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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS
FOR CRISIS LEADERSHIP THEORY AND PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Social Construction of Crisis in Higher Education: Implications for Crisis Leadership

Theory and Practice

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This dissertation explored the nature of crisis in higher education—a context where conflicts of various kinds across a diverse array of stakeholders are common, and where their occurrence often challenge core institutional values. Much of the crisis management and crisis prevention literature focus primarily on the public relations aspect of crisis—how to protect the reputation of the institution, maintain a favorable impression in the eyes of many stakeholders, and use communication to shape public opinion. Unlike existing studies that characterize communication as a tool for managing specific components of crisis situations after they emerge, this project placed a broadened emphasis on the role of communication in the ongoing work of crisis leadership. Additionally, unlike traditional studies that treat crisis as an objective phenomenon, this project considered the ways that crises are created through communication. Rather than take the idea of “crisis in higher education” as a given, the researcher analyzed the

use of this label and advanced a more holistic and comprehensive portrayal of crisis leadership—a phenomenon that involves, but extends beyond, reputation management.

The following four research questions guided this project: 1) What events/situations are characterized as crises in higher education? 2) How do these events/situations become defined and labeled as crises? 3) What are the prominent characteristics of the discourse around crisis and crisis leadership in higher education? 4) What skills, values, and competencies are important for the work of crisis leaders in higher education? The author investigated these central questions through the use of two research methods. In response to the first question, the author first conducted a content analysis of higher education news outlets, including *Inside Higher Ed* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and a smaller sample of articles from *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* from the past five years (2011-2015). The second phase of the project, in response to the remaining questions, involved semi-structured interviews with 37 senior university leaders representing a diversity of units from Association of American University (AAU) member institutions.

The multi-method investigation of this topic led to a number of findings. First, there exist a myriad of different types of incidents or situations that are typically classified as “crises” in higher education—crises that are cross-cutting in nature—based on the following taxonomy: academic, athletics, technological, facilities, financial/business, human resources, leadership/governance, natural disaster, public safety, racial or identity conflict, and student affairs. Next, the senior leaders interviewed for this project addressed three central findings related to the process of defining and labeling phenomena as crises: there are multiple, and at times conflicting, definitions of crisis, crises are distinct from other types of events or situations, and many factors contribute to the elevation of an incident to the level of crisis, most notably the use

of social media. The third set of findings capture the communicative construction of crisis in higher education. Specifically, crises are said to exist if other perceive them to exist, crises may be called into existence based on the framing of events or situations by leaders, and crisis often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy based on one's decision to designate an event or series of events as a crisis. Finally, there are many core skills, values, and competencies associated with the practice of crisis leadership in higher education that may be cultivated through formal training and development efforts.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Introduction and Research Objectives

Crisis is a prominent condition of contemporary organizational life (Roitman, 2014), and this is especially the case for colleges and universities. By their very nature, crises have the potential to permanently tear at the fabric of an institution. These moments of disruption or discord in the life of an organization cast extensive challenges for leaders, yet they also serve as important communicative opportunities for the emergence of leadership (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), sensemaking (Weick, 1979, 1995), reflection (Barge, 2004; Barge & Fairhurst, 2008), and as a stimulant of organizational change and improvement going forward. As leaders wrestle with the nuances of crisis prevention, management, and crisis communication, these situations present a rich and dramatic backdrop for leadership analysis.

Additionally, leadership is an increasingly popular topic in both scholarly literature and professional training and development (Ruben, 2012; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a). As aptly noted by Fairhurst and Connaughton (2016a), “leadership is both new and old, a timeless concept that must simultaneously reflect the times yet stay ahead of them. To do so is no small feat, but it is most worthy of pursuit in contemporary organizational life” (p. 24) In many instances, the success or failure of an organization hinges upon the actions and decisions of those in leadership roles. More than a formal position or responsibility, however, leadership is understood to be a process of social influence that may be accomplished by any organizational actor. This process is shaped by verbal and nonverbal communication and co-constructed between leaders and followers, and by informal as well as formal leaders (Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2017). This conceptualization of leadership as a distributed and communicative process is especially relevant for the study of crisis in higher education—situations that often demand a collective and

collaborative response from multiple units and individuals.

This dissertation explores the nature of crisis in higher education—a context where conflicts of various kinds across a diverse array of stakeholders are common, and where their occurrence often challenge core institutional values—through an examination of the various strands of scholarly literature that correspond with the study of crisis, leadership, and organizational studies. Communication lies at the core of these intersecting areas of interest. By situating these areas of research within the domain of organizational communication, there remains an opportunity to further advance a communication-oriented understanding of organizations, leadership, and crisis within the context of higher education. A thoughtful exploration of these topics must also consider the unique structure, complexity, institutional challenges, and leadership development initiatives associated with American higher education (Ruben, 2004; Ruben, et al., 2017).

Some relatively recent examples of high profile events in higher education that were labeled crises include, but are not limited to, the shootings at Virginia Tech and Umpqua Community College, ISIS-inspired terrorist activity at The Ohio State University, the child abuse scandal at Penn State University, the discovery of academic fraud at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the student occupation of the administration building at Duke University, the heightened racial tensions and campus unrest at the University of Missouri and Yale University, a power outage, cyberattack, and series of athletics scandals at Rutgers University, the removal—and eventual reinstatement—of President Teresa Sullivan at the University of Virginia for criticism related to her rate of institutional adaptation and change, the appointment—and eventual withdrawal—of Dr. Steven Salaita and the resignation of Chancellor Phyllis Wise at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the devastating impact of

Hurricane Katrina at Loyola University in New Orleans and the catastrophic flood at the University of Iowa, demonstrations of racist behavior within the Greek systems at the University of Oklahoma and the University of Maryland and towards visiting high school students at Texas A&M University, evidence of the men's soccer team ranking freshman women by their appearance at Harvard University, allegations of widespread sexual assault at the University of Montana, the excessive abuse of alcohol at Dartmouth College, and the investigation of 85 colleges and universities by the Department of Education for possible violations of Title IX (a federal anti-discrimination law protecting such victims). This list only begins to skim the surface of the types of incidents that have become crises of significance in recent years that are most relevant to colleges and universities.

In response to the growing number of crisis situations, the American Council on Education (ACE) convened a roundtable with presidential leaders, media experts, and attorneys on the topic of "Leading in Times of Crises." This meeting led to the development of an article (Bataille, Billings, & Nellum, 2012) and a subsequent book (Bataille & Cordova, 2014) on the subject. This topic remains a top priority for college and university leaders for many reasons. First, events or situations that are characterized as crises often have a dramatic impact on a wide array of organizational stakeholders. Next, these situations often influence the operations or finances of the organization, all the while threatening the reputation of the institution. For example, research by Luca, Rooney, and Smith (2016) explored the significant impact of recent campus scandals on student applications, and a recent report of the sexual molestation crisis at Penn State indicated that the University and its insurers have spent \$250 million—and counting—on a variety of fees related to the crisis, with \$5.3 million alone spent on crisis communications and other consultants (Mondics, 2017). Finally, regardless of the reason, crises

can detract from the educational mission of the college or university, and they require a great deal of time and energy on behalf of the leaders of the organization. As acknowledged by Rollo and Zdziarski (2007), “The impact of crises on the facilities and the institutions’ ability to accomplish their educational mission must be addressed, but it is the human side of the equation that begs our attention as educators committed to serving our communities” (p. 3). These multifaceted consequences make it especially challenging for organizational leaders as they respond to, navigate, and learn from these events.

Crisis leadership in higher education is, perhaps unfortunately, a timely and important area of study. It is the subject of recent documentaries, such as *The Hunting Ground* (Ziering & Dick, 2015) and dissertations (Agnew, 2014; Garcia, 2015; Gill, 2012; Jacobsen, 2010; Menghini, 2014; Muffet-Willett, 2010). Despite the prevalence of crisis situations within the context of American colleges and universities—organizations that are bastions of academic excellence and models for global higher education—there is surprisingly little written on the topic within the area of organizational communication. Furthermore, as suggested by Genshaft (2014), “higher education is particularly primed for poor handling of crises,” in part because of the lack of preparation and an ongoing preoccupation with excellence (p. 10). This claim is consistent with the survey findings of Mitroff, et al. (2006) that found much remains to be done in the area of crisis leadership preparation in higher education. With these ideas in mind, the goals for this dissertation project are three-fold: 1) To advance theory in understanding the nature and incidence of crisis and the role of communication in crisis leadership, 2) To apply sound research methods for studying this topic within the context of higher education, and 3) To develop updated models and guides to improve crisis leadership practice in higher education.

Crises present a wide array of challenges for organizational leaders, as widely discussed in the scholarly and professional literature. In addition to exploring what is meant by crisis leadership in higher education, this project builds upon the objective treatment of crisis as widely acknowledged in the literature, and unpacks further the use of the term “crisis” as a contested, subjective, and communicative phenomenon. A primary aim of this project is to enrich the understanding of how the term “crisis” is used and to what end. Just as leadership is co-constructed between leaders and followers, the very notion of crisis is subject to the same negotiation between higher education leaders and the many stakeholders who are often most influenced by the crisis situation itself. This negotiation calls for research that disentangles the use of the label “crisis” from the phenomenon being described. As a discursive framing strategy (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), impacted stakeholders, the media, and organizational leaders may use the “crisis” label for any number of reasons. For those affected by an incident, for example, framing the event as a crisis helps to focus attention on a problem of concern and heighten the probability of an expedited response. For the media, framing an event as a crisis underscores its significance and news value. From the perspective of the institution and its leaders, the declaration of a crisis can also have advantages. For example, leaders may find it strategically advantageous to identify a phenomenon as a crisis for its ability to invoke leadership shortcuts, to permit expedited decision making, and to facilitate quick and authoritative action. For any or all of these reasons, crises are proclaimed and problematized in higher education practice.

The proposed research questions for this project build upon the existing literature in organizational communication, leadership and organizational studies, and higher education. Importantly, these guiding questions approach the study of organizational crisis and leadership in colleges and universities from an organizational communication perspective, through which

organizations and leadership are understood to be communicative accomplishments (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). Up to this point, much of the recent scholarship on the topic of crisis communication within higher education is found in public relations (Fortunato, 2008; Leeper & Leeper, 2006; Len-Rios, 2010) and higher education literature (Coombs, 2008; Dubois, 2006; Garcia, 2015; Gill, 2012; Jablonski, et al., 2008; Mann, 2007; Muffet-Willett, 2010; Zdiarski, et al., 2007). Importantly, an organizational communication perspective places an emphasis on the process of communication that extends beyond a traditional public relations and reputation management orientation. This organizational communication lens also considers the significance and impact of leadership communication behaviors, the ways in which leaders make sense of organizational and environmental crisis situations, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders in organizational dynamics. Finally, an organizational communication orientation allows for a more comprehensive and holistic study of the co-construction of leadership and the implications for the training and development of leaders.

By bringing an organizational communication lens to the study of organizational crisis and leadership in higher education, the researcher aspires to develop a richer understanding of the processes by which crises emerge and unfold and the contexts within which leadership and organizing occur. A different vantage point may also allow for the development of new ways of theorizing about crisis and crisis leadership—a vantage point that might not fully appear in the current literature.

As suggested previously, and to be discussed in the next chapter, much of the writing on crisis management and crisis prevention, focuses primarily on the public relations aspect of crisis—how to protect the reputation of the institution, maintain a favorable impression in the eyes of many stakeholders, and use communication to shape public opinion. Unlike existing studies that

characterize communication in a fairly limited way—as a tool for managing specific components of crisis situations after they emerge, this project places a broadened emphasis on the role of communication in the ongoing work of crisis leadership—before, during, and after specific incidents on which crisis management literature and advice generally focuses. Additionally, unlike traditional studies that treat crisis as an objective phenomenon, this project considers the ways that crises are created through communication.

Informed by the scholarly literature in this area, the researcher understands crisis to be an event, series of events, or situation that present reputational risk to the institution and require immediate institutional attention. Additionally, as characterized in this dissertation, crisis is also a socially constructed, often subjective, and communicative phenomenon. Put another way, rather than take the idea of “crisis in higher education” as a given, the researcher analyzes the use of this label and seeks to advance a more holistic and comprehensive portrayal of crisis leadership—a phenomenon that involves, but extends beyond, reputation management. The framework to be developed suggests that incidents happen and that crises are created. The creation occurs through communication, and it is through communication that they must be addressed (B. Ruben, personal communication, December 5, 2016). Crises are distinct from problems, nuisances, or incidents; yet, as will be discussed throughout the project, the labeling of events as “crises,” the monitoring of events that may escalate to the level of “crisis,” and the preparation of leaders for navigating the inherent ambiguity and mission-related significance associated with “crisis” situations in higher education is much less clear and potentially more problematic. The ubiquity of crisis in higher education, coupled with the subjectivity of the term itself, provides an opportunity to consider a broader view of crisis leadership—a perspective that

foregrounds the many communicative elements of leadership in higher education.

Research Questions

Given the contemporary context of crisis situations in higher education and the gap in the existing scholarly literature, this dissertation project seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What events/situations are characterized as crises in higher education?

RQ2: How do these events/situations become defined and labeled as crises?

RQ3: What are the prominent characteristics of the discourse around crisis and crisis leadership in higher education?

RQ4: What skills, values, and competencies are important for the work of crisis leaders in higher education?

In addition to addressing these specific research questions, the researcher believes this study will contribute in more general ways, particularly by addressing the following issues of theoretical and practical importance:

- Which theories inform the current understanding of the role of and response to crisis in higher education?
- How do leaders in higher education recognize an event or string of events as constituting crisis? How do these leaders make sense of and take action regarding these events?
- How does the culture of higher education shape the ways that leaders understand and respond to crises—and how do these crises simultaneously shape the academic culture? What, if anything, differentiates the cascading influence of crises in colleges and universities from other types of organizations?

- How might organizational communication concepts help advance an understanding of organizational crisis and the practice of crisis leadership in a way that extends the focus beyond the reputation of the organization? In what ways can this understanding of crisis align with current approaches to crisis prevention, management, and communication in higher education?
- In what ways do leaders frame events or situations as crises, and what are the leadership implications involved in this framing decision?
- How are crises characterized in the media coverage surrounding institutions of higher education?
- What preparation is provided for leaders in higher education as they navigate the complexity presented by crisis situations?
- What values, behaviors, and competencies are most relevant to the practice of crisis leadership?

An attempt to answer these various questions required two phases of research, each of which are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. The first phase of this project consisted of a content analysis of the media coverage related to the invocation of crisis across the landscape of American higher education. The second phase of the project, building upon the more expansive content analysis, involved the use of interviews in better understanding the experiences, challenges, and behaviors associated with the practice of crisis leadership in higher education from the perspective of 37 senior leaders. The findings from this extensive research project, as discussed in the concluding chapter, may be used to advance communication scholarship in the area of crisis leadership and inform existing approaches to crisis leadership training and development within the context of higher education.

Conclusion

Crisis communication remains a primary area of study within the public relations literature for obvious reasons; however, the researcher believes that there is an important element to crisis leadership that extends beyond reputation management. Crisis provides a rich backdrop within which to explore the interdependent relationship between colleges and universities, the distributed nature of leadership in higher education, and an increasingly complex and generally unpredictable environment. In short, crisis in higher education serves as a germane context for leadership analysis.

As mentioned by one senior administrator who was interviewed for this project, *“The whole lived experience of the human condition exists on our college campuses 24/7. In an era when we practice our work to be all in support of our communities, I think that means that we have to be prepared to be crisis-driven”* (Participant 14). This project occurred at a critical time for American higher education—a time marked by significant change across the sector, ongoing scrutiny from a wide array of internal and external stakeholders, and much public debate regarding race relations, freedom of speech, and issues of access and affordability across colleges and universities. Heeding this interviewee’s call to become “crisis-driven,” this project seeks to contribute to a richer understanding of what fundamentally constitutes “crisis” in higher education, along with a more nuanced understanding of the primary issues at stake for leaders during these critical moments.

In their summary of the six challenges facing organizational communication scholarship, Jones, et al. (2004) called for increased scholarship that “must be useful to people in ongoing organizations,” notably research that considers the increasingly important role of context (p. 725). This charge reflects Daly’s (2000) defense for communication research to be

consequential. Writing more recently for the 25th anniversary of *Communication Theory*, Zelizer (2015) called for communication theory to “reflect far more stridently on the relevance of practice” (p. 414). Communication scholarship can have a lasting impact by spanning practice and theory, and what follows is an engaged research project that aspires to be “consequential” for higher education leadership theory and practice. The study of the discourse surrounding crisis situations in higher education, and the subsequent leadership values, competencies, and behaviors that are found to be most critical to navigating these types of situations, can contribute to the expanding body of scholarship and best practices in this area.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly literature in the areas of leadership, crisis, and higher education training and development is extensive and interdisciplinary. The goal of this chapter is to synthesize the various strands of literature related to these intersecting areas of study, devoting particular attention to the communicative elements of these topics within the context of higher education. A communication-oriented conceptualization of leadership, crisis, and higher education training and development allow for a broader understanding of these concepts, emphasizes the process through which these phenomena occur, and identifies numerous complexities and nuances that which might otherwise be taken for granted in both scholarship and practice. This chapter highlights the existing literature on leadership communication and the unique context of leadership in higher education. Chapter Two continues with a summary of the relevant literature in the areas of crisis prevention, management, and communication. Given the additional focus in this dissertation on crisis leadership preparation, this chapter also includes a summary of the extant scholarship in higher education leadership training and development. Finally, the chapter concludes with a synthesis of this extensive body of literature as a way of setting the stage for the remainder of this dissertation project.

Higher Education Leadership: A Communicative Approach

Leadership

A number of texts outline the rich historical foundation and subsequent advancement of research on leadership, a topic that parallels the study of human behavior itself (Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2015; Yukl, 2012). As the study of society has evolved, so too have the definitions, models, and approaches to leadership theory and practice. These paradigms have shifted from a primary focus on individuals perceived to exercise extreme power over others to perspectives

that place an increased emphasis on the interactions between leaders and followers. A recent synthesis of the leadership literature (Ruben, et al., 2017) led to the classification of leadership theories in four broad categories, including the following:

- **Classical approaches**—traditional approaches to the study of leadership that include trait (Bass, 1990; Jago, 1982), skills (Katz, 1955), style (Blake and McCanse, 1991; Lewin, Lippitt, & White 1939), and situational theories (Hersey, 1984; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969)
- **Contemporary approaches**—modern approaches to the study of leadership theory and practice, including transformational (Bass & Avolio, 1994), authentic (George, 2003); and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002)
- **Competency approaches**—approaches to leadership that focus on the ability of successful leaders to acquire a portfolio of knowledge and skills that they can apply strategically in their formal and informal leadership roles (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Kotter, 2012; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Ruben, 2012; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Smith, 2007; Wisniewski, 1999)
- **Communication approaches**—approaches to leadership that illustrate the inseparable relationship between communication and leadership, and that foreground the role of communication theory in understanding the dynamics of leadership and social influence (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014a, 2014b; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a, 2016b; Ruben, et al., 2017; Witherspoon, 1997)

Despite the voluminous literature on the subject, leadership remains a widely observed, yet exceedingly complex phenomenon (Burns, 1978). Leadership is a difficult phenomenon to

describe, let alone define with enough flexibility to allow for the many interpretations and examples of a given historical moment (Stogdill, 1974). Although a universal definition of leadership is not necessary, or perhaps even possible (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Barker, 1997; Rost, 1991), three definitions inform the researcher's understanding of leadership as a process of social influence that is accomplished through communication (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a). Northouse's (2015) definition casts leadership as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 6). Related to Northouse's approach to influence, Hackman and Johnson (2013) define leadership as "human (symbolic) communication that modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared group goals and needs" (p. 11). Finally, as Robinson (2001) suggests, "Leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them" (p. 93). These three definitions demonstrate the inextricable linkage between communication and leadership situate leadership in communication—another topic that merits further explication in the next section.

Human communication

Communication, a "universal human experience," is critical to social behavior, yet familiar enough to lead it to be taken for granted (Thayer, 1968, 2003). According to Ruben (2005), "Communication is the process through which the social fabric of relationships, groups, organizations, societies, and world order – and disorder – is created and maintained" (p. 294). The pervasiveness of communication allows it to be defined as the "sine qua non," or an essential condition of the behavioral sciences (Thayer, 2003). To be human is to communicate—and perhaps even more relevant to this current dissertation project, to *lead* is to communicate. As Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson (1967) suggest, "all behavior, not only speech, is

communication, and all communication – even the communicational clues in an impersonal context – affects behavior” (p. 22). One of the pressing challenges facing communication scholars reflects this definition—if communication is everything, then what exactly makes communication distinct? Three critical elements of human communication, including discourse, message(s), and meaning, are also important to the study and practice of leadership and merit further attention.

