage. Additional findings were discovered through critical analysis of the University's published communication (emails, communication protocols, and social media posts), as well as through an assessment of their online dialogue with various publics. Institutional Review Board approval was granted prior to the onset of data collection.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via email, and included representatives from the University's strategic communication department, recreation and wellness unit, and the student health center. Eligibility criteria specified that all persons interviewed were either active communicators during the adenovirus response or the crises which preceded it. All participants were involved in the development of a formal crisis communication plan, following the event.

Sample and Enrollment Numbers

The interview portion of this study involved three semi-structured interviews with three public relations managers at University. Concerted efforts were made to identify and recruit participants who were actively involved in the University's communication around the adenovirus event. Participants were recruited via email between October, 2019 and November, 2020, and included the Vice President of strategic communication (Ryan); a communication specialist from the University's health center (Sarah), and a communication specialist from the University's recreation and wellness program (Brianna).

Interview Type

The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews, which afforded us the opportunity to ask probing questions when needed. All interviewees were informed of my wish to audiotape the interviews for purposes of accuracy; however, they were advised of their right to decline being audio recorded. Permission was granted to audiotape two of the three interviews, and hand-written notes were taken for the third interview. All participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to skip questions that they feel uncomfortable answering and withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were asked to sign consent forms prior to the start of their interviews. The interviews were conducted in English and took on average 52 minutes to complete. All interviews were conducted in person, in a private office setting. All recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed in NVivo. Compensation was not offered for participation in this study. Interview Protocol

The interview protocol included a series of thirteen open-ended

questions, each with optional probing questions. The questions outlined for RQ1 were intended to gain a detailed account of how the University manage communication with their publics during the 2018 compounding crises. Some of the questions that were asked to answer RQ1 included "Can you please describe your role as a communicator at the University?" and " To what extent were you involved in the planning and design of the communication?"

In RQ2, we endeavored to gain an understanding about how the University's crisis communication management practices change following the compounding crises. The questions for RQ2 include: "How, if at all, did your role change during the 2018 Adenovirus outbreak?" and "Did the preceding crises influence your decisions about how to respond to the adenovirus crisis?"

Artifact Collection

As the adenovirus crisis evolved, students began receiving emails from the University's health center. The original copies of those emails and Twitter and Facebook, copies of all of the University's social media communication around this issue have been kept for data analysis purposes. During the course of the interviews, we attempted to gain additional artifacts by requesting copies of internal communication and planning documents from the interview participants. A copy of the University's newly developed crisis communication protocols has been received successfully, which were created by the three interview participants after the adenovirus crisis response.

Social Media Content

The WebScraper.io Google Chrome extension was used to scrape social media content from Twitter. Specifically, the application used the name of the University and "adenovirus" as keywords to pull all original Twitter posts, retweets, likes and comments about the adenovirus crisis. The application also captured information about the account that generated the content, such as the Twitter id, account holder's name (when available), ae of the account, and date of the post. This information is useful to determine which messages were generated by University representatives and which were public generated. Having all of the twitter content laid out into one Excel spreadsheet also made it easier to identify which public comments received replies from the University's communicators. In addition to the Twitter scrape, the first author also went through the University's Facebook pages and captured screen shots of all posts, likes, shares and comments about the adenovirus crisis. In total, the University only sent six emails and nine social posts in response to the adenovirus event. Copies of all text and images were loaded into NVivo for coding and analysis.

Approaches to Data Analysis

After uploading all interview transcripts, summaries, memos, social media screen shots, and artifacts into NVivo, a thematic analysis was conducted for all the materials. Thematic analysis is known for being a flexible approach to data analysis, and it involves arranging data into categorical themes or reoccurring ideas (Kitzinger & Wilmott, 2002). It can be use broadly to evaluate data that was collected via a variety of qualitative research methods (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The data files were stored into two thematic groups – mid-crisis communication and post-crisis communication.

The first round of coding involved an open, inductive approach, which aims to identify all of the recurrent themes and data points which are relevant to the phenomenon being assessed (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The nodes identified during open coding included "communication channel", "relationship management", "publics", and "message design".

The initial list of codes was extended during secondary and tertiary rounds of coding, and new codes included "infographics", "message frames," "engagement", and "publics' response". Codes were then clustered into groups organized around central ideas, such as "communication planning", "reputation management", "engagement with publics" and "response of publics".