Discourse, like communication itself, is a widely contested term (Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 1998, p. 6). Fairhurst (2007) defines discourse as “the study of talk and text in social practices,” not to be confused with Discourse (also known as big “D” Discourse) that refers to the “general and enduring systems for the formation and articulation of ideas in a historically situated time” (Foucault, 1972; 1980). Ellis (1992) goes on to suggest that “It is *through discourse* where language and communication meet because discourse is ‘language that is used for some communicative purpose’” (p. 84). Organizational actors are thus seen to exist *in* communication and *through* discourse, whereby discourse represents the actual use of language to achieve some type of goal (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008; Fairhurst, 2009). These ideas are especially relevant to communication theory, which is described by Craig (1999) as “a coherent field of metadiscursive practice, a field of discourse about discourse with implications for the practice of communication” (p. 120). Understood to be talk-in-interaction, the study of discourse foregrounds the relational conversing between individuals in a variety of contexts, including both interpersonal and organizational, which create new and ongoing opportunities for meaning making. This narrow focus on discourse, however, can also prove limiting to fully understanding the nature of crisis leadership. As discussed momentarily, a broadened understanding of human communication must also consider the nonverbal and material elements of communication. From

this perspective, communication extends beyond what one says, and fundamentally involves one's way of being in relation to others.

In addition to discourse, messages also matter to communication theory and practice. In their widely cited axiom of human communication, Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson (1967) noted that “one cannot *not* communicate” (p. 49). The message itself may be intentional or unintentional, planned or unplanned. The study of communication extends beyond talk-in-interaction and must also consider that which is *not* said. So too, in recent writing on the subject, leadership communication goes beyond what one says (or does not say), and may involve both nonverbal and material dimensions (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a). These verbal, nonverbal, and material ways of engagement “have message value” (Watzlawick, et al., 1967, p. 49) and the exchange of messages plays a pervasive role human interactions, particularly as it relates to the reception and interpretation of messages in any communication episode. Importantly, the process of communication is not limited to the transmission model that once dominated communication scholarship (Lasswell, 1948; Shannon & Weaver, 1949). In fact, this linear approach to communication, one that views communication as simply the transfer of information or meaning, overly simplifies a process that is otherwise quite complex (Axley, 1984). Carey (1975), for example, distinguishes the transmission view of communication from what he labels a ritual view. Whereas the transmission perspective understands communication to be “a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people,” Carey’s alternative view presents the role of communication in “drawing persons together in fellowship and commonality” (p. 6). More recent approaches to communication scholarship concern itself with the way people create, convey, select, and interpret the messages that inform and shape their lives—viewing communication as a basic life process rather than an

exchange of messages between people (Ruben, 2003, 2011; Thayer, 1968). These approaches make complex a process that might otherwise be taken for granted.

Finally, the process of communication is meaning-laden. Both the content and relationship dimensions of communication shape the interpretation of meaning in any communicative transaction (Watzlawick, et al., 1967), and as it relates to this current project, everything that a leader does is communicative in that it sends a message about both content and relationship (Bateson, 1972; Barge, 2014). Leadership behaviors—including, but going beyond one's discourse—communicates a message of potential significance to others. As Thayer (1968) acknowledged in his work on the subject, “The essence of being human is thus communicating-to and being communicated-with” (p. 18). He goes on to describe the needs, values, expectations, attitudes, and goals that are brought to every communication encounter. These predispositions, susceptibilities, and take-into-account-abilities influence the outcome of the interaction and “are equivalent to our individual make-meaningful-abilities” (p. 36). Communication is not a one-way process, but rather is best understood as “a multidirectional phenomenon with no distinguishable beginning or end” (Ruben, 2003, p. 95). Related to the study of leadership, meaning is not easily controlled by the leader, but rather is co-constructed between leaders *and* followers. Furthermore, the greater the extent of mismatch between expectations, attitudes, and values, the less the likelihood that message-sent will equal message-received (Ruben & Stewart, 2016).

A more thorough review of communication scholarship lies beyond the scope of this chapter and coming to terms with a singular definition of communication, like leadership itself, may be unreasonable and limiting (Dance, 1970; Littlejohn & Foss, 2011); however, as a way of synthesizing the three components of communication noted above, it is worth presenting two

definitions to communication that influence the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon and its presentation throughout this dissertation. Ruben and Stewart (2016) define human communication as “the process through which individuals in relationships, groups, organizations, and societies create and use information to relate to the environment and one another” (p. 17). Beebe, Beebe, and Ivy (2013) also present another useful definition of communication “as the process of making sense out of the world and sharing that sense with others by creating meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal messages” (p. 5). Building upon these foundational human communication concepts, this dissertation closely explores the connections between leadership and communication theory. As proposed below, an understanding of communication has the potential to alter, advance, and enrich leadership theory and practice.

Leadership Communication Connections

If leadership is thus understood to be a process of social influence that is accomplished through communication and if communication is recognized as a way of creating and using information to relate to the environment and one another, then a focus on the leadership communication connections must attend to the nuances of human interaction and social relationships. A more intentional investigation of leadership communication has the potential to advance theory and inform practice, and the ways in which one conceptually approaches the topic can subsequently influence the operationalization of leadership communication in practice. As primary domains of scholarly inquiry, the study of leadership communication connections, along with the corresponding theories that emerge from this investigation, present a myriad of lenses—ways of seeing and thinking about the nature of leadership and the communicative practices of leaders. In particular, a more sophisticated understanding of communication theory may lead to a deeper understanding of the challenges and choices available to leaders. These

theories – or lenses – are the “net[s] that we throw out to catch the world – to rationalize, explain, and dominate it,” as Popper (1982) indicates, and the ways that we understand leadership communication connections has the potential to inform leadership communication practice across organizational sectors, including higher education. The connections between communication thinking and the study and practice of leadership are critical.

In his work on the patterns and actions of leaders, Grint (2000) presents an “ensemble of arts” associated with the doing of leadership that emphasize the centrality of communication (p. 27). Suggesting that leadership is best understood as an art rather than a science, he considers “how four particular arts mirror four of the central features of leadership: the invention of an identity, the formulation of a strategic vision, the construction of organizational tactics, and the deployment of persuasive mechanisms to ensure followers actually follow” (p. 27). He classifies these central elements of leadership as philosophical arts (the who), fine arts (the what), martial arts (the how), and performing arts (the why). Carefully calibrated communication responses to organizational and societal problems often shape the legacy of a leader (Grint, 2005). Even though communication is widely recognized as a critical leadership competency for leaders in higher education and beyond (Agnew, 2014; Ruben, 2012), there remains an opportunity for communication thinking to further influence the theoretical leadership literature in more fundamental ways (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a, 2016b). For example, Eberly, Johnson, Hernandez, and Avolio (2011) depict the interactions between loci and mechanisms as constitutive of leadership. This is but one example of the ways that communication scholarship might influence the conceptualization of leadership, recognizing that the interactions between loci and mechanisms are always communicative.

A communication-oriented way of thinking about leadership allows us to consider the

role of communication involved in social influence—influence that often takes time and that relies upon the co-management of meaning with the follower. Presenting leadership through a communicative lens, Witherspoon (1997) views leadership as “first and foremost a communication process, or set of processes. Every leadership behavior is enacted through communication” (p. 2). In her detailed analysis of discursive leadership, Fairhurst (2007) echoes this idea by illustrating the ways in which leadership is constituted in and through discourse, which can be broadened to include both verbal and nonverbal interactions between leader and follower (Ruben, et al., 2017). Consistent with Fairhurst and Connaughton’s (2014a) work on the topic, the extant literature on the topics of leadership and communication point to a series of lenses which, “taken collectively, show communication to be central, defining and constitutive of leadership” (p. 8). One might consider the many examples of effective and ineffective leaders in higher education, as highlighted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, for example, who received praise or scrutiny for their approach to communication. In many ways, the perception of an individual leader hinges upon his or her relationships with organizational stakeholders—relationships that are cultivated, sustained, and potentially damaged or deteriorated based on communicative behaviors and decisions. Building upon the previous definitions of leadership and communication, the following section highlights three distinct areas of communication scholarship that are particularly relevant to this dissertation on crisis leadership. These three concepts include the work on framing and the management of meaning, sensemaking/sensegiving, and the social construction of leadership and reality, and the following description of these three ideas also includes a higher education vignette that can help to demonstrate the explanatory value of the ideas as it relates to the scope of this current dissertation.

Framing and the Management of Meaning. Leadership is a language game—and communication is likely both a tool and mechanism for influence within this uncertain, unwieldy, and unpredictable game (Pondy, 1978). According to Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), “Leaders operate in uncertain, sometimes chaotic environments that are partly of their own creation: while leaders do not control events, they do influence how events are seen and understood” (p. xi). Leaders are seen as having the ability to co-create the contexts, situations, and opportunities to which they and others must respond (Fairhurst, 2009). The skill of framing has the potential to cause others to accept one meaning or interpretation over another. One might consider an organizational crisis as a rich backdrop for the exploration of framing practices. During unprecedented and chaotic moments of organizational disruption, for example, it is often the leader’s role to frame the situation in a way that builds trust, confidence, and hope. Through the invocation of crisis, leadership also involves the mobilization of resources and the implementation of plans that are associated with an urgent, chaotic, or abnormal event, situation, or series of events. Put another way, the leader’s framing of the situation can often shape the reactions and behaviors that follow. Leaders may use this framing strategy as a strategic device to cut through the bureaucratic “red tape,” skip formal processes, and move quickly at a rate that is not common for institutions of higher education (L. Lewis, personal communication, December 18, 2015).

Drawing upon the work of Pondy (1978), Entman (1993), and Weick (1979), Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) define framing as

the ability to shape the meaning of a subject, to judge its character and significance. To hold the frame of a subject is to choose one particular meaning (or set of meanings) over another. When we share our frames with others (the process of framing), we manage

meaning because we assert that our interpretations should be taken as real over other possible interpretations (p. 3).

Not only is “talk” the way in which leaders accomplish specific tasks (Gronn, 1983), but it is through communication—and framing, more specifically—that leaders are able to shape reality for those whom one leads (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996). In a similar vein, through the practice of “bracketing” (Weick, 1988), leaders may choose to bracket periods of time or strings of events into a set, category, or series of trends. For example, a singular event of campus sexual assault is considered a “crime,” whereas a string of such events may raise the situation to the level of “crisis.” In this case, calling attention to the trends and bracketing a set of disparate activities or events together as part of a larger whole helps to create a narrative of “crisis” (L. Lewis, personal communication, December 18, 2015). It is important to further acknowledge that framing considerations include both what is said and what is not said, and the ways in which individual frames are ultimately interpreted and accepted depend very much on the expectations, experiences, and assumptions of those involved in a given situation.

The concept of framing was popularized in leadership communication with the publication of Fairhurst and Sarr’s work, but the idea has a more extensive history in the social sciences, including anthropology (Bateson, 1972), sociology (Goffman, 1974), linguistics (Tannen, 1979), and the organizational sciences (Weick, 1979, 1981). Within these interdisciplinary areas of study, framing is found to be both a cognitive device *and* a communicative activity (Fairhurst, 2005). Furthermore, three critical components constitute the skill of framing, including language, thought, and forethought. According to Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), “leaders who understand their world can explain their world” (p. 23)—and it is through this explanation that leaders help to shape the interpretation of a particular situation. From this

perspective, the leader takes on the role as docent—one whose role is very much shaped by the needs and expectations of those attending an art museum exhibit. Through various communication and framing strategies, leaders make sense of a situation for themselves, and then they lead others through that environment in a way they hope will shape their interpretation of the situation—or the artwork—for those who are seeking some type of framework with which to make sense of their experience (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a).

As noted earlier, the transmission model of human communication neglects to consider the ways in which meaning is created and interpreted by both the sender and receiver of a given interaction. This notion of meaning remains one of the most fundamental aspects of human communication (Axley, 1984), and it continues to inform current approaches to studying and understanding the process of leadership as social influence. More contemporary views of communication privilege meaning, with leadership itself often being described as the “management of meaning” (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). This meaning-centered view of communication presents leadership as a product, result, or outcome of collective meaning making (Barge, 2007; Barge & Fairhurst, 2008; Parker, 2005). According to Smircich and Morgan (1982), “In understanding the way leadership actions attempt to shape and interpret situations to guide organizational members into a common interpretation of reality, we are able to understand how leadership works to create an important foundation for organized activity” (p. 260). It is through communication that leadership—and organization (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004)—are possible.

Corresponding higher education vignette #1. The University of Oklahoma prides itself on being an institution where students can benefit from “a diverse, vibrant campus and community and an exciting global heritage” (The University of Oklahoma, 2017). This noble

mission was called into question on March 9, 2015, when several brothers from Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) Fraternity were caught on video singing a racist anthem. President David Boren received praise for his prompt and bold response to the crisis, a response that also carries some inherent legal risks (Stripling & Thomasan, 2015). Calling the students “disgraceful” and expelling the students “because of [their] leadership role in leading a racist and exclusionary chant which has created a hostile educational environment for others,” Boren’s swift public response may be seen as a communicative framing strategy. In response to SAE members finding a place to live, Boren publicly declared that “we do not provide student services for racists and bigots.” This example appears to capture one way in which language allows for the management of meaning, particularly within a context that is as complex and unpredictable as higher education. The management of meaning calls for leaders who maintain a sophisticated understanding of human communication. In her call for an increased emphasis on framing, Fairhurst (2005) concludes that “For leaders who are not particularly skilled communicators, the road is not always easy. However, the possibilities of worlds yet to be imagined await those who try” (p. 179). In a similar way, Bolman and Gallos (2011) suggest that “Whether academic leaders realize it or not, they always have choices about how to frame and interpret their world—and their choices are fateful” (p. 22). Framing is but one area of communication research that will likely contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership in higher education.

Sensemaking/Sensegiving. Related to the idea of framing and the management of meaning, two communication-related concepts that will likely continue to inform and advance leadership communication scholarship are sensemaking and sensegiving. Humans live in a world of gaps and the way that one bridges these gaps reflects the act of sensemaking (Dervin, 1992, 1998). More specifically, it is through the act of sensemaking that human actors “structure the

unknown” (Waterman, 1990, p. 41) as a way of constructing that which then becomes sensible to those whom one leads (Weick, 1995). The full details of an organizational crisis are often unknown to organizational leaders; yet, as primary spokespeople for the organization, leaders must simultaneously learn *and* communicate during these moments of complexity (Smerek, 2009). These phenomena foreground the communicative decisions of organizational leaders. The study of sensemaking coincides with the study of knowledge seeking and information behavior, particularly as one makes sense of their everyday experiences (Connaway, Radford, et al., 2008; Dervin, 1992; Dervin, 1998). In his analysis of the seven properties of sensemaking, Weick describes sensemaking as a process that is retrospective, grounded in identity construction, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (p. 17). An underlying argument to be made in this discussion of sensemaking is that just as leaders create their own environments, these environments simultaneously shape leaders, leadership decisions, and leadership possibilities – an idea that will reappear later in the section on social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In order to make sense of uncertain and unpredictable organizational circumstances, for example, the impetus often lies with the leader to bracket and punctuate past events, or as Weick (1995) describes the process, to “create breaks in the stream and impose categories on those portions that are set apart. When people bracket, they act as if there is something out there to be discovered” (p. 35). This communicative process of enactment, along with sensemaking in its entirety, often influences the direction of particular organizational events (Weick, 1988).

The process of sensemaking involves more than interpretation. According to Weick (1995), “Sensemaking is about authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well as discovery” (p. 8). An emphasis on sensemaking must also consider the role of communication and context in

understanding the actions and behaviors of leaders (Fairhurst, 2009; Weick, 1979, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Thayer (1988) extends the phenomenon of sensemaking into the domain of leadership, while also raising the importance of sensegiving as a leadership function – both of which reflect the leader’s communicative roles as author and creator:

[A leader is] one who alters or guides the manner in which his followers ‘mind’ the world by giving it a compelling ‘face.’ A leader at work is one who gives others a different sense of the *meaning* of that which they do by recreating it in a different form, a different “face,” in the same way that a pivotal painter or sculptor or poet gives those who follow him (or her) a different way of ‘seeing’ – and therefore saying and doing and knowing in the world. A leader does not tell it ‘as it is’; he tells it as it *might be*, giving what ‘is’ thereby a different ‘face’... The leader is a *sense-giver*. The leader always *embodies* the possibilities of escape from what might otherwise appear to us to be incomprehensible, or from what might otherwise appear to us to be a chaotic, indifferent, or incorrigible world – one over which we have no ultimate control” (p. 250, 254).

This extended passage is especially germane to an understanding of crisis and organizational leadership, despite Thayer’s potentially narrow portrayal of communication as transmissional whereby the leader shapes perception in a linear manner. First, Thayer illustrates one way that communication thinking might contribute to an understanding of the process of leadership, particularly the enactment of leadership during periods of organizational disruption. Also, his dual emphasis on sensemaking and sensegiving depicts the leader’s role as one whose goal is to manage meaning—or as Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) describe sensegiving in their introductory work on the subject, “rather than making sense of an ambiguous situation for [oneself], [the leader] was now in a mode of making sense for others” (p. 443). The authors go on to suggest

that “the sensemaking phases are those that deal primarily with understanding processes and the sensegiving phases are those that concern attempts to influence the way that another party understands or makes sense” (p. 443), recognizing, once again, that leadership itself is co-constructed between leaders and followers and that both sensemaking and sensegiving fundamentally hinge on the expectations, experiences, and assumptions of those involved in a given situation. Finally, the passage by Thayer allows for a deeper understanding of the strategies for achieving social influence in an uncertain environment. Both sensemaking and sensegiving are critical leadership activities during times of both change and stability (Bartunek, et al., 1999; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, et al., 1994; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Both framing and sensemaking/sensegiving strategies involve the use of evocative language, symbols, metaphors, narratives, and alternative discursive devices. Furthermore, these approaches are both accomplished through communication and informed by a communication-oriented conceptualization of the leadership process.

Corresponding higher education vignette #2. The act of sensemaking calls for leaders to take notice, decide what to make of it, and determine how to act. This natural and automatic process presents unique leadership challenges for leaders in higher education. In their writing on the specific topic of academic leadership, Bolman and Gallos (2011) provide an example of a new community college president facing a myriad of budgetary and human resource challenges. She approached these challenges with a spirit of confidence and optimism. Seeking the counsel of five other new presidents at a summer institute, the community college president received five conflicting pieces of advice as to how best to proceed. As the authors note, “A key challenge for any academic leader is how to make sense of complex circumstances, recognize available choices, choose the best path forward, and convey all that to others in a compelling manner” (p.

18). Sensemaking and sensegiving are critical to leadership, and the way that academic leaders make sense of the many choices available within the context of higher education will often determine one's ability to maintain influence.

Social Construction of Leadership and Reality. In their introduction to the chapter on leadership communication in the updated *Handbook of Organizational Communication*, Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014b) point towards a new complexity associated with the study of leadership—a complexity that is marked by a focus on not just leaders, but all organizational actors. This new complexity coincides with the linguistic turn in the social and organizational sciences, a pivot in philosophical thought that placed a greater emphasis on the relationship between philosophy and language (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Rorty, 1967). Addressing what were seen as inherent limitations of the positivist research tradition, the linguistic turn led to increased thinking and writing on the nature of language in constituting one's reality. Put another way, the emphasis was no longer on the physical properties of an object or phenomenon, but rather on the language used to speak about the object or phenomenon (Ayer, 1936; Wittgenstein, 1961). As noted by Fairhurst (2009), “those impacted by the linguistic turn are broadly social constructionist, discursive, and more qualitative than mainstream leadership scholars (p. 1608). These post-positivist approaches to leadership privilege communication as constitutive of leadership itself (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014b, p. 406). Building upon these claims, the final communication-oriented concepts that align with ongoing leadership thinking and leadership practice are the work on symbolic interaction (Blumer, 2003; Mead, 1934) and social constructionism (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

Social interaction is a natural condition of the human experience. Similar to Thayer's (1978) definition of communication, human actors that interact with one another must also take

into account what the other is thinking, expecting, and doing—what Blumer (2003) describes as an “a process of ongoing activity in which participants are developing lines of action in the multitudinous situations they encounter” (p. 151). The position of symbolic interactionism is that the meaning of the things toward which people act are critical and worthy of scholarly analysis. Symbolic interaction, according to Blumer, contains three central premises, including the following:

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them... The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (p. 135).

Reality is thus not seen as a “given,” but rather consists of acts of interpretation, definition, and action/reaction (Blumer, 1966; Mead, 1934). The communication and leadership implications of this theory are significant. Most notably, the philosophy of symbolic interactionism leads one to consider the ways that human actors, or leaders more specifically, respond to situations and other individuals based on the meaning that these situations or individuals have on them. Interpretation leads one to act in a particular way and related to the next concept of social constructionism, the impact of the followers on this ongoing process of leadership must not be underestimated.

With roots in both symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) and phenomenology (Schutz, 1970), the idea of social constructionism is also a useful concept for thinking through the leadership communication connections. As noted earlier, people make their social and cultural worlds just as these worlds make them, and language takes on a constitutive role in this social

process (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999; Hacking, 1999; Potter, 1996; Shotter, 1993). In their synthesis of the literature, Fairhurst and Grant (2010) describe how “communication becomes more than a simple transmission; it is a medium by which the negotiation and construction of meaning takes place” (p. 174). As offered by Grint (2005), contingency theories of leadership that isolate the leader, context, situation, and followers are inherently limited, and he calls for more attention to be paid “to the role of leaders and decision-makers in the construction of contexts that legitimates their intended or executed actions and accounts” (p. 1472). This is an especially important point for the present research, for as discussed later, the “crisis” label is typically used to describe an existing external phenomenon, event, or situation; however, the lens of social construction, as offered in the above description, allows for a consideration of the ways in which leaders recognize an event or string of events as constituting crisis. More specifically, crises exist because of the ways in which people perceive the situation or because of the ways that leaders talk about the situation. Thus, the idea of social construction shifts the focus of crisis from phenomenon that are “out there” to those that are constituted through communication between leaders and followers, as discussed in further detail in Chapter Four.

Referring to an earlier theme in this chapter, the phenomenon of leadership is not limited to those at the top of the organizational hierarchy; rather, as a process of social influence, leadership may be accomplished by any organizational actor, shaped by verbal and nonverbal communication, and co-constructed between leaders and followers (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a). Leadership activity is distributed throughout the organization, as is often the case in institutions of higher education, and it is arguably socially constructed through communication within the organization. This understanding of leadership aligns with the definition presented by Barge and

Fairhurst (2008) who define leadership “as a co-created, performative, contextual, and attributional process where the ideas articulated in talk or action are recognized by others as progressing tasks that are important to them” (p. 232). A relational conceptualization of leadership suggests that leadership is generated through interactions among people—variously labeled, leader and follower—in a particular context (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). The concepts of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism underscore the importance of communicative practices, broaden the context for leadership theory and practice to consider the formative role of the follower(s), and provide various conceptual tools for the analysis of leadership communication.

Corresponding higher education vignette #3. A myriad of recent examples within the context of higher education speak to the ongoing negotiation of decision making—a negotiation that reflects both a leader’s interpretation of a situation *and* the role of the followers in shaping the outcome of the decision. One might consider the removal—and eventual reinstatement—of President Teresa Sullivan at the University of Virginia for criticism related to her rate of institutional adaptation and change. Another example includes the appointment—and eventual withdrawal—of Dr. Steven Salaita at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign as an ultimate consequence of a controversy surrounding his comments on Twitter about Israel’s policies in Gaza. These two examples represent the complex, uncertain, and messy nature of decision making in higher education—a context that is known for its multiple missions and diverse array of stakeholders with conflicting needs and expectations (Birnbaum, 1988; Gmelch, 2013; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Gmelch & Miskin, 2004; Lawrence, 2017; Manning, 2012; Ruben, 2004; Ruben, et al., 2017). The outcome of these decisions extends beyond a leader’s interpretation of a situation and involves the role of the followers from various stakeholder

groups in co-constructing both leadership *and* reality itself.

Leadership Communication Conclusions

Leadership is a communication endeavor. As noted earlier, to be human is to communicate and to lead is to communicate. As a result of recent co-authored writing on the subject (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a; 2016b; Ruben, et al., 2017), and building upon the existing scholarship highlighted in this chapter, the researcher understands communication to be the very DNA of leadership. An understanding of human communication theory allows for a rich understanding of leadership, both of which receive further inquiry in this dissertation. The enactment or accomplishment of leadership relies upon the intersection of discourse, message(s), and meaning. Furthermore, the concepts of framing/the management of meaning, sensemaking/sensegiving, and symbolic interactionism/social constructionism are useful concepts for exploring the relatively untapped connections between the theories of communication and the theories of leadership.

In his influential work on the philosophy of language, Wittgenstein (1961) advances the claim that “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (5.6). An understanding of language, and communication theory more broadly, allow for a deeper understanding of the meaning that is co-constructed in any communicative encounter. The pivot towards a social constructionist understanding of leadership lays out a new research agenda for leadership studies—an agenda that places communication at the core of leadership studies (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014a, 2014b; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a). In response to this proposed direction for leadership communication research, this dissertation advances a number of ontological (what is leadership communication?) and epistemological (how can leadership communication be known?) claims related to the study of leadership communication. As discussed in the next

section, events that are labeled “crises” provide a backdrop that both highlight and make complex the role of communication in the ongoing enactment of leadership.

Crisis

Definitions, Models, and Approaches to Crisis

Crises are unpredictable phenomena, yet not unexpected (Coombs, 2015). The etymology of “crisis” is illustrative of human attitudes towards the concept. The word “crisis” has its roots in the Greek language where it represents a “turning point,” similar to the medical usage of the term in Latin to imply the “turning point” of an illness. The origin of the word maintains a positive connotation, originally referring to the turning point in sickness, tragedy, or peril (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015). These turning points, often reflecting human choice and human decision, could fundamentally shape the future of an individual or organization (Shrivastava, 1993). Beginning in the 18th century, “crisis” evolved to mean a difficult situation or dilemma, presumably a more negative conceptualization of the originally conceived “turning point.” Sellnow and Seeger (2013) present another interesting interpretation of the concept from the Chinese “wei chi,” which translates to “dangerous opportunity” (p. 22). This interpretation of the term captures the ambivalence associated with the very concept of “crisis” as both the fear and danger associated with crisis intersect with the opportunity and turning point of what might lie ahead (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017). The danger/opportunity duality gives rise to the idea of crisis management—where the goal is presumably to minimize danger and maximize opportunity.

Historically, crisis management was an ill-defined concept for organizational scholars and practitioners. The widely regarded response to the 1982 poisonings of Tylenol capsules by Johnson and Johnson, juxtaposed with the notoriously poor response to the Exxon *Valez* oil spill

in Prince William Sound in 1989, led to the emergence of the field of crisis management (Heath & O’Hair, 2009; Mitroff, 2004). Distinct from more localized incidents, crises have the potential to “disrupt the entire organization” (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992, p. 3). The causes associated with a crisis are complex and multi-faceted, leading Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) to categorize three primary causes, including 1) normal failure and interactive complexity, 2) failures in warnings, faculty risk perception, and foresight, and 3) breakdowns in vigilance. Seymour & Moore (2000) identify two distinct types of crisis—“the Cobra” or sudden crisis that takes an organization by surprise and “the Python” or slowly “creeping” crisis that grows increasingly problematic over time (p. 10). Other classifications of crises may be found in Coombs (2015), Coombs, et al. (1995), Lerbinger (1997), Meyers and Holusha (1986), and Mitroff and Anagnos (2001). Regardless of the cause, the perception of the increase in organizational crises may parallel Perrow’s (1984) prediction that an increased complexity in society would also lead to an increase in accidents and crises. Just as organizations become increasingly complex, so too are the environments in which these organizations are situated. These increasingly contentious ecosystems, marked by a 24/7 news cycle, immediate access to information, and the use of various new technologies, are seemingly ripe for the emergence of crisis situations.

As illustrated in Table 2.1 below, there are a myriad of crisis taxonomies offered in the existing literature (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017), often which are distinguished between those that are man-made and others that are natural disasters (Lindell, Prater, & Perry, 2007). Reviewing the distinct types of crises listed below, there are several types of crisis situations that are more likely to impact leaders of higher education. In particular, it would seem that natural disasters, technical breakdowns, and incidents of violence are increasingly common types of situations that require attention from leaders in higher education. As discussed in the subsequent chapters, one

set of findings from this project expand upon and re-organize these various lists, while also exploring the unique set of goals, expectations, and challenges for crisis leadership in higher education.

Table 2.1. Crisis Taxonomies

Lerbinger (1997)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural • Confrontation • Skewed management values • Management misconduct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technological • Malevolence • Deception • Business and economic 	
Meyers & Holusha (1986)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public perception • Top management succession • Hostile takeover 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sudden market shifts • Cash crises • Adverse international events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product failure • Industrial relations crises • Regulation/deregulation
Coombs, et al. (1995)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural disasters • Technical breakdowns • Challenges • Workplace violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Malevolence • Human breakdowns • Organizational misdeeds • Rumors 	
Mitroff & Anagnos (2001)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic • Human resource • Physical loss of key plants and other facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informational • Reputation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural disasters • Psychopathic acts
Coombs (2007)		
<u><i>Victim Crises: Minimal Crises Responsibility</i></u>	<u><i>Accident Crises: Low Crises Responsibility</i></u>	<u><i>Preventable Crises: Strong Crises Responsibility</i></u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural disasters • Rumors • Workplace violence • Product tampering/malevolence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges • Technical-error accidents • Technical-error product harm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human-error accidents • Human-error product harm • Organizational misdeeds

Given the existing definitions and taxonomies of crisis, it is also important to address what is entailed by the invocation of crisis. In her recent work on the topic, Roitman (2014) describes the prevalence of crisis in today's current environment. She describes crisis as "an omnipresent sign in almost all forms of narrative today [that] is mobilized as the defining category of historical situations, past and present" (p. 3). As an object of knowledge, the invocation of crisis enables and forecloses certain narratives and communicative possibilities. As Roitman posits, "Under the sign of crisis, 'events' are distinguished and signified; they achieve empirical status as 'history' and hence become legible to us" (p. 93). The identification of a particular incident or moment as a crisis involves a level of judgment, leading it to become a widely used—and potentially overused—label.

The very notion of crisis, like communication (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011) and leadership (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003; Barker, 1997; Rost, 1991), is subject to a myriad of definitions. As discussed throughout this dissertation, crisis is a socially constructed, contested, and communicative phenomenon. One's definition of crisis reflects one's assumptions of a given situation—assumptions of the current state of an organization compared to the very possibilities of what an organization might become (Mitroff, 2004). Mitroff cautions against predicting crisis with any degree of certainty; however, he offers the following definition as a guide: "A crisis is an event that affects or has the potential to affect the whole organization" (p. 6). Ruff and Aziz (2003) present a more specific definition of a crisis as "any incident or situation, whether real, rumored or alleged, that can focus negative attention on a company or organization internally, in the media or before key audiences" (p. 3). Heath and Millar's (2004) definition is also partial: "A crisis is typically defined as an untimely but predictable event that has actual or potential consequences for stakeholders' interests as well as the reputation of the organization suffering

the crisis” (p. 2). Finally, it is worth acknowledging Fink’s (1986) more balanced definition of the phenomenon as a “turning point, not necessarily laden with irreparable negativity but rather characterized by a certain degree of risk and uncertainty” (p. 23). Reviewing the broad array of definitions of crisis, several themes stand out as being most important. First, crises present a threat to the reputation of the organization. Although they may also create an opportunity for learning, the crisis is understood to be a disruption from normal activity that may be problematic for the organization (Irvine & Millar, 1998; Weick, 1988). Second, crises require an immediate response (Laermer, 2003; Mitroff, 2004). Finally, perception matters in moments of crisis (Benoit, 1995, 1997; Coombs, 2015; Mitroff, 2004). Crises indicate vulnerability and “a crisis can tarnish the most positive of images” (Borda & Mackey-Kallis, 2004, p. 117). The challenge for leaders during times of crisis is negotiating the complexities of the situation itself, while also responding in such a way as to maintain a favorable organizational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2005) and cultivate hope, trust, and safety for those whom one leads.

A communication perspective has been one of the most useful as both a conceptual framework and practical guide for organizational leaders, especially in understanding the expansive scope and diversity of stakeholders associated with organizational crises. Coombs’ (2015) writing on the topic speaks to the importance of this communication perspective. In his synthesis of the multidisciplinary writing on the topic, Coombs notes that “A crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (p. 3). A diverse number of stakeholders are impacted by contemporary organizational crises, and often play a significant role in the actual generation of the crisis itself, particularly through the use of social media and mediated communication (Coombs, 2002; Heath, 1998; Pang, et al., 2014; Siah,

et al., 2010). The work on stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) presents a useful lens into understanding the often conflicting interests, needs, values, and expectations of those who maintain a stake in the organization. In her writing on the topic of organizational change, for example, Lewis (2007, 2011) privileges the role of the stakeholder throughout the change process. In fact, the communicative interactions of both internal and external stakeholders, those whom Fortunato (2005) may describe as constituency groups, are formative of the organization itself. As Lewis (2011) acknowledges at the outset of her project, “Stakeholders enact the organization as the embodiment of their own purposes, their sense of how activities are related; how people are known; how outcomes arise and how processes unfold” (p. 6). If perception is found to be a critical element of the crisis itself, a communicative approach to crisis management must also take into account the interests—and competing perceptions—of those who maintain a stake in the organization.

The life cycle of a crisis is another important issue raised in the crisis management literature. As the writing on chaos theory suggests, there exists an underlying order and pattern within the disorder of crisis (Li & Yorke, 1975; Lorenz, 1963; Wheatley, 2006). Fink (1986), for instance, uses the progression of a medical illness to depict the four stages of a crisis, including the following:

- (a) prodromal – clues or hints that a potential crisis exists begin to emerge; (b) crisis breakout or acute – a triggering event occurs along with the attendant damage; (c) chronic – the effects of the crisis linger as efforts to clean up the crisis progress; and (d) resolution – there is some clear signal that the crisis is no longer a concern to stakeholders; it is over (p. 20).

The second model, presented by Mitroff (1994), divides crisis management into five phases: (a)

signal detection; (b) probing and prevention; (c) damage containment; (d) recovery; and (e) learning. Aside from the final stage of Mitroff's proposed cycle, the general framework is consistent with Fink's (1986) findings. Finally, Coombs (2015) identifies a third model for crisis development which includes the three general stages of precrisis, crisis event, and postcrisis. These phases are useful in that they provide a coherent ordering of the crisis; yet, crises, by their very nature, are unpredictable and call for leaders to be both flexible and prepared (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017). These models cast the crisis as a linear process, and the recommendations for managing the individual crises emerge as prescriptive strategies (Gigliotti, 2016). The following higher education example from Gigliotti & Fortunato (2017) addresses the challenges associated with thinking of the evolution of a crisis as a linear process with a demarcated beginning and end:

For example, in the child abuse sex scandal at Penn State, the public announcement of the many allegations against the former assistant football coach might be viewed as the commencement of the crisis. However, as outlined in the Freeh Report commissioned by the Penn State Board of Trustees, critical facts relating to Coach Jerry Sandusky's child abuse were concealed from and by leaders across the university – a troubling finding that points to the many historical factors leading to the public components of the crisis (Freeh, 2012). This case is one of many that capture the subjectivity involved in defining something as a *crisis*, let alone identifying its beginning and end (pp. 305, 306)

The notion of crisis leadership, as discussed in this dissertation, suggests that leaders attend to the historical conditions that led to the invocation of crisis—conditions that very well may not be found in the above-mentioned life cycles.

One final idea related to a communication-oriented understanding of crisis deserves mention at this point. Much has been written about the development and implementation of crisis management strategies, including crisis management plans (Barton, 2001; Coombs, 2006a; Lerbinger, 1997), crisis responses (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2006b, 2015; Mitroff, 1994), and post-crisis evaluations (Mitroff, et al., 1996; Sen & Egelhoff, 1991). The vast literature on these topics acknowledges the importance of crisis preparation, the centrality of clear, quick, and honest communication during all phases of the crisis, and the opportunity for learning following the crisis to inform future crisis responses. A communication approach might consider the nuances of these strategies, including the anticipated audiences, the pre-determined goals, the underlying messages, the intended and unintended outcomes, and the perceptions and reactions from a myriad of stakeholders. According to Barton (1993), “In a crisis, managers must know their audience...To be effective, your communication during a crisis should have a clearly articulated goal for each audience” (p. 123, 124). If understood to be “risks that are manifested,” (Heath & O’Hair, 2009, p. 10), the ways in which leaders manage, respond, and evaluate the response to these risks are important topics for communication scholarship. An understanding of process and meaning, both central to the purview of communication scholarship, is critical to an ongoing understanding of the complexity of risk and crisis communication (Heath & O’Hair, 2009).

A Preliminary Look at Crisis Leadership

As noted at the outset of this dissertation, much of the writing on crisis management and crisis prevention focuses primarily on the immediate actions one may take through the creation and dissemination of public messages to minimize dangers and maximize opportunity. Writings on crisis management generally focus on specific strategies and tactics to deal with events that

threaten, disrupt, or endanger organizations, those it serves, or its employees—and the threats to the reputation of an organization that crises embody. The study of crisis management has its roots in the corporate sector and only recently has there been an increase in writing on the topic within the context of higher education. This is arguably the essence of the public relations approach to crisis management, where the aim is to protect the reputation of individuals and or an institution, maintain or restore a favorable impression in the eyes of many stakeholders, and use communication (conceptualized as message-sending) to shape public opinion. Managing a crisis, however, is only one part of a leader's responsibility. As described in the previous section on leadership communication, many leadership and social influence outcomes are often unplanned, unintentional, unpredicted, and unpredictable, and the consequences are ultimately shaped over time. Furthermore, the message sent by a leader in an effort to “manage” a crisis, particularly during the crisis situation itself, does not guarantee that the message will be received by those most impacted by the event. Single messages seldom have much impact on broader impressions, and the historical context is significant in shaping the design, interpretation, and evolution of messages related to an organizational crisis. For example, when a crisis strikes, it is important to consider the organization's history with crises of this type, the leader's past experiences in dealing with crises, and the susceptibilities and expectations of those stakeholders most impacted by the crisis. For these reasons, crisis management and crisis prevention are only part of the story (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017), and the focus on crisis leadership in this dissertation offers a broader framework for understanding what is most at stake during these important moments, as explored in depth throughout this project.

The concept of crisis leadership helps to move beyond a mechanistic or tactical view of the leader's role in crisis—often referred to as crisis management—to one that is systematic,

proactive and expansive—a perspective that is more appropriately labeled crisis leadership. A crisis leadership framework is useful for academic and administrative leaders in navigating those crises that are most germane to institutions of higher education, particularly in understanding the intersections of the core values of an institution, the historical context for the organization, and the types of leadership behaviors that preceded the crisis itself (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017).

The notion of crisis leadership, particularly crisis leadership in higher education, extends beyond reputation management, the prevention of a crisis, and the public relations-oriented management of a unit, department, or institutional crisis. An investigation into the domain of crisis leadership must consider the central and critical role of trust and credibility. Effective crisis leadership goes beyond delivering the most appropriate response(s) to the most appropriate audience(s). In fact, this simplistic view of communication violates much of what is currently understood about human communication, as discussed in the earlier section. Rather, communication theory would point to the importance of understanding the organization's history with crisis, appreciating the diverse needs of one's stakeholders, and leading with integrity throughout the entire crisis process (e.g. before, during, and after). Crisis leadership involves prevention and management, consistency and clarity, trust and transparency—with communication playing a critical role during each phase. As offered by DuBrin (2013), crisis leaders demonstrate charisma, strategic thinking, and an ability to inspire and show sadness and compassion. By building and maintaining a reservoir of goodwill at the individual and collective level, a foundation is set for authentic, values-centered dialogue when crises strike. Specifically, it seems likely that the reputation and history that serves an individual leader and collective organization well during times of normalcy is essential for effective leadership and performance during times of crisis. This reputation provides a solid and sturdy foundation upon which to stand

when crises strike. Beyond the leadership implications, this emphasis on trust and credibility is part of a more expansive, nuanced view of the crisis leadership system. The incident itself and the immediate communication messages to follow are part of a more extensive system for inquiry.

Crisis management and crisis prevention are embedded in what is understood to be crisis leadership in higher education. Within the various phases of a unit, department, or organizational crisis lie a number of communication implications for academic and administrative leaders. Put another way, crises exist when people label them as such; and this labeling of a situation, event, or series of events as a crisis places demands on organizational leaders. In his writing on the subject for higher education, Booker (2014) synthesizes the existing literature and posits various leadership competencies that are most essential for each phase of the crisis process. These competencies include the detection of early warning signs in the environment, the strategic use of communication in preventing, preparing, and containing the crisis, and the promotion of learning throughout the process and at the conclusion of the crisis (p. 19). As a more proactive and holistic approach to dealing with crises in colleges and universities (Mitroff, 2004), the nuances of crisis leadership extend from those risk assessment tactics that precede the crisis to the learning processes that take place after the crisis, with an eye towards those future crises that might lie beyond the horizon.

Borrowing what Mitroff (2004) describes as the “integrated design” of crisis leadership, crisis leadership involves more than simply saying the right message(s) to the right audience(s) to uphold the reputation of an institution in the face of crisis (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017). Rather, crisis leadership calls for a more expansive understanding of the types of risks that a unit, department, or institution faces—and a continual emphasis on learning at all phases of the crisis

process (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017). The communication tactics outlined in the literature on crisis management and crisis prevention are certainly critical; but so too are the decisions that leaders make in assessing risk, coordinating an assessment of damage(s) done, training and coordinating first responders, and communicating with consistency, clarity, and care along the way.

The Context of Higher Education: Organizational Dynamics, Leadership Challenges, and Existing Approaches to Training and Development

Individuals construct organizational processes and practices, in much the same way as the organization shapes and influences the individuals within an organization. The final section of this literature review offers a snapshot of the literature that is most germane to the study of higher education as an organization, focusing primarily on a variety of higher education-oriented topics most relevant to the scope of this dissertation, including the organization of higher education, the challenges associated with leadership in higher education, and existing approaches to training and development within higher education.