Findings

Communication Planning

Ryan serves as an advisor to the President's cabinet and the University's Board of Regents, and also spends about one-third of his time partnering with other departments on planning their communication. He explained that work is divided in the strategic communication office so that members of the team each have specific responsibilities, such as management of the social media pages, graphic design, internal communication, and media relations. Press agentry, or media relations, was considered to be one of the more essential functions for preventing reputational damage. When compounding crises occur, communication planners prioritize the crisis that would affect the largest number of stakeholders. He mentioned that, "One solid piece of our structure is that we maintain constant communication with the University's senior leadership, I would say on an hourly basis, during crisis." This constant communication serves to keep key stakeholders informed about ongoing issues and helps them to prepare responses to questions that they might receive from external parties.

When participants were asked about why communication about the adenovirus risk was not released to the public until several weeks after the risk was first identified, Sarah and Ryan both referenced guidelines received from external parties. Ryan explained "There is a large population of people

on campus each day, upwards of 50,000 people, and there's a certain amount of infectious disease that exists in that population all of the time. So, we follow guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and local health departments as to when to communicate about risks, so as not to create panic or spread misinformation about how serious a risk is." Sarah also referenced her department's reliance on CDC guidelines, and added that she turns to the Okanagan for further guidance on health promotion to students (Black & Stanton, 2016).

Although individual units have a substantial amount of decision-making agency over the communication for their department, the office of strategic communication becomes involved as soon as issues escalate to a crisis stage. According to Ryan, "As soon as something becomes a crisis, they would be working with us, but there is group decision making. I might recommend something, but we need agreement to move forward." Sarah and Brianna confirmed that they both are often asked to contribute to strategic communication, but indicated that strategic communication has the power to reject their recommendations.

Sarah described how, during past crises, the conversations were limited to senior leadership in strategic communication and the individual units affected by the crisis. However, the new crisis communication protocols extend the communication planning to include fewer senior members of departmental staff. She said that this change allows decision makers to become more aware of diverse perspectives, and how communication might be interpreted by diverse publics. She also mentioned that this change in protocol helps communicators to better understand the tone of their message and explained "Tone changes how the message is received. It can improve the message or damage it. When students receive health messages in a tone that implies the creator was cautious or not transparent, as many messages from strategic communications inherently are, they are less likely to perceive the message as being credible or in their best interest."

At this University, issues affecting only students as publics are generally managed by Ryan's team or the specific unit experiencing the crisis. However, issues that have the potential to affect alumni or donor relationships, or which could pose serious reputational threat to the University, are immediately escalated to and managed by the strategic communication department. Although departments are given some degree of agency over their own internal communication, and are often asked to advise communication being produced by the office of strategic communication, senior leadership in strategic communication ultimately has veto power over all external communication that happens at the University.

Reputation Management

While Sarah and Brianna indicated that students were consistently their primary stakeholders and that reputation management was only a

secondary or tertiary concern for their departments, reputation was always a primary concern for Ryan and his team. When asked what steps the strategic communication department took to protect the University's reputation during a crisis, Ryan said "When major crisis happens, day to day management gets sidelined and 90% of activity is oriented around the crisis." When Ryan was asked if theoretical principles of crisis communication were applied, he replied that, although he has theoretical training and prior practical experience in crisis communication, he does not use theory in strategic planning for the University. He explained, "I use what I know to be best practices."

Brianna has no formal training in crisis communication and indicated that she also relies on best practices. Conversely, Sarah said that she has formal education in both communication and public health and relies on theory for all communication that she conducts on behalf of the health center. At the departmental level, communication happens mainly through the social media profiles of the departments, as well as through emails via the health center's online patient medical records system. All units have access to a University-wide text messaging system for staff and could possibly also gain access to the entire University network, but neither the health center or recreational and wellness have ever attempted to do so.

Organization-Public Relationships (OPR)

The University's strategic communication department has a staff member who is dedicated to the management of the University's social media platforms, and this person is also tasked with responding to communication from online publics and assessing the analytic reports that measure message engagement. When asked about the degree to which the department engages with its publics on social media, Ryan replied "We haven't tested the effects of our messages, so i don't have any empirical evidence to prove that it was well-received, but we track the engagement and I know that the adenovirus health messages on our social media had a high level of engagement." Although the interview participant seemed to believe that there was active engagement happening in the online spaces, analysis of the Facebook and Twitter scrape showed no real dialogue occurred between the University and its online publics who responded to the adenovirus messaging.

The health center and recreation and wellness departments do not measure responses to their messaging, and only engage in dialogue when emails are received directly from their publics. The overall tone of messages that were posted by members of the public on the University's social media was "concerned". This mirrored the tone in the messages that were directed to the University's health center. However, the tone of messages posted by publics to personal Facebook pages, on personal Twitter profiles, and on the comments section of online news articles was predominantly "disappointed" and "criticizing".