The Organization of Higher Education: Challenges and Opportunities for Leadership

Colleges and universities play an important role in American society. Their purpose is intellectual and pedagogical, development-centered and humanity-centered. Borrowing from Cardinal John Newman's (1854) insights in the middle of the nineteenth century, "a University is a place of concourse, whither students come from every quarter for every kind of knowledge ... It is a seat of wisdom, a light of the world, a minister of the faith, an Alma Mater of the rising generation" (p. 1). Rhodes (2001) succinctly acknowledges the American university as an "unambiguous influence for good" (p. 1). As Tighe (2003) describes the dramatic influence of

American research universities, it becomes difficult to dismiss the need for quality institutions of post-secondary education.

As organizations, colleges and universities maintain a unique structure and purpose.

Some unique characteristics, as discussed by Ruben, et al. (2017), include the following:

- Multiple, sometimes blurry purpose(s)/mission(s)
- Unclear “bottom line”
- Structural complexity
- Loosely coupled elements, decentralization, and “shadow systems,” whereby individual departments and units create their own structures and services (e.g., technology and accounting functions) because the central systems do not provide adequate or necessary services
- Extensive array of stakeholders/cultures
- Distinctive internal administrative and academic units with (often vastly) different structures, cultures, accountability requirements, core values, and leadership traditions and practices
- Differing core values among administration, academics, staff, and students
- Decentralized decision making
- Traditions of autonomy, self-direction, academic freedom, and collegial decision making
- Absence of attention to succession and transition planning

In other ways, colleges and universities share much in common with other organizational types, including government, health care, and business. Depending on one’s perspective, the requisite competencies for leadership may be specific to one’s position in higher education or may cut

across organizational types (Ruben, 2012). The two-dimensional model in Figure 2.1 points to the need for excellence in both the position-specific or “vertical” competencies and cross-cutting or “horizontal” competencies (Ruben, 2012; Ruben, et al., 2017). As offered in subsequent chapters of this dissertation, both sets of competencies are critical to effective leadership during events or situations that are characterized as crises in higher education, and the competencies, skills, and values associated with crisis leadership offered in this project align directly with these five primary competency areas.

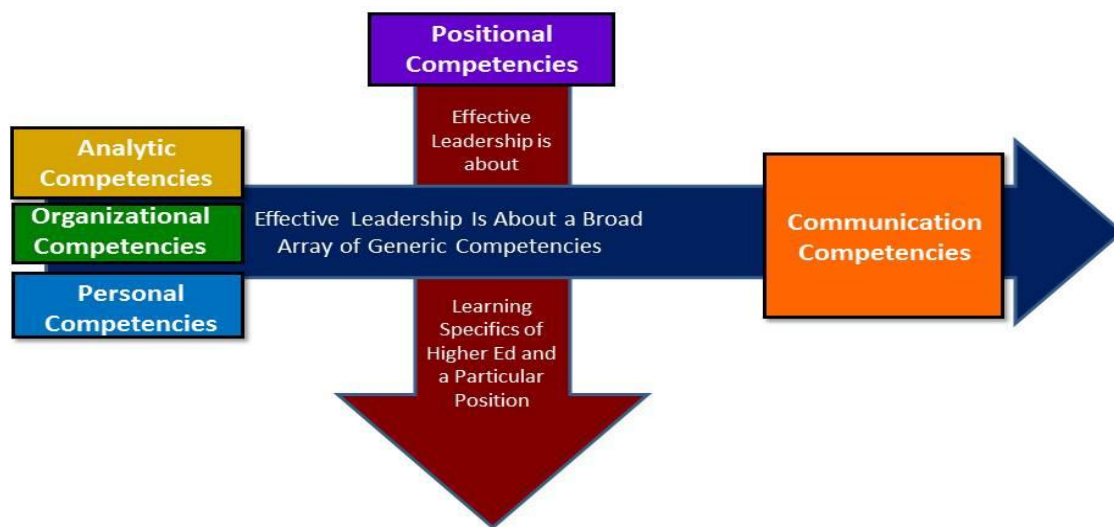


Figure 2.1. Two-Dimensional Leadership Competencies Model (Ruben, 2012; Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2017)

The specific situations mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation project paint a dire picture for those who aspire to lead in higher education—from active shooting situations and racial tensions to financial challenges and athletics scandals, it is a most challenging time for leaders in higher education. Not necessarily forecasting extinction, Rhodes (2011) draws a

provocative comparison between universities “confronting the changing world at the beginning of the new millennium” compared with “the dinosaurs contemplating the looming asteroid at the end of the Cretaceous period” (p. 233). Harden’s (2013) recent prediction of “the end of higher education as we know it” and Christensen’s (2013) ongoing claims of “disruption” have attracted a great deal of attention both within and beyond the academy. In the context of this rapidly shifting landscape, the preparation of leaders in higher education is of significant and timely importance (Gigliotti, forthcoming; Gigliotti & Ruben, 2016).

Colleges and universities are unique organizational entities in certain ways, and as such, they demand particular approaches to leadership. As Birnbaum (1992) offers, “colleges are exceptionally complex systems that interact with even more complex environments” (p. 12). With a myriad of diverse stakeholders, multiple mission(s), and distinct (and at times, conflicting) internal cultures, leaders can best navigate these “loosely coupled systems” through effective communication (Orton & Weick, 2011). Ruben (2004) calls for academic leaders who both understand these ominous challenges and possess the competencies for leading during this exciting, but complex moment. By leaning into the uncertainty of this tumultuous period, leaders have an opportunity and duty to make sense of these complex challenges for the benefit of the institution that one leads. To prepare emerging academic leaders, Ruben positions leadership education at the core of this new paradigm. Recent scholarship by Bolman and Gallos (2011) and Juntrasook (2014) capture the many ways in which leadership is dynamic and co-created in academia, both in the ways that leaders engage in “multiframe thinking” and in the ways that they model behaviors for the many stakeholders with an interest in higher education. In summary, higher education is unique in structure, scope, and purpose. The needs, goals, and expectations for leaders are complex during times of normalcy in higher education, and as

presented in this project, these appear to be further aggravated and accentuated during times of perceived crisis.

Leadership Education, Training, and Development

The fourth research question for this dissertation deals with the skills, values, and competencies associated with the practice of crisis leadership. The preliminary answers to this question calls for a consideration of leadership preparation and development. It is understood that leadership, to a certain extent, can be taught (Giber, Carter, and Goldsmith, 2000; Parks, 2005; Van Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman, 2010)—and the processes and structures for leadership development are found to be both systematic and multidisciplinary (Connaughton, Lawrence, & Ruben, 2003). There is an ongoing effort to further strengthen the capacity of leaders in higher education, such as those programs offered by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA), along with the many in-house training and development initiatives across institutions of higher education. For a more comprehensive summary of these leadership preparation initiatives, see Gmelch & Buller (2015) and Ruben, et al. (2017). Despite what appear to be a growing number of leadership development initiatives and efforts, the existing scholarly literature in this area is limited. Recent scholarship has begun to further interrogate the topic of academic leadership development (Bolman, & Gallos, 2011; Buller, 2012; 2013; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Gmelch, Hopkins, & Damico, 2011; Ruben, et al., 2017).

Leadership development in higher education may take on many different forms. For example, recent work by the researcher identified a number of different approaches to leadership development in a review of the Association of American University websites, as presented in Table 2.2 (Gigliotti, forthcoming). Although the content of the individual initiatives varies by

each institution, the researcher noticed a consistent emphasis on the competencies, styles, and approaches to leading others within the specific context of higher education. Furthermore, as it relates to the design and delivery of academic leadership education initiatives, the review of these programs brought attention to the following considerations: 1) the institutions offer differentiated activities and services for academic leadership development which vary in size, duration, format, modality, sponsoring department(s), and program theme(s), 2) the publicized leadership development programs reflect the unique character of the university, with a particular emphasis on connecting current and future academic leaders to the mission, vision, and values of the institution; and 3) there is a trend to cultivate small communities of practice within the voluminous training and development opportunities, with some programs going so far as to pair program participants with mentors from within the organization for both guidance and support in their leadership development.

Table 2.2. Approaches to Leadership Development in Association of American Universities (AAU)

Approach to Leadership Training and Development	Description
360 Leader Assessments	Method for collecting opinions from a wide range of co-workers and stakeholders related to one's leadership performance
Alumni Leadership Networks	Formal and informal networking opportunities for graduates of on-campus leadership initiatives and new participants from these respective programs
Assessments	Self-assessment tools used to identify strengths and areas of growth, including, but not limited to, the Leadership Practices Inventory, the Campbell Leadership Descriptor, the Management Effectiveness Profile, the Leadership Effectiveness Assessment, Myers-Briggs, DiSC, and Life

	Styles Inventory
Coaching Sessions	One-on-one confidential executive coaching sessions for on-campus leaders
Coffee Conversations/Leadership Lunches	casual conversations on various topical areas facilitated by presenters from across campus
Consultation Opportunities	On-campus professionals with leadership and organizational development expertise are available to assess and offer recommendations for individual and group performance
Executive Leadership Academies/Fellowship Programs	Ongoing leadership workshops for a cohort of aspiring leaders which often include a mentor component and capstone presentation at the conclusion of the experience
Group Leadership Forums	Introduces participants to the complexities and nuances of leading project teams and work groups in higher education, with an emphasis on managing group and organizational dynamics
Leadership Certificate Programs	Customized workshop series on various topics of interest for aspiring faculty and staff leaders
Leadership Development Courses	Leadership courses, typically offered by HR offices, for individual employees
Leadership Libraries	Collection of texts and resources related to leadership in higher education
Leadership Newsletters	Bulletins issued routinely throughout the year to both share information related to leadership in higher education and to formally recognize the accomplishments of campus leaders
Leadership Profile/Individual Career Plans/Career Development Passport	Electronic portals, typically organized by HR offices, to track and monitor leadership accomplishments in current positions and identify the skills necessary to advance in a professional context

Leadership Webinars/Self-Directed Online Leadership Resources	Virtual seminars and resources on topics of interest for emerging leaders in higher education
Mentor Programs	Formal pairing of emerging leaders with senior leaders from the campus offered to help individuals learn more about each other and to strengthen their organizational and professional knowledge
Onboarding Opportunities	Organizational socialization initiatives used to introduce new leaders to the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to succeed in the organization
Performance Management Programs	Appraisal programs which assess individual performance in the institution
Roundtable Conversations with Peers, Senior Leaders, & Outside Leaders	Facilitated conversations on topics of interest with campus and community leaders
Speaker Series	Keynote speakers from on-campus and the community which offer various perspectives on leadership in higher education
Succession Planning Resources	Resources for identifying and developing future leaders in higher education
Supervisory Development Labs/New Executive Officer Training Sessions	Workshops and training programs offered for new and current supervisors within the institution
Talent Accelerators	Incubators and other physical spaces used to encourage creativity and address areas of growth from leadership assessments
Women's Leadership Initiatives	Tailored experiential leadership programs for women in higher education which often include female mentors from the campus community

Leadership is something that can be taught and nurtured over time. Furthermore, as discussed earlier in this chapter, preparation is widely regarded as critical for effective crisis

management. As offered in this preliminary review of the literature, the context of higher education is particularly unique, and higher education as a sector is regularly under scrutiny from a wide array of stakeholders. This heightened degree of public scrutiny is especially the case during times of perceived organizational crisis where the stakes for individual and organizational excellence are quite high. In pursuit of better understanding crisis leadership in higher education, the following chapters directly and indirectly address both what is currently offered in training and development, along with what might be done in the future to strengthen leadership effectiveness in this area of increasing importance.

Conclusion

This summary of the literature provides a useful point of entry and conceptual foundation for this dissertation research. Upon reviewing many of the central claims found in the existing literature, valuable connections lie at the intersection of leadership, communication, and higher education. As offered earlier, the primary foci for organizational communication scholarship (e.g., processes, meaning, the co-construction of leadership, and the communicative strategies associated with organizing) allow for a more holistic understanding of crisis leadership. It is important to consider those features of higher education and higher education leadership that are unique, along with the more general characteristics of leadership communication that cut across the human experience. Current commentary on crisis in higher education appears to cast communication as a taken-for-granted function of reputation management. Communication is depicted as a critical leadership function for managing expectations, restoring hope, and protecting the interests of the institution. By extending the study of crisis leadership in higher education into the domain of organizational communication scholarship, the researcher aims to develop a richer understanding of the process by which crises unfold and the contexts within

which leadership and organizing occur. Communication theory provides a path to new knowledge in this area. Drawing on a sample of both higher education news outlets and the experiences of leaders from prominent American research universities, the findings from this project, as discussed in the following chapters, contribute to a conceptual gap in the scholarly literature and a practical area of improvement in applied leadership practice, with the hope of encouraging greater reflexivity as it relates to crisis leadership in higher education.

In his recent analysis of his time as president of Tulane University during Hurricane Katrina, Scott Cowan (2014) offers ten leadership principles that reflect the nuances of crisis leadership presented in this chapter. These principles include the following:

1. Do the right thing
2. Seek common ground
3. Marshal facts
4. Understand reality
5. Aim high
6. Stand up for your beliefs
7. Make contact
8. Innovate
9. Embrace emotion
10. Be true to core values

In many instances, individual crises are isolated occurrences that can attract a great deal of attention. The principles offered by Cowan speak to the importance of embodying an approach to leadership that prepares one for these isolated moments, while also serving the leader and his or her unit, department, or institution well during periods of normalcy. Crisis leadership in higher

education—a broader term that embodies and goes beyond both crisis management and crisis prevention—involves a recognition of the needs, expectations, and values of the many stakeholders who have an interest in colleges and universities. Crisis leadership positions communication as a critical competency for navigating tumultuous terrain. Finally, crisis leadership extends the unit of analysis from the crisis itself to the culture, history, and leadership decisions that underlie the unit, department, or institution. The emphasis on crisis leadership in this dissertation highlights the critical role of communication and feedback throughout the process—and suggests a more holistic and comprehensive approach to leading during times of perceived crisis. Finally, as a socially constructed, often subjective, and communicative phenomenon, this study also calls into question the use of the word “crisis” to characterize events, situations, or series of situations. The time has come for a closer consideration of the use of this label, and its ability to enable and foreclose certain narratives and communicative possibilities within higher education. The next chapter provides a description of research questions and a methodology designed to clarify the relationship between leadership, communication, and higher education, and to further unpack the topic of crisis leadership in colleges and universities.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Overview and Research Questions

As noted in the introduction, this study was designed with three primary goals in mind: to advance theory in understanding the role of communication in both the construction of crisis and the enactment of crisis leadership, to apply advanced research methods for studying this topic within the context of higher education, and to develop updated models and guides to improve crisis leadership practice. In order to accomplish these goals, the following research questions guided this dissertation project:

RQ1: What events/situations are characterized as crises in higher education?

RQ2: How do these events/situations become defined and labeled as crises?

RQ3: What are the prominent characteristics of the discourse around crisis and crisis leadership in higher education?

RQ4: What skills, values, and competencies are important for the work of crisis leaders in higher education?

As described throughout this chapter, the researcher investigated these central questions through the use of two research methods. In response to RQ1, the researcher first conducted a content analysis of higher education news outlets, including *Inside Higher Ed* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and a smaller sample of articles from *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* from the past five years (2011-2015). The second phase of the project, in response to RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4, involved semi-structured interviews with 37 senior university leaders representing institutions from the Association of American University (AAU). The following sections describe both research methodologies in greater detail.

Content Analysis

In response to RQ1, the first part of this research project involved the identification of events or situations that are typically characterized as crises within the context of higher education through the use of a content analysis. This was done by identifying news articles from the most recent five-year period of 2011-2015 that included the word “crisis” or “crises” within the text. According to Krippendorff (2013), “content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 24). The characterization of crisis in the media coverage surrounding institutions of higher education is both complex and widespread. Furthermore, there exists a great deal of raw textual data from a variety of news outlets in digital form that could address RQ1. For both of these reasons, Krippendorff’s emphasis on context, analytical constructs, and inferences is especially relevant to this project. Specifically, the use of a content analysis allowed for a systematic investigation of a limited body of text in order to make inferences that are intended to best answer RQ1.

A problem-driven content analysis, according to Krippendorff, is “motivated by epistemic questions about currently inaccessible phenomena, events, or processes that the analysts believe texts are able to answer” (p. 155). Beginning with the assumption that crisis is a pervasive condition of organizational life, particularly for institutions of higher education, an analysis of news outlets could confirm this assumption, while also providing a specific taxonomy that could inform the semi-structured interviews that followed in the second phase of the research project. The researcher identified several suitable news outlets that could provide answers to RQ1, including specific higher education news providers, including *Inside Higher Ed* and the

Chronicle of Higher Education, and general news providers, including *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*.

As noted above, the researcher limited the search to news articles from the most recent five-year period of 2011-2015 that included the word “crisis” or “crises” within the text, resulting in 489 articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and 494 articles in *Inside Higher Ed*. Given the lack of a controlled vocabulary and the broader scope of both *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, the researcher reviewed a much smaller sample of the most recent 50 articles from these outlets using Factiva (Factiva, 2017), a global news database that would allow for a systematic search of “crisis” or “crises” within higher education. The researcher searched both outlets using the following search terms (college or university or education or educational) w/4 (crisis or crises) in order to identify articles that referred to a crisis or crises within four words of referencing an educational institution. The researcher reviewed the smaller sample of articles from *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* to ensure that events or situations characterized as crises in these outlets were included in the more extensive search of articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*.

The researcher did not code articles that were unrelated to crisis in higher education. For example, the following articles were not included in the final analysis: 1) articles addressing existing faculty research on national and international “crisis” or “crises,” 2) articles referring to the “Syrian refugee crisis,” “international housing crisis,” or other external crises that are unconnected to this current project, 3) articles focusing on individual crises and personal crises (e.g., “career crisis” and “mid-life crisis”), 4) articles focusing exclusively on events described as “crises” in international higher education outside of the United States (e.g., the financial crisis facing colleges and universities in Europe), and 5) articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*

that did not explicitly address the topic of crisis in higher education, but appeared in the search because of biographical information for Goldie Blumenstyk (2014), author of *American Higher Education in Crisis?: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Finally, the researcher did not account for any references to “crisis” in the comments section of the articles. As will be discussed in the next section, the findings of this content analysis, along with the broader taxonomy of crisis types in higher education, contributed to and informed the approach to the second phase of the project involving the use of qualitative interviews.

Upon identifying the use of the term “crisis” in a news article, the researcher used the coding scheme illustrated in Table 3.1 as a way of coding the manifest and latent content variable in each respective article. Upon coding the articles, the researcher revised the coding scheme in order to ensure that the categories were mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and relevant (Dwyer, 2013; Krippendorff, 2003; Neuendorf, 2002). Two graduate students were recruited to code a smaller sample of the articles in order to identify any issues with the coding scheme and to ensure the reliability of the findings.

Table 3.1. Content Analysis Coding Scheme

Year of the article	a) 2011 b) 2012 c) 2013 d) 2014 e) 2015
News source of the article	a) <i>Chronicle of Higher Education</i> b) <i>Inside Higher Ed</i> c) <i>The New York Times</i> d) <i>Wall Street Journal</i>
The individual that used the label “crisis”	a) the author of the article b) an administrative leader within the college or university facing the crisis c) an administrative leader from another college or university in response to the crisis

	<p>d) an internal stakeholder (e.g., student, alumnus, faculty member, board member) who is directly or indirectly impacted by the crisis</p> <p>e) an external stakeholder (e.g., National Collegiate Athletic Association, accrediting agency, parent) who is directly or indirectly impacted by the crisis</p>
Extent of the impact of the crisis as described in the article	<p>a) impacts only one division of the institution</p> <p>b) is university-wide in its impact.</p>
Crisis type, using an existing taxonomy developed by Mitroff, Diamond, and Alpaslan (2006)	<p>a) criminal: rapes/murders/robberies/guns/gangs/terrorism</p> <p>b) informational/technological: identity theft/violations of confidentiality/fraud</p> <p>c) building safety</p> <p>d) athletics: recruiting practices/academic, hazing, or sex scandals</p> <p>e) health: disease outbreaks/food safety and tampering/mental health/suicide</p> <p>f) unethical behavior/misconduct: fraud/plagiarism/record tampering/conflicts of interest</p> <p>g) financial</p> <p>h) natural disaster</p> <p>i) legal/labor disputes and academic employment issues (adjuncts, part-time lecturers, etc.)</p> <p>j) perceptual/reputational: false rumors/stories</p> <p>k) other</p>

The findings of this content analysis, as described in the next chapter, were organized around related themes and were used to inform the qualitative interviews during the second phase of the project. Specifically, the researcher reviewed the findings of the content analysis in order to more fully understand the dominant categories within each of the dimensions that were coded. Despite the researcher's sound and systematic use of this method, the approach is not without limitations. Some initial limitations of this approach include the wide variety of events

that are labeled as a “crisis,” the inclusion of crisis situations that have only reached the level of public attention, and the individual biases of the various news sources included in the analysis.

Interviews

The second phase of this dissertation focused upon the topic of crisis leadership from the perspective of senior leaders in higher education. The researcher attempted to answer RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 through the use of semi-structured interviews with a broad array of senior university leaders representing institutions from the Association of American Universities (AAU) (Association of American Universities, 2017). These types of institutions were selected for four primary reasons. First, the 62 institutions admitted into the AAU are recognized as leading public and private research institutions—institutions where one might expect to find a number of well-developed best practices in the area of crisis leadership preparation, expertise, and training and development opportunities, all of which might have an impact on the preparation and effectiveness of the leaders at these institutions. The scope of research, teaching, and outreach activities, including athletics, at these institutions gives rise to a broad range of potential crisis situations. Furthermore, as a result of their status as leading institutions of higher education, these institutions attract a great deal of media attention when crisis situations occur, and are subject to a great deal of scrutiny by a wide array of internal and external stakeholders. Finally, AAU member institutions serve as models for higher education across the country—and in some instances, the world—and in many respects, their rich history of academic excellence positions the universities as exemplars for other colleges and universities with similar research ambitions.

Crisis leadership, as conceptualized in this project, extends beyond the responsibility of individual positions, and this representative focus on a diverse array of senior leaders from several different universities allowed for greater depth than most traditional studies on the

subject (e.g., those studies that limit their sample to exclusively interview senior leaders based on a singular position, area of responsibility, or institution, such as Garcia (2015), Harper (2004), and Teniente-Matson (2013)). Data from these interviews with an expansive set of representative university leaders was used to further develop and validate the findings from the content analysis phase of this dissertation project.

Identification and Selection of Institutions for the Study. The researcher selected a purposeful sample of senior leaders from ten institutions to participate in this project—institutions that have recently addressed a diverse array of crises that are representative of the initial themes uncovered in the content analysis from the first phase. These institutions include the following:

- Carnegie Mellon University
- Duke University
- Pennsylvania State University
- Rutgers University
- University of Iowa
- University of Maryland
- University of Nebraska-Lincoln¹
- University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
- University of Pittsburgh
- University of Wisconsin-Madison

¹ The University of Nebraska-Lincoln lost its membership in the Association of American Universities in 2011, but through the use of a modified snowball sample approach, one of the respondents directed the researcher to a senior colleague from the institution who would be able to contribute meaningfully on many aspects of this project.

These institutions were intentionally selected for several reasons. First, each institution has recently dealt with a situation or event that is characterized as a crisis in the content analysis (e.g., academic crisis, athletics crisis, technological crisis, facilities crisis, financial or business crisis, human resources crisis, leadership or governance crisis, natural disaster, public safety crisis, racial or identity conflict, or student affairs crisis). Recent examples include student deaths and suicides (Erdley 2016; Parker, 2012), academic (Stripling, 2014) and athletic (Wolverton, 2012) scandals, cyberattacks (Heyboer, 2015), bomb scares (Preston, 2012), natural disasters (Mangan, 2012), heightened tensions due to race relations (Stripling, 2015), and leadership and governance challenges due to public debate and disagreement with the state legislature (Flaherty, 2016a; Flaherty, 2016b). Collectively, these situations generally represent the diversity of issues facing college and university leaders in higher education found in the first phase of the study. These crises touch upon all three themes from the content analysis, each of which will be described in full detail in the next chapter: a) institutional and environmental incidents, b) those situations isolated to one unit and interdependent incidents that disrupt the entire institution, and c) events declared a crisis by both internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. Second, in many instances, the researcher selected institutions where it was possible to draw upon existing relationships with colleagues in order to gain access to senior leaders who would be willing to participate in a study of this potentially sensitive topic. Finally, with the goal of conducting as many interviews as possible in-person, the researcher selected a majority of the institutions based on geographical proximity.

After identifying the target institutions and upon securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the researcher contacted via e-mail a sample of senior administrators from each university who held formal leadership responsibilities within the institution. The invitation to

participate can be found in Appendix A. Participants were asked to review the informed consent content found in Appendix B. In order to ensure participant confidentiality, the researcher used corresponding participant codes and at times, general titles (e.g., senior leader representing Student Affairs, senior Finance and Business leader, etc.), as opposed to names throughout the project, and the researcher intentionally avoided including any interview responses that might point to the identity of the respondent.

In order to qualify for participation, respondents had to meet one of the following criteria:

- Senior leader(s) and administrator(s) who are most directly involved with the crisis at the institutional level.
- Senior university communication representative(s) who are most responsible for the design and delivery of messages during all phases of the university crisis.
- Key university leader(s) from departments most impacted by a particular crisis or set of crises.

A majority of the individuals contacted for this study agreed to participate. Several individuals opted not to participate in the study for a host of reasons. In most instances, their schedules did not allow time for their participation. Others noted that they would not be able to contribute meaningfully to a study on this subject. Within each institution, the researcher used a snowball sample approach to solicit the names of additional senior leaders with knowledge of and experience with a specific crisis situation. This sampling strategy allowed the researcher to ask research participants to assist in identifying other potential subjects (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Data Collection. The researcher interviewed 37 senior leaders representing a variety of positions, responsibilities, and titles across the following divisions: Office of the

Chancellor/President, Institutional Diversity, Facilities Management, Academic Affairs, University Marketing and Communications, Athletics, Information Technology, Student Affairs, Business and Administration, and University Relations and Alumni Relations. A full list of specific titles can be found in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Titles of Research Participants

Office of the Chancellor or President
Chancellor
Chief of Staff and Associate to the Chancellor
Chief of Staff to Chancellor
Director, Office of the President and Interim Secretary of the Board of Trustees
Institutional Diversity
Senior Associate Vice Chancellor for the Division of Workforce Strategy, Equity, and Engagement
Facilities Management
Associate Vice Chancellor for Facilities Planning and Management
Associate Vice President and Director, Facilities Management
Academic Affairs
Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost
Vice President and Dean for Undergraduate Education
Secretary of the Faculty
Chief of Staff/Senior Special Assistant to the Provost
Vice President for Commonwealth Campuses
University Marketing and Communications
Assistant Vice President, University Marketing and Communications
Assistant Vice Chancellor, University Communications
Vice President for Strategic Communications

Athletics
Senior Deputy Director of Athletics
Information Technology
Vice Chancellor for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer
Senior Vice President and Chief Information Officer
Student Affairs
Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Senior Operating Officer
Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs
Vice President for Student Affairs
Assistant Dean for Student Affairs
Vice Provost for Student Life and Dean of Students
Assistant Dean of Students
Associate Dean and Director of Residence Life
Associate Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students
Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs
Business and Administration
Senior Vice President for Finance and Business
Vice President of Administration
Executive Vice President, Strategic Planning and Operations, and COO
University Relations and Alumni Relations
Senior Vice President for Development and Alumni Relations
Vice President of University Relations

The researcher conducted 23 interviews in-person, typically in the interviewee's office location, and 14 interviews by phone. Each interview opened with brief informal dialogue as a way of building trust and rapport, which was especially important given that the researcher did not have a prior relationship with a majority of the research participants. The researcher used the interview protocol presented in Appendix C as a guide for the semi-structured conversations. As offered in the appendix, the protocol included a series of classification questions (e.g., What does crisis mean to you, particularly in the context of higher education?), critical incident questions (Flanagan, 1954) (e.g., Describe your experience(s) as a leader in preparing, managing, and learning from an event that you would characterize as a crisis at your institution?), and best practice questions (e.g., What role, if any, can leadership development programs play in preparing higher education leaders for organizational crisis?). The questions were structured to begin with general thoughts regarding the definition and characterization of crisis in higher education. Building upon these foundational themes, the conversations shifted into a discussion of various approaches to addressing crises at individual institutions, paying focused attention to one or more specific cases that were identified as crises by either the respondent or outside media outlets. The researcher referred to the general findings from the content analysis during this point of the interview as a way of providing context for the discussion of crisis in higher education. Additionally, the questions were slightly adapted based on the respondent's primary area of responsibility within the institution (e.g., academic affairs, student affairs, business, athletics, technology, communication). The interviews concluded with a discussion of the preparation of leaders in higher education, particularly leaders who are able to navigate the challenges presented by crises, along with the specific competencies most useful for crisis leadership in higher education.

As mentioned earlier, the findings from the content analysis were used to inform some of the questions asked during the individual interviews. Prior to each interview, for instance, the researcher reviewed specific cases and incidents related to the institution that were mentioned in the news articles and this information was used as a guide during the conversations. Furthermore, when discussing the perceived pervasiveness of crisis in higher education, the researcher would refer to specific findings from the content analysis and this information allowed for an informed discussion between the interviewer and interviewee. In many instances, the interviewee expressed interest in learning more about the findings from the content analysis—and this knowledge allowed discussion of any number of elements related to the broader topic of crisis leadership during the interview. For example, if a respondent had difficulty thinking about a comparative crisis at another institution, they might ask if the researcher learned of other examples during the content analysis. Also, in other cases, the participant would draw on the broader higher education landscape as a point of reference for their comments, and he or she would express interest in hearing about general themes from the content analysis that would relate to his or her experience at their institution.

The researcher made minor revisions to the interview protocol throughout the research process as a way of eliciting responses that were both substantive and descriptive. The 37 interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes, with an average time of approximately 35 minutes, resulting in over 1,200 minutes of data. As offered in the next chapter of this dissertation, the rich vignettes and quotes from these conversations contributed meaningfully to this scholarly project. These vignettes and quotes are italicized throughout the project as a way of distinguishing them from the researcher's commentary and from other quotes found in the literature. The respondents were generally candid in their comments, and there seemed to be a

genuine interest in both the topic and the insights that could be gleaned from a study of this phenomenon. Furthermore, as will also be discussed in later sections, many of the respondents used the interview as an opportunity to reflect on the many challenges, and at times frustrations, presented by those events that are characterized as crises at the institutional and environmental level.

Interviews were conducted until the researcher reached a point of saturation for the study overall. Data saturation, according to Charmaz (2006), is described as the period “when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of your core theoretical categories” (p. 113). The researcher kept a research journal throughout the project where details of each interview were noted, and the emergence of repetitive themes towards the conclusion of the project were identified. There are obvious limitations related to the concept of data saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Dey, 1999), and additional interviews may have led to the emergence of additional insights; however, the researcher limited the sample to 37 respondents with confidence that these interviews provided insights that informed the four primary research questions.

Data Coding, Analysis, Validity, and Reliability. The researcher recorded the entirety of each interview with a voice recorder and uploaded the files into a password protected folder on his computer. Using funds provided by both the School of Communication and Information and the PhD Program in Communication, Information and Library Studies, the researcher used professional transcription services. The researcher carefully compared five of the transcribed interviews with the recorded interviews to ensure the reliability of the transcribed content. The interviews resulted in 575 single spaced pages of interview data, along with nearly 50 pages of field notes taken by the researcher. The researcher identified key words, themes, and ideas in an

initial reading of the transcribed data, all of which contributed to the development of a codebook, which can be found in an abbreviated format in Table 3.3 and then in a more comprehensive format in Appendix D. In addition to these codes, the researcher also coded demographic information, including the type of institution (i.e., public and private), gender, and position in the institution.

Table 3.3. Interview Codebook

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes
Crisis domain	<p>Institutional crises – incidents that occur at one particular college or university</p> <p>Environmental crises – broader issues in the higher education environment that present challenges to the larger system</p>
<p>Crisis examples – code for the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Academic crisis (e.g., debate over tenure, plagiarism, academic job crisis) b) Athletics crisis c) Cyberattack or technological crisis d) Facilities crisis (e.g., water main break, chemical spill, damages to university infrastructure) e) Financial or business crisis f) Human resources crisis g) Leadership or governance crisis (e.g., conflict between university leadership and state legislature) h) Natural disaster i) Public safety crisis (e.g., active shooter, sexual assault, suicide or death) j) Racial or identity conflict k) Student affairs crisis 	<p>Narratives and vignettes describing experiences dealing with specific types of crisis</p>
Crisis failures or lack of preparation/planning	<p>Comments associated with poor planning/preparation or overall failures in</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes
	responding to and dealing with crisis situations
Crisis planning and preparation	Making the necessary arrangements to prepare for crisis situations (e.g., tabletop simulations, functional exercises, full-scale operational exercises, heatmaps)
Definitions of crisis	Attempts to state or describe exactly the nature, scope, or meaning of the word “crisis”
Detecting and monitoring what could develop into a crisis	Assessing environment for crises and differentiating crises for problem, nuisance, or inconvenient situations
General leadership lessons	General advice and insights for leadership in higher education based on experiences and observations that extend beyond crisis situations
Higher education in crisis	The notion that higher education as an entire sector is in crisis
Human generated crises vs. natural disasters	Statements that describe the differences between man-made crises and natural disasters
Juicy quotes	Illustrative, provocative, or rich quotes for further consideration
Limitations of a public relations approach to crisis management	Comments that speak to the limitations of the “spin game” associated with public relations approaches to crisis management
Media relations	Interactions with local and national media in response to campus crises
Reputation – code for both <u>individual</u> and <u>institutional</u>	Statements dealing directly with the perception of the unit, department, institution, or higher education sector
Social construction/declaration/ invocation of crisis	The existence of a crisis because people perceive it as such or because of the ways that leaders talk about it

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes
Social media	The use of interactive technology that allows for the development of virtual communities and networks in a 24/7 environment.
Stakeholders	“Any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46).
Teamwork and Emergency/Incident Response Teams	Working well with others to design plans, address problems, and collaborate
The ubiquity of crisis in higher education	Statements that focus on the “overblown” or “exaggerated” sentiment of crises in higher education—or those that comment on the pervasive nature of crises in higher education.
Training and development	Preparing leaders in higher education for dealing with crisis situations
Uniqueness of higher education	Comments that speak to the perception of higher education as distinct from other sectors
Values, competencies, and priorities for leading during crisis – code for the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Analysis, Synthesis, and Triage b) Adaptable/Flexible c) Calmness d) Care and Aftercare e) Collaboration f) Confidence and Courage g) Do the Right Thing h) Empathy and Compassion i) Humility j) Information Gathering and Dissemination k) Institutional Focus l) Learning m) Presence and Availability n) Resilience o) Safety 	Important and lasting beliefs, ideals, principles, skills, or priorities that influence behavior and decision making

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes
<p>p) Transparency and Honesty q) Trust r) Values-Based Leadership s) Other</p>	

Beginning first with this process of initial coding, the researcher then engaged in subsequent phases of focused coding “using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57) and then axial coding, where the researcher created new codes “whose purpose is to make connections between categories” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 252). Using a constant comparative method consistent with the development of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the researcher compared the emergent categories with previous scholarship on the topic in order to generate, develop, and verify the data analysis and emergence of themes offered in this project. This interpretive process “entails not only condensing raw data into concepts but also rearranging the concepts into a logical, systematic explanatory scheme” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 56). Finally, in order to stay close to the data and account for the insights from all research participants, the researcher analyzed both dominant codes and non-dominant codes, as discussed in subsequent chapters (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

The researcher referred regularly to the four research questions during this phase of initial coding, paying particular attention to concepts most germane to the focus of this study. Using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package, the researcher imported all of the transcribed interview files, imported the final codebook, and coded the qualitative data using the codes, or what are referred to as “nodes” in NVivo. The summary of coded data by code or “node” resulted in 338 single spaced pages. Using a grounded theory approach, the

researcher qualitative analyzed the coded content and categorized common themes that emerged from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Additionally, as suggested by Charmaz (2006), “As we proceed, our categories not only coalesce as we interpret the collected data but also the categories become more theoretical because we engage in successive levels of analysis” (p. 3). The themes that best respond directly to the research questions put forward for this study will be discussed in the following two chapters.

Finally, in order to determine the intercoder reliability or intercoder agreement (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000) of the coding scheme, the researcher recruited a trained graduate student to code 20% of the total interviews, or 7 interviews. The notion of intercoder reliability refers to the degree of agreement for coding between two independent coders. Upon collectively reviewing the codebook, the other coder also used NVivo to code the qualitative interview data. NVivo also allows for the calculation of both percentage agreement and *Kappa coefficient*, a statistical measure that considers the amount of agreement that one might expect through chance. The coding comparison resulted in nearly 50% agreement among the two coders, with an increased agreement after meeting to discuss the codes following the initial coding.²

The use of qualitative interviews, similar to the method of content analysis, is not without limitation. The tone and content of some of the questions, despite numerous reviews from both the researcher and the members of the dissertation committee, may have had too great of an influence on the responses. Furthermore, an understanding of the notion of “crisis in higher education” is inherently subjective and broadly interpreted, as discussed in the next chapter. This

² There was a great deal of overlap between the two coders as it relates to various codes with a shared understanding, including the codes of “crisis examples,” “leadership competencies, skills, and values,” “stakeholders,” and “social media.” However, there was far less consistency with the use of those codes that required a greater familiarity of the specific research topic and existing literature, including “social construction/declaration/invocation of crisis” and “the ubiquity of crisis in higher education.”

lack of agreement as to what constitutes crisis often led to competing definitions and inconsistent responses. Also, despite efforts to ensure a high degree of intercoder reliability, the selected methodology also allows for the potential of researcher error, including the failure to appropriately code an interview response. Finally, the findings of the project reflect the responses from an inherently limited number of interviews with senior leaders. As with all qualitative research, a generalization of the results is not a primary goal of the project; yet, the findings may inform approaches to preparing for crises across institutions of higher education.

The content analysis and the semi-structured interviews allowed for a comprehensive and in-depth exploration into the area of crisis leadership in higher education. These methods permitted the researcher to analyze media reports of the landscape of higher education in the United States and then to take a closer look at the lived experiences of senior leaders involved in navigating the complexities of crisis situations at their respective institutions. The following chapters provide an overview and discussion of the findings and their implications for crisis leadership in higher education—one that is informed by communication and that extends beyond reputation management.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The following chapter presents the findings from this multi-method research project. The material in this chapter is organized by individual research question, and each section includes a summary of key findings based on emergent themes and a brief summary of the findings relative to the themes. A more extensive discussion of these findings in relation to the existing literature will appear in Chapter Five. The findings from the content analysis address the first research question regarding the characterization of situations or events as crises in higher education. The interview findings directly address the second, third, and fourth research questions regarding the process of defining and labeling situations or events as crises, the prominent characteristics associated with the discourse around crisis and crisis leadership in higher education, and the skills, values, and competencies associated with the practice of crisis leadership in higher education. The findings from both the content analysis and the interviews reflect the complexity and importance of this topic, and raise additional questions for future consideration that will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Findings for RQ1: The Characterization of Crisis in Higher Education

Higher education is the subject of much national and international media attention and public scrutiny. Phase one, the content analysis of articles from the two prominent higher education news outlets, *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, resulted in the identification of 983 articles from the most recent five-year period of 2011-2015 that included the word “crisis” or “crises” within the text and met the conditions discussed in the previous chapter. Using the criteria highlighted in Chapter Three, the researcher conducted a content analysis of 495 articles from *Chronicle of Higher Education* and 488 articles from *Inside Higher Ed*. See Table 4.1 for a breakdown of articles by year.

Table 4.1. Breakdown of Coded Articles by Year

Year	Number of Articles	Percent
2011	225	23%
2012	264	27%
2013	173	19%
2014	132	13%
2015	189	19%
Total Number	983	100%

A content analysis of 48 of the most recent articles from *The New York Times* and 8 articles from *Wall Street Journal*, all of which referred to some type of “crisis” in higher education, resulted in consistent types of events as to those found in the higher education news outlets. The researcher reviewed the smaller sample of articles from these two news outlets to ensure that events or situations characterized as crises in these outlets were included in the more extensive search of articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*.

The researcher coded the selected articles to determine who used the label “crisis” to describe the event, situation, or series of events, as shown in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2. Table Summary of Use of the “Crisis” Label

Source	Number of Articles
Author of the article	832
Administrative leader within the college or university facing the crisis	29
Administrative leader from another college or university in response to the crisis	3

Internal stakeholder (e.g., student, alumnus, faculty member, board member) who is directly or indirectly impacted by the crisis	68
External stakeholder (e.g. National Collegiate Athletic Association, accrediting agency, parent) who is directly or indirectly impacted by the crisis	73
Total Number³	1,005

These categories emerged from a two-stage coding process: First the researcher identified the individuals who used the “crisis” label in the various articles; and second, to simplify and identify patterns, these were combined into the more general categories presented above. As evidenced by the data, these findings suggest that in an overwhelming number of cases (832 of 1,005), the authors of the article took the liberty of describing the event or series of events as a “crisis.” For example, as Kolowich (2015) wrote in regards to the closing of Sweet Briar College, “She was shocked. Why were the alumnae hearing about the college’s existential crisis only now, after the decision to close was already made?” In other cases, a wide array of internal or external stakeholders (173 of the total) were quoted as describing the situation as a “crisis.” For example, in response to racial tensions at the University of Kansas, Brown (2015) described the response from a group of internal stakeholders: “The senate’s executive committee saw the two leaders’ alleged indifference as a sign that neither ‘has the intention of responding to the crisis our black peers face on this campus.’” Although this research method does not allow the researcher to understand the motivations for why individuals used the “crisis” label, the findings seem to suggest that the authors of the news articles liberally invoke the term in their writing on higher education. Additionally, based on the available evidence, these findings indicate that

³ Note that the total exceeds the full number of articles in the sample as there were several instances where more than one individual described the event as a crisis, including instances where both the author independently used the label and cited an internal or external stakeholder who declared the event a crisis.

senior leaders are far less likely than other internal or external stakeholders to use the “crisis” label in their characterization of an event or series of events.