Although most communication with publics occurs online or through

the media, the University occasionally still leverages traditional media for information dissemination during a crisis. According to Ryan, "We seldom do print pieces, but we have recently for the mold issue. We put information in the dormitories about how to prevent moisture build-up and mold. Otherwise, most of our communication with students is in digital format. Since then, we've also done more communication directly with parents to let them know what steps we are taking to prevent future problems."

Post-Crisis Communication Protocols and Practices

Following the adenovirus crisis, the three participants formed a committee which drafted a new crisis communication plan for the University to roll out at the department level. The new plan defined a University crisis as "an incident that negatively impacts our community (professional staff, student staff, members, an/or participants), departmental culture, our programs or facilities, and/or how others view our department." The plan also specified where crises can originate (internally or externally; online or offline), how communicators should mitigate the risks of a communication-related crisis (message editing; use of clear language; environmental scanning). Additionally, the plan offered guidance for coordinating a crisis communication response (recognize when a crisis is happening; alert all relevant parties about the issue; compile details about the crisis; anticipate questions that the public may ask). Furthermore, the plan highlights the importance of the message medium (social media; email; text alerts), the messenger (teachers; University spokespersons; department representatives), documentation of the timeline of events, and management of the media. Communicators are instructed to escalate all media inquiries to the Office of Strategic Communication (OSC), contain social media messages and discourage public conversations about the crisis, and plan to address the impact of the crisis before offering explanations for the cause of the crisis.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore organizational management of multiple crises, which occur in close succession. This study revealed that the University's adenovirus outbreak was primarily managed at the functional level, with most of the communication being managed by the public relations' strategic communication department, rather than at the program level. Although the programs were consulted for contextual information about the adenovirus risk, all information was filtered and presented to the publics in a way that was meant to reduce their perceptions of risk. This was intentionally done to prevent students and parents from panicking, but online commentary from students and concerned parents suggested that the University's lack of transparency may have caused public trust to be diminished.

While the University has been more proactive about communicating with its publics through the COVID-19 crisis, the crisis communication

plan that evolved from the adenovirus crisis still suggests that the University maintains a policy of diminishing and deflecting during a crisis. The SCCT posits that crisis communication responses should be more flexible and event-specific (Coombs, 2006; Coombs 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The interesting and baffling finding about the creation of the new crisis communication plan is that the interview participants confirmed that no attempts were made to involve the University's crisis communication scholars in the development of the new plan. The University examined in this study has a very robust communication program and employs some of the field's most recognizable scholars. The University's failure to consult these persons during the design and implementation of the new protocols is an incredible oversight. Additionally, the new plan fails to account for the possibility that crises may compound and pose additional challenges to communication. The new crisis communication plan with is a document that has only three pages. A well-constructed crisis communication plan should be more robust and should seek to offer guidance for all possible variables and outcomes, not just a few.

This study demonstrates that compounding crisis can be examined from multiple frameworks, and analysis need not be confined to only SCCT. In the data analysis, open coding was applied to discover what themes emerged and what other communication disciplines might offer new lenses for examining compounding crises. The finding shows that the relationship management principles that are observed in OPR overlap with the post-crisis response guidelines outlined in SCCT. Theoretical principles of OPR and SCCT are both concerned with reputation preservation, as well as the retention or reclamation of lost social capital.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the limited sample size of the interviews in this study. With more interviews, we will be able to provide a more detailed and well-rounded account of case. Although we focused on the functional and program levels of excellence theory, more interviews might have made it possible to assess this case at the organizational and societal levels as well. Second, the three participants were employees of the University, and may have perceived themselves to be at personal risk or have barriers to the disclosure of information about the compounding crises.

Analysis of the social media commentary about this crisis suggests that the University may have incurred long-term reputational damage as a result of the compounding crises and the University's communication strategy. However, confirming this hypothesis would require examining the publics perceptions of the organizations temporally. This could be done quantitatively, through surveys and evaluation of the University's enrollment numbers and revenue from donations. Further study could also be conducted qualitatively, through interviews with internal and external publics. A mixed-methods study

applying all of these approaches to data collection would likely garner the most accurate and rich findings.

Compounding crises are an underexplored area of communication scholarship, and there is ample room for more research in this field. Universities provide an interesting scope for evaluating compounding crises, because they tend to have a large and diverse network of stakeholders, and may have more active communicators employed in managing such crises than other types of organizations. The priorities of the various communicators at a University are also diverse, and appear to be oriented around publics with specific sets of demographics (i.e. students, prospective students, or donors). Future research might explore how universities manage crises that affect specific publics, or might more closely examine changes in communication as compounding crises evolve.

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