In addition to the empirical evidence offered above, the findings from the analysis also pointed to three themes in relation to RQ1. Each of the following themes will be explored in the forthcoming sections: a) the emergence of various crisis categories, b) classified on three dimensions (i.e., domain, responsibility, and declaration), c) with the impact often distributed across numerous divisions and units.

Theme One: Multiple Categories of Crisis

In response to RQ1, the researcher counted the frequency of crisis examples in the identified set of articles. In order to classify the types of crises that were most widely acknowledged in the news media, the researcher initially used an existing taxonomy of crisis categories developed by Mitroff, Diamond, and Alpaslan (2006), which underwent refinements as the project progressed. The taxonomy by Mitroff, et al. (2006) initially provided the researcher with a baseline set of crisis examples that were most prevalent for institutions of higher education. When it became apparent that this taxonomy was limited and not entirely well-aligned with the emerging and increasing incidents of crises found in the news articles, the researcher created a more general taxonomy for the purposes of this study. This revised taxonomy, displayed in Table 4.4, includes the crisis type, some examples offered by one or more of the respondents, and an illustrative quote from the interviews that highlights this crisis type. Several of the crisis categories from the Mitroff, et al. (2006) taxonomy also appeared in the revised taxonomy (e.g., athletics, natural disaster, financial); however, the revised taxonomy also included a number of more general categories that were initially not present (e.g., academic, facilities, student affairs). In addition to using this taxonomy to code for the news articles in the

content analysis, the researcher confirmed that this revised crisis taxonomy fully captured the various types of crises mentioned in the interviews with senior administrators during the second phase of this project.

The results of this initial analysis using the Mitroff, et al. (2006) taxonomy are shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3. Results Using Mitroff, Diamond, and Alpaslan (2006) Coding Scheme

Code	Number	Percent
criminal: rapes/murders/robberies/guns/gangs/terrorism	41	4%
informational/technological: identity theft/violations of confidentiality/fraud	2	<1%
building safety	1	<1%
athletics: recruiting practices/academic, hazing, or sex scandals	54	5%
unethical behavior/misconduct: fraud/plagiarism/record tampering/conflicts of interest	6	<1%
Financial	398	40%
natural disaster	14	1%
legal/labor disputes and academic employment issues (adjuncts, part-time lecturers, etc.)	71	7%
perceptual/reputational: false rumors/stories	13	1%
Other	384	39%
Total Number	984	100%

These findings point to a significantly high incidence of financial-oriented crisis during this particular time period, as compared to the other crisis types. Importantly, almost 400 of the coded articles were not captured by this existing taxonomy, which led to the researcher creating a

refined and more general taxonomy, as shown in Table 4.4, that more fully accounted for the diversity of crises presented in the news articles.

Table 4.4. Taxonomy of Crisis Types in Higher Education

Crisis Type	Example	Illustrative Quote
Academic crisis	Debate over tenure, widespread plagiarism or academic fraud, and significant violations of academic integrity	<i>“Of all the things that have happened, one of the elements of it that really did feel like a crisis was when an employee of the university publicly stated that we have been accepting students that couldn’t read, so that put us more into crisis mode just more than anything else that happened during that period of time” (Participant 15).</i>
Athletics crisis	Child abuse scandal	<i>“I would tell you candidly that when the Sandusky crisis hit this institution in November 2011, I think it's fair to say Penn State was not well prepared to deal with or respond to a crisis of that magnitude. There was, I think, a fair amount of fumbling and indecisiveness that went on. In some cases, indecisiveness actually rendered decisions that were, in hindsight, regrettable. It's one of those things where if you had a do-over, you might approach some of these things a bit differently. [As] we dealt with some of the ensuing waves of events, like the release of the Freeh Report and the nationwide reaction to that, followed quickly by the sanctions that were imposed by the NCAA, it was clear that we remained in a full-blown crisis response mode” (Participant 10).</i>
Technological crisis	Cyberattack	<i>“One is at a very basic level, a crisis means that you have an online service or you know, one of our critical technological tools is not available. To have a tool like, you know, HR system, or even our main webpage, you know, not be up and available for people to see or to use, in our world is the crisis. And the second area, which leads kinda to the first, is you know, the information security, cyber security kinds of activities and threats</i>

Crisis Type	Example	Illustrative Quote
		<i>that we continually grapple with which can lead to a disruption of a service, but also can lead to, you know, inappropriate access to information assets at the university, so those kinds of events we treat as crises as well” (Participant 26).</i>
Facilities crisis	Water main break, chemical spill, widespread power outage, or damages to university infrastructure	<i>“We had a chemical spill in a chemistry/engineering lab. I get a call at dinner with my family at 8 o'clock at night and somebody had reported it” (Participant 22).</i>
Financial or business crisis	Significant decreases in state appropriations	<i>“For every school, and certainly some of the large publics with significant decreases in state appropriations, depending on whether you're a Research I institution that receives external funding from NIH. Of course, market commissions, all of those types of things, are putting enormous pressure on institutions of higher education. I think you could potentially label it as a financial crisis. I don't think it takes on the same type of communication or the same types of protocols [as other crises], but you are looking at financial issues that then run through the entire operation. It's looking at all of your costs, so are you able to run the operation in a more efficient and a less costly way, which leads to all kinds of interesting conversations around outsourcing the size of the workforce, including the faculty, conversations about distance education, all of those types of issues” (Participant 18).</i>
Human resources crisis	Employee crimes, debates regarding tenure, issues surrounding hiring and firing of employees	<i>“One of the areas of crisis that our office deals with is when there's a very public faculty misconduct issue. We had one year where we had three faculty felons. Those became very public because in one case it was a faculty member who was allegedly trying to entice a fourteen-year-old on the internet or criminal stalking. Those became issues that normally we would deal with faculty</i>

Crisis Type	Example	Illustrative Quote
		<i>misconduct in a fairly private manner, investigation on campus, conclusion that there were misappropriation of funds, scientific research misconduct. When it gets elevated because it's part of the public discourse in the news media, that becomes a crisis that we have to deal with. That's probably the big one” (Participant 12).</i>
Leadership or governance crisis	Conflict between state legislature and university leadership	<i>“I think the one's that's sort of the most corrosive for the place like long-term is the fact that the governor and the legislature are coming at higher education from a different direction than this institution. I mean, that's difficult because our funding depends on it. Our tenure depends on it. So many certain vital elements. We're a state agency” (Participant 17).</i>
Natural disaster	Flood, tornado, or hurricane	<i>“The University of Iowa had its “Flood of the Century” back in '93. It was a 100 year flood. It hit the campus hard. The water overflowed the Coralville Reservoir. That's upstream from us, and it took out a number of buildings, and I think damaged the buildings, the campus back in '93, dollars I think was the \$6 million range, maybe \$10 million, and was something that was never going to be forgotten by those who experienced that. Then fast forward 15 years later to '08, when we started seeing the water coming and getting those early warnings that we could be dealing with another flood, it was interesting to see that half this organization, facilities or half the campus for that matter, were going around and saying, "My God, this could be as bad as '93," and were doing things based on their experience in '93. The other half of us, and I joined the campus in '03, had no reference of it or experience with that. In a way, that experience of '93 limited people the scale of what this could become. They couldn't imagine it being as bad as it was in '93. We were many times worse. The rest of us weren't encumbered by that reference point, so to speak. We didn't know what '93 was and we were just ...</i>

Crisis Type	Example	Illustrative Quote
		<i>Boy. It was just fun to see some folks reacting to a previous disaster and others reacting to the current disaster. One of my 10 lessons learned that I always had down is plan for your next disaster, not your last one” (Participant 11).</i>
Public safety crisis	Active shooter, sexual assault, suicide or death	<i>“I say that that [the Virginia Tech massacre] was like the 9-11 of higher education, that mass shooting. When there's 32 people killed by a shooter, that's about as horrible as things get” (Participant 30).</i>
Racial or identity conflict	Campus unrest due to racial or identity tensions within the community and acts of intolerance by any campus stakeholder	<i>“There were certainly a lot of crises across college campuses this past year because people under-reacted to the situation at hand. You saw that with the racial tensions at Missouri, a really good example I think ... As the leader not addressing it, not being transparent about it, not meeting it head on, and therefore the perception was: you don't care about this. It doesn't matter whether it's right or wrong. You don't care about it, and that just escalated the whole thing. You have an under-reaction which caused an escalation” (Participant 27).</i>
Student affairs crisis	Mental health crisis	<i>“I think that students' mental health is a major concern. I think it continues to be a growing concern. We are seeing that more students are coming forward, and so I don't know if that is because of a removal of stigma or if it's because many students have already, previous to coming to campus, have had interactions with mental health professionals ... but I do know that we are seeing more students” (Participant 24).</i>

Theme Two: Complexity and Cross-Cutting Nature of Crisis

Existing frameworks for classifying crises seemed to reflect a narrow view of crisis, and an analysis of the data revealed categories that are more inclusive of the types of crises most

relevant to institutions of higher education. An examination of the events and situations characterized as crises in the selected news stories, along with a review of the aggregate of coded articles, led to the development of a more general crisis classification scheme depicted in Table 4.5. This more inclusive classification taxonomy provided a more useful scheme for understanding the complexity and cross-cutting nature of crisis in higher education as emerged from the data. In addition to using this scheme for classifying crises in the content analysis, one of the emergent goals in the study was to validate the adequacy and accuracy of this framework through the interviews that occurred in the second phase of the project.

Specifically, the coded articles from the content analysis clustered primarily around three emergent themes: crisis domain, crisis responsibility, and crisis declaration. Based on the content analysis, it became important and useful to differentiate between two different crisis domains, both institutional and environmental. From the analysis of media coverage, it also became apparent that the leadership responsibility for dealing with the crisis often varied from one specific unit or division of the institution to those crises that have an interdependent influence on multiple units or divisions. It was also necessary to distinguish the declaration of crisis based on those that are self-declared by internal stakeholders within an institution from those that are other-declared by external stakeholders outside of the institution. This scheme represents the range of articles coded in the dissertation, and Table 4.5 below provides a brief description of these emergent themes and relevant examples from the content analysis that illustrate each of these themes.

Table 4.5. Crisis Classification Scheme

Emergent Themes and Subthemes	Description	Examples
Crisis Domain <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional Crises • Environmental Crises 	<p>There are notable differences between institutional crises and environmental crises.</p>	<p>Institutional Crises (e.g., school shooting, allegations of fraud, student death, campus protests at one particular college or university)</p> <p>Environmental Crises (e.g., broader issues in the higher education environment that present challenges to the larger system, including the crisis in the humanities, the crisis in legal education, the financial crisis in higher education, and the student loan crisis).</p>
Crisis Responsibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One Unit or Division • Multiple Units or Divisions 	<p>The leadership responsibility for dealing with the crisis often varies from one specific unit or division of the institution to those crises that have an interdependent influence on multiple units or divisions.</p>	<p>One specific unit or division of the institution (e.g., leaders in technology services are primarily responsible for dealing with a cyber-attack that impacts the institution, leaders in student affairs are often responsible for addressing issues of hazing in the fraternity and sorority community)</p> <p>Interdependent influence on multiple units or divisions (e.g., sudden and significant decreases in freshman enrollment become the responsibility of leaders in enrollment services, the business office, academic services, and student services;</p>

Emergent Themes and Subthemes	Description	Examples
		<p>damage due to hurricanes has a direct impact on the facilities, human resources, and business operations of a college or university; campus sexual assaults require primary attention from leaders in both human resources and student affairs; and the emergence of an active shooter will have a rippling effect across all divisional units.</p>
<p>Crisis Declaration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Declared • Other-Declared 	<p>The invocation of crisis may be self-declared by internal stakeholders within an institution or other-declared by external stakeholders outside of the institution.</p>	<p>Self-Declared</p> <p>In response to racial tensions at the University of Kansas, Brown (2015) described the response from a group of internal stakeholders: “The senate’s executive committee saw the two leaders’ alleged indifference as a sign that neither ‘has the intention of responding to the crisis our black peers face on this campus.’”</p> <p>Other-Declared</p> <p>As Kolowich (2015) wrote in regards to the closing of Sweet Briar College, “She was shocked. Why were the alumnae hearing about the college’s existential crisis only now, after the decision to close was already made?”</p>

Theme Three: Varied Scope of Impact

The researcher initially set out to code the articles based on the extent of the impact of the declared crisis ranging from limited impact to one division of the institution (e.g., Student Affairs, Business/Financial Operations, Academic Affairs, Athletics) to university-wide impact. In some instances, the author of the news article emphasized the role of one specific college or university division in addressing the crisis at hand and naturally there were some crises that were more oriented to one division over another (e.g., leaders in Academic Affairs were most directly impacted by issues related to academic integrity, leaders in Athletics were most impacted by a hazing situation involving one of the sports teams). However, the content analysis revealed that the process of responding to, managing, and leading during crisis situations was often much more complex, multifaceted, and interdependent with primary decision making authority and potential impact distributed across numerous divisions and units. As explained by one of the respondents, *“I think once you become a vice president, you become an institutional officer and your purview is not just your portfolio. So, like when we had this racist, misogynist e-mail, that wasn’t just a student affairs problem, that was a campus-wide problem”* (Participant 21). In many instances, it became apparent that the described crises varied from isolated incidents in that the impact of the crisis was college or university-wide in scope. In these cases, the researcher coded the article as an example of a crisis with a scope of impact that transcended institutional units.

RQ1 Summary

As described above, the findings from the content analysis resulted in the identification of three themes: a) the emergence of various crisis categories, b) classified on three dimensions (i.e., domain, responsibility, and declaration), c) with the impact often distributed across

numerous divisions and units. These themes from the content analysis were used to develop appropriate questions for the interview protocol that was used in the second phase of the project (see Appendix C). For example, as initially described in Chapter Three, prior to each interview, the researcher reviewed specific cases and incidents related to the institution that were mentioned in the news articles and this information was used as a guide during the conversations with senior administrators. Furthermore, when discussing the perceived pervasiveness of crisis in higher education, the researcher would refer to specific findings from the content analysis and this information allowed for an informed discussion between the interviewer and interviewee. In order to validate the adequacy and accuracy of both the Taxonomy of Crisis Types in Higher Education and the Crisis Classification Scheme, the researcher was able to confirm that these more general schemes accounted for the diversity of crisis examples offered in the interviews with senior administrators. This approach seemed to work well for purposes of this research project, and the further testing, application, and refinement of these classification schemes represents a worthy area for future projects focused on crisis in higher education settings.

As detailed in the next section, the responses to RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 build upon this central finding of the content analysis of media articles that there exist a wide array of events and situations that are individually self-declared or other-declared as crises in higher—some of which are specific to an institution and others that influence the broader higher education environment—and although some individual units are often more impacted by the crisis than others, the impact of a majority of the crises coded in the content analysis of media articles extends across units, divisions, and institutions. Ultimately, these findings call for a more nuanced understanding of the discourse surrounding the labeling of events or situations as crises and a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the implications for crisis leadership in

higher education that were found to be useful in this study and could be of additional value in future research by the author and others wishing to study the types and nature of crisis in higher education.

Senior Leader Interview Findings

Similar to the themes presented above from the first phase in response to RQ1, the findings from the second phase, interviews with the senior leaders, contributed to the emergence of dominant themes that directly address RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4. The discussion that follows below, and in subsequent sections of this chapter, is organized based on emergent themes from the coded interview data. Major themes, which are discussed below and presented as subheadings, capture the primary categories and dominant patterns to emerge in the data. Furthermore, as illustrated through the use of quotations from participants, these themes embody the diversity of ideas raised in the qualitative interviews.

Findings for RQ2: The Process of Defining and Labeling Phenomena as Crises

Given the wide array of crisis types facing institutions of higher education, RQ2 builds upon the findings of RQ1 in considering the ways that events or situations become defined or labeled as crises. In order to better understand the various crisis definitions and the process by which these crises are identified and described, the researcher asked the following two questions: 1) What does the word “crisis” mean to you, thinking particularly about the context of higher education? 2) What factors/conditions play a role in treating a particular event or set of events as a crisis to which leaders must pay particular attention and respond? In addition to these two questions, respondents also addressed this research question in their responses to other questions in the interviews (see Appendix C). For example, when asked to describe their institution’s procedure for preparing or dealing with crises, the interviewees often elaborated on their

understanding of what constitutes a crisis. Or when asked to comment on past experiences with specific crises, respondents used the opportunity to detail how they distinguished the situation as especially unique and worthy of immediate attention.

Upon coding the qualitative interview data, several themes emerged from the data that directly address RQ2. Below is a discussion of the themes, along with a synthesis of illustrative quotes from the interviews that capture these themes: a) the multiple definitions of crisis, b) crisis as distinct from other events or situations, and c) the impact of social media.

Theme One: Multiple Definitions of Crisis

When asked to describe their understanding of crisis in higher education, many of the respondents offered distinct definitions of what “crisis” meant to them. These definitions varied in a number of respects and, at times, these definitions often competed with one another. One leader suggested, *“Oh, [crisis] could mean just about anything,”* (Participant 3) or as another offered, *“You can argue that everything is a crisis”* (Participant 1). Many of those interviewed for this project acknowledged that crises threaten reputations, impact the lives of those involved in the institution, and disrupt the ways in which the organization functions. Another individual noted, *“I think that crisis is anything that has a significant impact on our student population, our staff and faculty population, the organizational reputation, and the ability for the organization to function and deliver the services to those groups”* (Participant 8). One administrator commented in this way: a crisis is understood as *“a problem that is significant... not a small problem, but a big problem that also has urgency associated with it”* (Participant 15). Related to this idea, another respondent defined crisis as *“the extreme end of risk”* (Participant 19).

Based on their responses in the interview, senior leaders representing student affairs divisions seemed to have a higher and more specific threshold for classifying events as crises. As mentioned by one senior leader in Student Affairs³,

Maybe it's the student affairs in me, but if no one's life is at risk, it's not truly a crisis. So I only categorize things as crisis if there's a threat to safety and if there's you know, life at risk. Other than that, it's just a variation of steady-state chaos, and you know, there can be extra chaotic moments, like when you have a building takeover. And there can be more normative chaos, like when you're trying to deal with concerns about sexual misconduct, and concerns about race, and concerns about healthcare, and you know, trying to figure out how you're gonna finance something...those are more steady-state chaos, so, I think higher ed is now just degrees of chaos. And crisis is when it crosses over into threat to life (Participant 19).

Many of the student affairs respondents shared this sentiment that the “crisis” label was reserved for only the most severe of cases, particularly those situations where lives are threatened. For example, one individual described crises as “*the catastrophic things*” (Participant 13) and as another noted, “*Usually you are not getting a phone call 9 to 5 dealing with a crisis, it's usually later in the evening or after midnight*” (Participant 32). Suggesting that leaders in student affairs “*deal with crises...on almost a daily basis unfortunately*” (Participant 9), the data indicates that this sub-group of respondents tended to exercise caution in using the label of “crisis” to describe situations of lesser magnitude.

³ As mentioned in Chapter Three, in order to ensure participant confidentiality, the researcher used general titles (e.g., senior leader representing Student Affairs, senior Finance and Business leader, etc.), as opposed to names throughout the project.

One additional idea to emerge from the interview data related to this theme of multiple definitions of crisis relates to the role of crisis as disruptive of organizational mission. For example, as one respondent noted, *“I think of crises as anything that pulls away from the work of the mission of the institution in a way that could lead to damage, reputationally or otherwise to the institution”* (Participant 1). The importance of mission was noted by another administrator: *“bottom line is [crises] are things that disrupt the core mission of the university in one way or another”* (Participant 29). Related to the core services of an institution, a senior leader raised the following definition of crisis: *“I guess [a crisis] would be an issue that surfaces that affects the trust or the value of what the institution is meant to deliver for people. It potentially calls into question the institution’s ability to provide educational or research or service support or protection or safety in the course of doing its work”* (Participant 20). Several respondents also referred back to those events or situations that threaten the university’s ability to fulfill its core mission(s) in the service of its primary stakeholders, while causing people to *“potentially think poorly of the institution’s management of that situation”* (Participant 28).

Theme Two: Crisis as Distinct from Other Events or Situations

The differentiation of crisis from nuisance, problem, challenge, or incident was another important theme to emerge in the interviews. As suggested by one senior leader representing Student Affairs, *“not every crisis that people have needs to be a crisis or should be a crisis. Sometimes people think they’re in crisis and they’re really not, because if you’ve got three months to figure out something it’s not a crisis, it’s a job”* (Participant 36). Related to this claim, another senior administrator in University Communications who is responsible for working with individual departments who encounter situations that might rise to the level of crisis, offered the following example:

Somebody in our Health Center might think of something as a crisis. It might damage the reputation of a program or maybe even an individual, and those are things to be dealt with, but they don't rise to the level of a true crisis in my opinion. We get this all the time with people who think there's a major crisis going on, but the reality is, once we dig into it, it's really not. It's more of a nuisance, and there's a big difference between a nuisance and a crisis (Participant 5).

Many of the interview responses also differentiated “crisis” from “problem,” “incident,” or “challenge.” As differentiated by one senior Finance and Business leader, *“We face challenges every day. Not all challenges reach crisis proportions”* (Participant 10). He went on to suggest the following: *“To me, some things become a true crisis when it threatens health and safety of people that work on or visit the campus, when it threatens the institution's reputation, when it threatens the institution's financial well-being or stability”* (Participant 10). Additionally, as another administrator noted in regards to her experience with campus sexual assaults or suicide, *“Generally, when there's more than one [incident] we move into crisis mode. When there's a singular incident, it's an incident. When they become multiple, it becomes a crisis”* (Participant 1). This criteria was summarized a similar way by another leader: *“An individual's suicide is an incident we need to attend to, but it is not going to affect the whole campus. But when you have a string of them – like, I'm thinking back to the situation up at Cornell a few years ago when you had folks jumping into ravines – and it reaches an issue of severe magnitude and it's likely to impact the entire campus, and the reputation of the institution, then I think you've got a crisis”* (Participant 21).

Theme Three: Impact of Social Media

Nearly all the senior administrators interviewed for this project commented on the role of social media in accelerating, accentuating, and escalating events to the level of crisis. One leader noted, *“I think it’s just very clear that the world that we all operate in has changed dramatically. Things that 10 or certainly 15 years ago would have flown under the radar screen, now because of the omnipresence of digital devices ... anybody can become a quasi-journalist”* (Participant 10). Some administrators attributed the perceived increase in crisis situations to the rise of social media. Characterized by many in this project as a *“mixed blessing”* (Participant 17), the respondents generally acknowledged the value of social media as a mechanism through which institutions and their leaders can monitor and respond to these incidents; yet, despite this opportunity, the respondents also addressed the public availability of information *and* misinformation through social media that is both *“emotional and visceral”* (Participant 12). Additionally, related to this theme, respondents highlighted the ways in which social media has complicated the role of and the expectations placed on the senior administrator in higher education.

According to those interviewed, social media play an important role in elevating events and situations to the level of crisis, as defined and differentiated earlier in this project. Through the use of social media, information and misinformation can travel *“like wildfire”* (Participant 26), leading to a *“multiplier effect”* (Participant 22) whereby much of the content is rapidly distributed, yet not *“necessarily grounded in fact”* (Participant 30). For example, as described by one senior Finance and Business leader, *“We have to be sensitive to the fact that issues or challenges can escalate much, much more rapidly. Disgruntled employees can take to Twitter or send something off to any one of a number of different social media sites, and all of a sudden,*

something that seemed small can escalate dramatically” (Participant 18). Another student affairs leader described the experience of a colleague who observed phones lighting up across the audience while sitting on the platform of a Commencement ceremony. *“It turned out that a student committed suicide 15 minutes before and no one in the administration knew because it happened so quickly... Basically, the entire campus knew about it and was talking about it before the administration even knew of it”* (Participant 35). In addition to allowing for the rapid dissemination of news, *“the electronic communication that’s available now means that you’re just getting advice and condemnation and excoriation from all quarters”* (Participant 15).

Several administrators described social media as both a *“blessing and a curse”* (Participants 17 and 35) for leaders in higher education. Respondents spoke of the advantages of using social media to both monitor stakeholder attitudes and respond swiftly to multiple audiences, including those audiences that institutions may not have had strong relationships with before. One senior leader representing University Relations described the importance of social media *“as a pretty good barometer and leading edge of what you might see soon”* (Participant 27). Put another way, another Vice President of Student Affairs suggested that *“nothing is local, everything is interconnected... I have to be aware of what’s happening anywhere because it’s inevitable through social media that we will be influenced by it”* (Participant 19). Institutional presence in this digital space is critical and as one respondent representing University Communications suggested, the technology allows leaders to *“be aware of what people are saying, but you’re trying to answer their concerns there also”* (Participant 17). Within the national context of widespread racial tension and campus unrest, for example, several administrators described their personal experience of responding to the emergent challenges through the use of social media. In one widely discussed example,

Students started a hashtag about their perceptions of what it was like to be a student of color here [where] they posted about difficult experiences that they have been having. Typically, we try to at least be [digitally] present. We certainly are always monitoring; but in a case like that, we had some senior administrators who at least posted in that hashtag just to say, 'We're here. We are listening. We are trying to learn from your experiences' (Participant 17).

Related to this example, another administrator from the same institution described the dilemma of how to best respond to this unfolding situation: *"We had to weigh in on it, but we had to express our sympathy and understanding of what was being conveyed. One of the things that we debated is do we talk about this in a general way or do we talk about specifically this hashtag"* (Participant 25). The available technology allows leaders to monitor the communication and respond accordingly *"in the channels that people are consuming. Meet people where they are"* (Participant 25).

As one interviewee described the role of social media in elevating certain events to the level of crisis, *"Depending on how the situation is viewed and the amount of traction on social media, this could either blow up and be a crisis or this could largely pass"* (Participant 23). The escalation of incidents or situations to the status of crisis through social media was described by many using similar terms as *"blow up"* (Participant 23), including *"catch fire faster"* (Participant 25), *"get really like wildfire"* (Participant 16), *"caught in a firestorm"* (Participant 3) and *"explode"* (Participant 31). According to the administrators, the challenge for all institutions, including institutions of higher education, is to *"have a more sophisticated set of monitoring tools to understand [how information spreads]. If it catches fire at 10:30 at night in a dorm and grows through a social community there, and we wait until 10:00 am the next morning*

to realize that it happened before weighing in, a huge amount of perception has already been shaped” (Participant 25). This is particularly challenging for institutions of higher education, as supported by several research participants, *“because our institutions are not built to respond to that, nor do we really have the right monitoring infrastructure”* (Participant 25). Numerous administrators described the importance of investing in an appropriate technical infrastructure, including some type of available social media monitoring software, and gaining the necessary expertise in order to better deal with the challenges posed by social media, particularly its role in the elevation of incidents to the level of crisis.

Many of those interviewed also described the impact of social media on their work as leaders, more generally. The immediacy of social media sets leaders up for failure, as one administrator noted, because *“we can’t do it as timely as people want”* (Participant 9). Reflecting on the evolution of technology, one administrator illustrated that *“Social media has made every movement international ... and social media also means there’s no airtime. You know, I often comment that 35 years ago when we had an incident ... there were going to be a couple of days before anyone really knew about it”* (Participant 19). Several interviewees shared specific strategies that their President/Chancellor or that they personally use in regards to communicating during crises through social media; however, as one Chancellor candidly admitted, *“I know next to nothing about [social media]. We have people who are dealing with that stuff”* (Participant 28). Finally, recognizing the rapid change and excessive expectations associated with the role of social media in addressing crises, one senior leader from Student Affairs admitted that *“I have moments where I’m glad I’m as old I am, because I don’t know that if I had 25 years left doing this that I would be able to make it with the power of social media – the way people communicate today”* (Participant 34). Whether this sentiment is widespread

across senior leaders in higher education is unknown, although the findings from these interviews indicate a very strong relationship between the increased scrutiny of higher education and its leaders and the increasingly pervasive role of social media.

RQ2 Summary

In response to RQ2, the emergent themes from the interview data address the multiple, and often conflicting, definitions of crises, and the ways that senior leaders in higher education differentiate crises from incidents, nuisances, or problems, as a result of their magnitude and severity. Finally, as illustrated by the third theme in this section, the process of defining and labeling events as crises is further complicated by the pervasive role of social media in accelerating, accentuating, and elevating events to the symbolic level of crisis through the spread of information and misinformation.

The responses to questions related to RQ2, as described above, suggest that there are different communicative assumptions that lead one to distinguish a nuisance, problem, challenge, or incident from that which is labeled a “*true crisis*” (Participant 5). The differences, as depicted in the findings from the interviews, may involve scope of impact, urgency, or frequency. These findings are consistent with the descriptions of crisis as a social construction, as offered in Estes (1983) and Schultz and Raupp (2010). Specifically, “the term *crisis* implies that the event or condition so described is different from others” (Estes, 1983, p. 446) and the labeling of the event or condition as a crisis contributes to the construction of the situation itself—and the ways “which actors react to and make sense of the crisis” (Schultz & Raupp, 2010).

The many definitions of crisis raised in the researcher’s conversations with the various senior leaders parallel many of the definitions in the existing scholarly literature. As it relates to the ways in which crisis is defined, one administrator noted that the “*the definition of a crisis is one*

that I think is a little bit fluid and evolves, as does the management and response to it” (Participant 18). Two different administrators paraphrased the colloquial expression made famous by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in his 1964 description of his threshold test for obscenity: *“It’s kind of like you know [crisis] when you see it”* (Participant 30). The social construction of crisis through communication, as presented in the next section, involves not only “seeing it,” and even more than “defining it” and “knowing it.” The social construction of crisis involves “calling it” a crisis, which then sets into motion a series of implications for the practice of crisis leadership in higher education.

Findings for RQ3: Communication and the Social Construction of Crisis in Higher Education

The focus of RQ3 is on the ways in which crisis develops and the communication used to discuss these phenomena. In order to unpack this question, the researcher posed the following set of questions: 1) What reactions from internal and external stakeholders may elevate something to the level of crisis? 2) Do you think that the way in which leaders talk about events can make them seem more like or less like a crisis? Why or why not? 3) When communicating to internal or external audiences during an ongoing problematic event, would you resist using the term “crisis?” Why or why not? When would it be appropriate to adopt that term? What are the implications of calling an ongoing problem/set of problems a “crisis?” Are there disadvantages to labeling something as a crisis? These questions, which appear in Appendix C, were generally used to better understand the role of communication in the construction of crisis from the perspective of senior administrators and the many stakeholders who are involved in higher education.

In response to this research question, three relevant themes emerged from the interviews, each of which are discussed below. The themes relate directly to a) the perception of crisis, b) the ways in which leaders frame crisis situations, and c) the role of crisis as a self-fulfilling prophecy. As characterized by many of the respondent comments, the invocation of crisis has the potential to heighten emotions, attract greater attention, and create the conditions through which one experiences crisis-like situations. For these reasons, as detailed below, a communication-oriented exploration into the social construction of crisis considers both the ways in which leaders talk about crisis and their experience in crisis situations.

Theme One: The Perception of Crisis; The Reality of Crisis

Specifically, the first theme highlights the idea that crises are said to exist because of the ways in which people perceive the situation and because of the ways that leaders talk about the situation. As one senior administrator posited, *“When you're in the middle of it, you need to pay attention to it. Time is of the essence. Crisis is only flamed by a lack of immediate attention. Recognizing it as a crisis is part of that. I think the time starts to tick away. You have to trust that even if you're the leader, if someone else sees something as a crisis, you have to listen”* (Participant 23). This claim was reinforced by another administrator from University Relations who suggested the following:

Know what it is that you're dealing with and then consult others. By God, we're not the smartest people in the world, and get that team around you who will see it differently than you do because if the crisis is me or I'm so into it, I might just not be able to see clearly what I could do or how people are reacting because I'm defensive about it or I'm emotionally involved in it. Don't under-react, don't overreact. Get the facts, get the right

team around you, and do it in a hurry. You can't wait on this crap because it's going to move faster than you (Participant 27).

The data illustrates how the perception of crisis contributes to the existence of crisis, and as indicated by numerous interview participants in this project, the crisis—as a socially constructed and communicative phenomenon—takes on a life of its own as leaders attend—or fail to attend—to the phenomenon at hand.

A related idea to emerge from the data suggests that it is a leadership imperative to treat phenomena that others perceive to be crises with attention, scrutiny, and a general degree of seriousness. For example, senior leaders addressed this process accordingly: *“the perception often makes the reality”* (Participant 1), *“When [a situation] gets elevated because it's part of the public discourse in the news media, that becomes a crisis that we have to deal with”* (Participant 12), and *“If others perceive something to be a crisis, it is a crisis”* (Participant 3). Drawing upon the interview data, the ingredients and conditions for crisis exist across colleges and universities, and part of the challenge involves the ability to gauge stakeholder perceptions in the midst of troubling circumstances. As one administrator described, *“That's the world we live in now. It's tough. You really don't know what's a crisis that's unfolding before you”* (Participant 4).

Although crisis was broadly interpreted and defined, as discussed earlier, there was a general agreement among the administrators that *“crisis is in the eye of the beholder”* (Participant 36), and given this subjective dimension, *“it behooves us to have institutional leaders in agreement about what constitutes a crisis. I need to have my finger on the pulse of a president, and my colleague vice presidents to have us all understand what we are going to deem a crisis”* (Participant 21).

Theme Two: The Framing of Crisis by Leaders

A second theme to emerge from the data relates to the impact of framing a situation or event as a “crisis.” When asked to describe their use of the “crisis” label, one person noted, “*in probably nine cases out of ten, we make things into crises*” (Participant 1). Many administrators indicated that the decision to call something a “crisis” is often both intentional and deliberate. One senior finance and business leader suggested the following:

I don't avoid [using the “crisis” label]. I try to be parsimonious about it. I mean, it's a term that I would, again, reserve only for those things that come upon you that are deserving of that label by nature of their impact and their ability to sort of garner notoriety. It's not something that you affix lightly to something that presents itself. There are also times when something deserves that label. Sometimes there needs to be truth in labeling so that you get people's attention. For instance, if I go to [the President], and I say, ‘This issue has the potential to become a full-blown crisis if this isn't addressed quickly,’ I want his antenna to go up because my use of that term is intentional (Participant 10).

As another vice president noted, “*We have to define it as what the consequences or unintended consequences are to call it a crisis. I think a crisis is also a terrible thing to waste*” (Participant 23). Reflecting on the etymology of the word crisis, the interview data suggests that there lies opportunity in crisis—and one might extend this further based on the data to suggest that there lies opportunity in the framing of crisis.

Leaders in higher education, as described by many of the individuals in this project, must recognize the responsibility of their framing decisions. The interview data captured the many emotions that accompany crisis-like phenomena, and as reinforced by several administrators, the

decision to characterize an event or situation as a crisis contributes to these emotions. As one Academic Affairs administrator described this leadership responsibility,

How a leader comes across is extremely important, especially early when the events unfold, because nobody really knows what the truth is at that time. It's very difficult. Everybody's in a panic. The leader's job is to control as much fear, and make sure people are safe. So yes, the leader is critically important. People know about things well before the facts are known. You can easily create a crisis situation when it's not really a crisis situation (Participant 4).

This sentiment was shared by a Chief Information Officer, who noted the following: *“I do think that sometimes situations are labeled crises, but you have to take the time to sort of level set and make sure they are. Because sometimes they are, and sometimes they're not”* (Participant 8).

This framing decision, as raised in these interviews, often carries significant responsibility for its ability to shape both the perception and reality associated with the circumstances at hand. The findings from this project point to the importance of considering not just the crisis-like situation facing colleges and universities and their leaders, but also the ways in which the event is situated (Grint, 2005).

One additional idea related to this theme deserves mention. The framing of an event or situation as a crisis by a leader is often reserved for the most serious of situations. One Vice President for Student Affairs indicated that this decision may not necessarily be a conscious or intentional one, but that *“we don't use [the word crisis] a lot...I have heard a lot of words like ‘tragedy,’ but not ‘crisis.’ We, in our incident response planning, we use that more than we talk about ‘crisis response planning.’ I don't think we shy away from the word, I just don't know that we tend to use it all of the time”* (Participant 14). Recalling the earlier findings associated with

the definition of crisis, there was general agreement among the respondents that crises threaten reputations, impact the lives of those involved in the institution, and disrupt the ways in which the organization functions. To this point, there is an element of risk involved in the communication around crisis-like phenomena, such as the following risk described by another senior Student Affairs leader: *“In one direction it could be to inflame something that really didn’t need to be inflamed because of the rhetoric around that, but the other could be to downplay it and create a backlash around the downplaying that creates its own crisis. The communication is critical, and it can work against you in either direction”* (Participant 35). This passage seems to suggest an idea described in more detail in the following section, that the communicative choice to frame some event or situation as a “crisis” carries consequences. These findings are consistent with the existing literature on framing and the management of meaning, particular in the leader’s ability—and ethical responsibility—to “manage meaning” during crisis-like situations (Fairhurst, 2007, 2011; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Smircich & Morgan, 1982).

Theme Three: Crisis as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

One final theme related to the construction of crisis through communication to emerge from the interviews points to the nature of crisis as a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that the communication surrounding crisis heightens emotions, attracts greater attention, and creates the conditions through which one experiences crisis-like situations. Several claims made in the interviews addressed the connotations associated with the word “crisis,” and the internal and external impact of using this label to describe the state of affairs in higher education. According to the interview data, there is something inherently provocative associated with the use of the “crisis” label, and the decision to call something a “crisis” can garner much public attention. As described by a Chief of Staff to the Chancellor, *“Crisis sells papers. Crisis is a word that I think*

resonates with the public and makes you want to read it. Provocative in such a way, like 'oh my God,' higher ed is in a serious situation" (Participant 3). Many of the interviewees were not surprised to learn of the nearly 1,000 instances of "crisis" references in the news articles analyzed in the first phase of this project. The desire or tendency for the media to sensationalize crisis emerged as a prevalent theme in this project. According to one leader from Student Affairs, *"The news trucks show up. 'Oh my gosh, it's a crisis.' The news trucks showing up do not mean that there really is a crisis. What they're looking for, and they love to come out here and do man on the street interviews to see if they can get a student to say, 'oh it's horrible.' Then sometimes we have a tendency to react to that"* (Participant 13). Another individual pointed out that higher education news outlets are *"like every news media outlet. They have an incentive to make a story, so they have incentive, perhaps, to over-crisisify"* (Participant 25).

Whether or not the media exaggerate crises in higher education lies beyond the scope of this dissertation given that the researcher intentionally interviewed higher education leaders and not the authors of the news articles declaring "crisis." However, in response to RQ3, the findings from this project do highlight the provocative quality surrounding the discourse of crisis in higher education, suggesting that the decision to call something a "crisis" heightens stronger emotions and attracts greater attention than alternative words like "incident" or "problem."

Previous experience with crises and crisis-like situations led many interviewees to comment on the emotional impact associated with this word. The many emotions attached to this label were characterized as *"baggage"* by one respondent in the following passage:

Crisis has baggage. One of the things that we talked about very explicitly - and you might have talked about it with some of my other colleagues who have been here a little bit longer - we used to call it a crisis response plan. And we recognized that the term crisis

had certain connotations that led people to not call, pick up the phone, and potentially activate our response plan because they're like, "I'm not sure if this is a crisis. I don't want to make it bigger than it really is" (Participant 12).

The administrator went on to acknowledge that *"we did very consciously recognize that the term crisis has baggage and creates a certain level of additional fear and concern that isn't necessarily always the best thing for addressing an issue that an institution of higher ed has to address"* (Participant 12). In fact, "baggage" emerged as an in vivo code that was used by numerous interviewees. When another senior administrator was asked to describe his experiences with crisis, he reiterated a widely acknowledged sentiment among the group—crisis is both provocative and impactful: *"I think if I were to say, 'we're in a crisis,' or the chancellor were to say, 'we're in a crisis,' that probably gets everybody's attention. We don't tend to use that word. I mean, you can probably find a whole bunch of stuff that we've said publicly, and I'd be surprised if we used the word very much...maybe because we're aware of the impact that it has"* (Participant 15).

One implication raised by the respondent comments is that by declaring an event or situation a "crisis," leaders have the ability to shape conditions through which others experience the situation—and therefore to lead others to experience it as a crisis. As a self-fulfilling prophecy, calling something a crisis can lead others to treat it as such. As one leader suggested, it is important for leaders in higher education to *"validate people's concerns and help people feel comfortable in the university's response [to a crisis-like situation] ...but also help deescalate the situation so they don't feel like the sky is falling"* (Participant 14). Crises imply *"a sense of something being out of control...kind of a whiff of chaos"* (Participant 17). Or as another person offered, *"it gives an implication of it being sort of the red alert or sirens sounding"* (Participant

20). As a socially constructed phenomenon, the findings from this project illustrate the challenge of being able to recognize the magnitude of the “crisis” a leader might be facing, while also paying attention to the panic that might accompany the use of this label.

RQ3 Summary

The comments of many interviewed for this project portray crises as both connected to some concrete reality, yet also socially generated through communication. These findings are consistent with the perspective offered by Estes (1983) that “crises are socially constructed as a consequence of social perception and definition; that is, a crisis may be said to exist if it is perceived to exist. By implication, findings from this study would seem to suggest that a crisis does not exist if people do not act as though it exists” (p. 445). These findings extend the work by Estes by clarifying the fundamental role that communication plays in the dynamics through which the reality of crises are shaped, and in some cases, created. To conclude this section, three dominant themes associated with the social construction of crisis emerged in the interviews for this project. First, in the views of those interviewed, if others perceive something to be a crisis, it is understood to be a crisis and treated as such. Secondly, respondents indicated that leaders have the potential to construct the perception of crisis through the act of framing, and with this authority lies great opportunity and responsibility. Finally, the act of designating an event or series of events as a crisis is a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that communication heightens emotions, attracts greater attention, and creates the conditions through which one experiences crisis-like situations. These findings support Hay’s (1996) claim that “Crisis, then is not some objective condition or property of a system defining the contours for subsequent ideological contestation. Rather, it is subjectively perceived and hence brought into existence through narrative and discourse” (p. 255). The combination of findings outlined in this section cast crisis

as a socially constructed, often subjective, and communicative phenomenon. Put another way, crises are incidents, events, or situations that present reputational risks and require immediate attention, and it is through communication and social interaction that they become crises. Crisis situations place unique demands on leaders that go beyond reputation management, and as discussed in the next section, there are a variety of skills, values, and competencies associated with the practice of crisis leadership in higher education.

Findings for RQ4: Crisis Leadership in Higher Education: Core Skills, Values, and Competencies

Given the pervasive nature of crisis in higher education, the final set of themes detailed in this section emerged in discussions of the leadership implications at stake during these crisis situations. These themes respond directly to the fourth research question: What skills, values, and competencies are important for the work of crisis leaders in higher education? As a way of answering this question, the researcher posed the following questions towards the conclusion of the interview: What role, if any, can or should leadership development programs play in preparing higher education leaders for organizational crisis? In what ways can campuses better anticipate, prepare for, anticipate, manage, and learn from crises? And finally, what competencies do you believe are most important for crisis leadership in higher education?

To a large extent, the type of crisis training and development one might benefit from depends to a considerable degree on how one thinks about crisis and their responsibilities during crisis. As suggested earlier, typical approaches to the study of crisis tend to focus primarily on the reputational implications of crisis situations, and a number of respondents described this as an unfortunate limitation. For example, as one individual posited, *“I think our greatest shortcoming sometimes is that we focus too much on reputational risk. I think you will find that*

across the board in higher education” (Participant 13). The findings of this study, and responses to the questions for RQ4 point to the need for a more holistic and comprehensive approach to crisis leadership in higher education—an approach to leadership that extends beyond reputation management and that encompasses a wide variety of competencies, skills, and values.

Additionally, as later described in this chapter, another emergent theme considers the role of experience and preparation in detecting, monitoring, and leading during crisis. Finally, the concluding theme points to the increasingly significant role of training and development in preparing leaders in higher education to deal with the complexity of crisis situations.

Theme One: Competencies, Skills, and Values Associated with Crisis Leadership in Higher Education

When asked in the interviews to describe the competencies, skills, or values that they found to be most useful to their roles as senior leaders when dealing with crisis situations, the administrators offered numerous responses of interest. These attributes were also mentioned during other sections of the interview, particularly as interviewees recalled their past experiences with campus crises and the lessons learned. The researcher coded for all competencies, skills, and values in the interview data, and in many instances, more than one leader offered the same or similar responses. A list of the core qualities and characteristics associated with crisis leadership that emerged in the interview data appears in Table 4.6, along with an illustrative quote from the interviews. The following attributes were all mentioned by numerous senior leaders, and as discussed in the next chapter, these qualities and characteristics present a dynamic, multifaceted, and comprehensive depiction of what constitutes the practice of crisis leadership in higher education.

Table 4.6. Core Competencies, Skills, and Values for Crisis Leadership

Competency, Skill, or Value	Illustrative Quote
Analysis, Synthesis, and Triage	<p><i>“I think you need to be darn smart! A quick study, and observant, and able to hold a lot of details, all at the same time. I think that you need to be comprehensive in your ability to quickly analyze impacts, and triage, and determine where collective efforts need to be deployed, most critically and in what order” (Participant 14).</i></p>
Adaptable/Flexible	<p><i>“We're not, you know, trying to figure out what our next step is [when a crisis strikes]. We know what our next step is, so to say we don't have protocols is not accurate. To say that we have protocols that are so detailed that I could tell you exactly what we're going to do in every situation, that's not accurate either. We have a framework in place a toolbox, and resources available to be adaptable and flexible when those incidents occur” (Participant 9).</i></p>
Calmness	<p><i>“I think my job is to exhibit calm-centered leadership. We've had crises. We've had times where there's been a death or major issue, major injuries. People look to leaders for direction. Even if on the inside I'm thinking 'Oh shit, this is bad. This is really bad.' On the outside, I'm working overtime to demonstrate calm leadership and to really be a steady presence that is almost unflappable” (Participant 13).</i></p> <p><i>“A crisis is just a problem right? How are we going to deal with it? What's the best way to address this problem? It isn't to start screaming fire but it may be to evacuate people from the building floor by floor. How</i></p>

Competency, Skill, or Value	Illustrative Quote
	<i>do we do that? We've already had our training. Everybody knows the protocol, but sometimes in a crisis people get nervous and they forget. Our role is to say, okay, let's go back to our training” (Participant 13).</i>
Care and Aftercare	<i>“Then the other most important thing that I learned that has been with me throughout my entire career is that it is imperative that you give aftercare for your staff because they're there and they're in the middle of it. When you're trying to support students in crises and other staff in crises, who takes care of the caregiver? I think people think of aftercare for first responders and law enforcement, but student affairs professionals and universities and colleges have to think about after care for the staff who are managing these crises because there's a toll that that takes on your own emotional well-being” (Participant 36).</i>
Collaboration	<i>“To that end, I do think that being collaborative is really critical. There are few crises that one can handle on his own or her own, so really having a trusting, collaborative relationship already established with the people that you will be working with, I think, is important, but also being able to do that in the moment” (Participant 14).</i>
Confidence and Courage	<i>“You've got to have a little bit of courage and not hurt feelings to make sure that you're able to say, ‘You know, we should probably get another voice here that we don't have right now and hear that voice.’ That does take some courage, I think. Part of my role is to</i>

Competency, Skill, or Value	Illustrative Quote
	<p><i>make sure we have all the right voices there” (Participant 27).</i></p> <p><i>“Something happens and you need to make a statement and you've got 20 minutes. You can't get everybody, and that's where being decisive, having some courage, having all the facts, is really key to that” (Participant 29).</i></p>
Do the Right Thing	<p><i>“I think that my hope would be that for any leader during a crisis, that the guiding question that we would all ask ourselves, regardless of what level-of-leadership we're in is, "What is the right thing to do” (Participant 34)?</i></p>
Empathy and Compassion	<p><i>“I think empathy is really important. When you look at other university crises that have really gotten out of control, it's frequently because the executive or leadership is seen as tone-deaf and just unwilling to listen. That balance, having a balance between being empathetic and always understanding what is in the best interest of the institution as a whole, can be in deep conflict, sometimes, but figuring out that balance is really important” (Participant 25).</i></p>
Humility	<p><i>“I think somebody that is willing to realize what they don't know and realize that that happens continually because the world keeps changing. Especially with social media, you know, cyber risks. So many different things to talk about. To have the commitment to not only themselves keeping up with what's happening in the world, but also committing to the folks that work for them and the</i></p>

Competency, Skill, or Value	Illustrative Quote
	<i>organization to continue training, I think is critical” (Participant 6).</i>
Information Gathering and Dissemination	<i>“Of course it goes without saying, communication is the key to successful emergency management planning. You cannot communicate enough, often enough, early enough, and long enough on any of this stuff. Of course, when you have a large complex organization as decentralized as we are, it's very easy to get confused and not communicate very well” (Participant 2).</i>
Institutional Focus	<i>“Generally, what I also say is what is best for the university is the path we will take [during a crisis]. We have to think in broad terms of what makes this university great or better. Really when it comes down to it, we're a people organization” (Participant 3).</i>
Learning	<i>“The Chinese or Asian, some kind of symbol for crisis is challenge and opportunity, so you have to then think about what can we learn from one thing? And how can we then apply that in other situations” (Participant 28)?</i>
Presence and Availability	<i>“First of all, just being available is so important. People want to see that the leadership is present and willing to help with whatever needs to be provided. Sometimes it means being full on in the front, you know, sort of leading the group through a process, and sometimes it's not” (Participant 26).</i>
Resilience	<i>“We underestimate I think how resilient we are, each as individuals, or as an institution when we're tested. There are lots of people that rise to the occasion when they have to. We saw that in [our crisis]. While it was the</i>

Competency, Skill, or Value	Illustrative Quote
	<i>most difficult time in my career, it also provided the most rewarding and meaningful moments in my career, just because of some of the really fine things that happened when we felt really under siege” (Participant 30).</i>
Safety	<i>“I think ensuring that the individuals that were involved in [a crisis], that they themselves were safe, and really the safety of anyone else, was our primary role as leaders” (Participant 18).</i>
Transparency and Honesty	<i>“I think we decided to be as transparent as we could about everything. One of the things I learned early on is that you've got to share the bad news. You just can't share the good news, you've got to share the good and the bad and we try to be honest with people. That transparency and honesty was really important” (Participant 30).</i>
Trust	<i>“The first one that comes to mind is really having a leader who trusts the decision making and that's at its core, trusts the decision making and abilities of the people who report to him or her. If you have a leader who really tries to get down into the weeds and either doesn't trust or just has some compulsion to make those lower level decisions, it creates a lot of chaos internally in managing a crisis. I think having leaders who really have that ability to, and part of it comes from length of time at an institution, part of it comes from their own personality and awareness of that act. It's a little bit of a hodge podge, but I think in dealing with crises, that is probably the biggest factor that I think makes a difference in how well an</i>

Competency, Skill, or Value	Illustrative Quote
	<i>institution operationally moves through handling a crisis” (Participant 37).</i>
Values-Based Leadership	<i>“With [a crisis] like this, at least what it did I guess to me and probably many of us in this case, is that it kind of starts at a very individual level. What's your personal ground, what are your values, what's your level of resiliency? What do you really believe in? It tests issues of loyalty to the organization, loyalty to leadership. Part of it is just you've got to start out being a fairly grounded person with some principles and know who you are” (Participant 20).</i>

Theme Two: The Role of Experience and Preparation in Detecting, Monitoring, and Leading During Crisis

A second theme to emerge from the interviews associated with RQ4 related to the role of experience and preparation in detecting, monitoring, and leading during crisis. One leader suggested that *“Identifying the crisis is the part that people miss because we just jump right in and start trying to solve stuff”* (Participant 36). In a similar vein, one senior administrator suggested that *“not everything is a crisis because the world isn’t perfect ... But when something pops up, then you have to sit down and understand is this a crisis or is this a temporary blip? And sometimes temporary blips are crises and sometimes they’re not, but you gotta weigh them because you can’t run organizations leaping from crisis to crisis. It is impossible”* (Participant 8). The interview responses, as offered below, addressed how this process requires leaders to be steadfast, nimble, and vigilant, while also relying on best practices in risk management. In order to further clarify the ways that respondents thought about this process, the researcher asked

respondents the following question: “As a senior leader in higher education, how do you know when you have a ‘crisis’ on your hands or a mere routine problem?” The responses to this question address the value of experience and preparation.

The interview data suggest that the ways in which leaders differentiate isolated incidents and inconvenient nuisances from what might be characterized as crises is a communicative process and is both subjective and rational. One leader described the process “*as subjective and judgmental, as it is rational*” (Participant 18). Another administrator acknowledged that there are some instances that are “*very easy to identify as crisis, such as if there’s a shooter out on the green, many other crises are less clear and they emerge in time*” (Participant 31). Experience, according to one individual, equips leaders with “*the gut sense that something is going to blow. You always feel better when you fear that and it doesn’t happen, rather than having something come out of the blue and hit you when you don’t expect it*” (Participant 12).

In describing their experiences with crisis situations, numerous leaders mentioned the desired quality for leaders in higher education to slow down, assess the environment, and carefully explore the situation at hand. Several leaders indicated that by “*leaning into a crisis*” (Participant 26) and “*adopting a rolling awareness*” (Participant 31), as raised in the interviews, they may further distinguish incidents and challenges from “*true crises*” (Participant 3). One leader described the process accordingly: “*What does crisis do? Crisis speeds everybody up. The best crisis managers are the ones who are slowing down while everybody else is speeding up ... you got to slow yourself down because crisis triggers the fight or flight impulse*” (Participant 36). Drawing on the interview data, the art of detecting and differentiating crisis calls for leaders to “*assess as rapidly as you’re able what the present and likely scope of that challenge is*” (Participant 10) and to adopt an “*internal vigilance [that] is required 24/7*” (Participant 20). The

experience involved in this process was characterized by many using similar terms, including the importance of *“being able to size up a problem and to know whether or not it’s truly a crisis or it’s just an unfortunate set of events”* (Participant 13), to *“take a step back and see how broad this could really go”* (Participant 1), and to cultivate a *“good sense for sifting and winnowing that which needs our most immediate attention”* (Participant 14). What one leader characterized as the ability to *“bob and weave”* (Participant 28), speaks to the role of experience and improvisation that is involved in detecting those situations which might rise to the level of crisis.

Risk management and crisis preparation are necessary, according to many of the respondents, in order to adequately prevent, avoid, or prepare for crisis situations. As one interviewee described the preparation involved, *“Risk management is all about somewhat preventing, but more it’s all about prepping for crisis. One of the reasons that crises spawn all other crises is because we don’t do appropriate risk management”* (Participant 36). Put another way, *“We really manage and monitor things to avoid them getting into the crisis stage, but sometimes that’s not preventable”* (Participant 18).

One final note regarding this process deserves mention. As several comments from the interviewees indicated, the ability to distinguish and differentiate crisis is difficult. One administrator joked that this process requires a *“magic wand”* (Participant 32). As noted by one Vice President representing University Communications, the process of preparing for, predicting, and distinguishing crises from other types of incidents is especially a challenge within the context of higher education

because you have a lot of academic administrators who came up through a system of committee-based decision making and they haven’t had a lot of exposure to things and therefore can’t predict where a crisis might go because they haven’t hit the nexus of

media and public and elected officials getting whipped up on an issue and what those dynamics look like and how quickly they develop (Participant 20).

This process, as described by one Chief of Staff to the Chancellor in the following passage, is made all the more problematic due to the decentralized system of higher education:

I think people who are doing this role well ... have built the relationships so that they're the natural funnel for information, so that they may be getting heads up on many things that are either a nuisance or not a crisis yet, but potential crisis, up to the things that are truly crises. If you're doing it well, you're hopefully getting as many of those in as early in the lifecycle of becoming a full-blown crisis and trying to manage them in advance. Of course, that doesn't always happen, and I think what I see as different about universities versus other large bureaucracies, like the city [government], is we have a very decentralized system here (Participant 25).

In their attempt to triage what might be a crisis, the desire to be “*by nature, caring and very invested in our communities' concerns, can sometimes trigger us to classify or think of things as crises which are not truly yet crises*” (Participant 25). Based on this data, the subjective and rational attempt to make their “*best educated guess*” (Participant 22) as to what constitutes a crisis is likely the result of some combination of both experience and preparation.

Theme Three: The Need for Training and Development

Experience in dealing with crisis can be extremely helpful according to the respondents, but many noted that experience alone is not sufficient. The respondents commented on both the value and scarcity of leadership training and development in higher education at various points in the interviews. In particular, crisis leadership training and development emerged as an important theme in the comments of many of those interviewed, and in further response to RQ4, the skills,

values, and competencies found to be important for the work of crisis leaders in higher education may be included in formal and informal training and development efforts.

A number of those interviewed suggested that their participation in formal training and development programs was “*very helpful, very instructive*” (Participant 4) in dealing with crisis situations in higher education. The kind of training that is needed often depends on the way that one thinks about crisis and their crisis responsibilities. In many instances, as described in the passage below, these programs incorporated various case study exercises that allowed leaders to consider elements of crisis response, risk management, and risk mitigation:

The cases were real world and they were wickedly complex and very definitely many of them were crisis situations and crisis response episodes. I would say yes, I was the beneficiary of some formal training. Quite honestly, I think much, much more of that kind of thing is needed. I don't think anybody should take a chair of this sort without having had some formal training opportunities about crisis response, risk management, risk mitigation. To me, these things, you ought not to be considered a prepared senior executive if you haven't gone through some formalized training. Is it perfect? No. Does it give you a set of mental tools, constructs that you can use to work your way through difficult situations. Yes. That's the benefit of it, is that it can give you some ready reference tools that you can draw upon to say, 'Okay, step back, reflect. Don't be emotional. Then respond quickly and fully' (Participant 10).

In addition to the case study method, several individuals reflected on their various roles in formal and informal mentoring programs as being most critical to their crisis leadership preparation. For one senior Information Technology leader,

my experience was actually seeing crises happen to people who were a step above me, and being provided the opportunity to participate in conversations. Not being in the middle of the mess, but being able to provide counsel or observations to the people who were trying to do some of the response. And because you were removed from it, you're not in the middle of the heat, and so you have opportunities to provide observations or suggestions or ask questions ... And I would say that was the number one thing that helped me better understand how to deal with crises. I think the being there during the crisis, being elbow to elbow with people, I think that's just Management 101. But I do think that an experience where you see other people in crisis and how they respond to it, if you can see that up close, you have the opportunity to take in a lot of stuff. You have the opportunity to see how people respond to certain things (Participant 8).

As suggested by these passages and others, these programs were found valuable for both providing the skills needed to effectively manage crisis situations and “*creat[ing] opportunities for necessary self-reflection*” (Participant 35).

In addition to campus-based programs, many leaders acknowledged the value of their participation in formal and informal consortia and in building relationships of mutual trust with colleagues in similar roles across the country. As one Vice President for Student Affairs noted, “*people seek their development in different kinds of places*” (Participant 31). Although she never participated in a formal crisis training program, she went on to acknowledge the value of her National Vice Presidents Group – a group of 25 vice presidents from public and private institutions that meet twice a year to “*process crises together*” (Participant 31). For example, the Vice Presidents of Student Affairs from the University of Missouri and Yale University – both of whom recently dealt with crises on the national level – were both involved in the consortium. As

the Vice President described, *“we would spend half a day on each of those crises as they evolved, and we would dissect them with the person who owned the crisis. It was very helpful training, very instructive ... And with this broad cross-section of people, you can really get a handle on major things going on”* (Participant 31).

Despite the perceived value of formal and informal training and development programs, many individuals commented on the scarcity of training and development efforts and their general lack of preparation with crisis situations. As one respondent noted,

I think it's both about training and education and I also think it's a little bit about how we recruit people into leadership roles in higher education. There are a lot of people who were a biology professor and then became a biology chair and then became an associate dean in the college and then ultimately became a provost and then became president. And they never had any administrative training and they certainly haven't managed any sort of crisis except how to run a lab. No discredit to those people, but these enterprises are becoming enormously complicated and how do we prepare people who come up through the academic ranks who have a whole wealth of knowledge that's incredibly valuable to the academic enterprise? How do we help them see the administrative and the business enterprise sides of things? Just as a basic level of understanding steps that they can even identify the things that will become crises. I think that's what actually causes some of these crises, people are not able to see how this incident in its small way is going to blow up if it's not managed well into a crisis. That's in large part because they've not had the experience to do it (Participant 1).

This idea was reiterated by another senior leader who expressed that *“you can never go wrong with more training, but I think we have to focus it more appropriately”* (Participant 3). The need

for additional training in this area, coupled with the growing complexity of higher education, emerged as an important finding in this project.

RQ4 Summary

The findings from this section point to the dynamic, multifaceted, and comprehensive nature of crisis leadership in higher education. Training and development initiatives, as presented above, may prepare leaders for the practice of crisis leadership. Although training and development was widely regarded as important by most of the participants in this study, several participants acknowledged the critical role of one's lived experience. According to one individual, *"I've been in some [leadership programs], but I wouldn't say that they prepared me very much for crisis ... For crisis management, I think the best preparation, frankly, is the totality of your life experiences and your vision and the kind of person you are"* (Participant 31). This sentiment was echoed by another senior administrator who suggested that *"The experiences are unfortunate, but we learn and then we're able to apply those things. Ongoing training is critical, but I don't think there's much of a replacement for experience... You have a portfolio of experiences that allows you to adjust and adapt based on the situation that you're faced with, and I don't know that there's any replacement for that"* (Participant 9).

To summarize, three themes emerged from the data that directly address the fourth research question. The first involves the wide array of competencies, skills, and values associated with crisis leadership in higher education. The second and third themes emphasize the value of both experience and training and development in preparing leaders in higher education to deal with the complexity of crisis situations. Moving beyond traditionally linear and prescriptive approaches to crisis management, the themes highlighted in this section contribute to a broader understanding of the notion of crisis leadership. The researcher will revisit these themes in the

final chapter, as they offer key implications for higher education scholars and practitioners moving forward.

Summary of Findings

As summarized in Table 4.4, the findings from this project align directly with the four research questions presented at the outset of this dissertation. The convergence of findings portray crisis as a socially constructed, often subjective, and communicative phenomenon. These events or situations challenge institutions and their leaders, and the implications for the practice of crisis leadership are expansive and multifaceted. The reputation-centered emphasis of traditional crisis management scholarship may not adequately address the nuanced conceptualization of crisis leadership depicted in these findings, and as further described in the next chapter, a closer investigation of both the scholarly research and these findings can contribute to both the study and practice of crisis and crisis leadership in higher education.

Table 4.4. Summary of Research Questions and Emergent Themes

Research Questions	Emergent Themes
RQ1: What events/situations are characterized as crises in higher education?	Theme #1: Multiple Categories of Crisis Theme #2: Complexity and Cross Cutting Nature of Crisis Theme #3: Areas of Impact and Responsibility
RQ2: How do these events/situations become defined and labeled as crises?	Theme #1: Multiple Definitions of Crisis Theme #2: Crisis as Distinct from Other Events or Situations Theme #3: Impact of Social Media

Research Questions	Emergent Themes
<p>RQ3: What are the prominent characteristics of the discourse around crisis and crisis leadership in higher education?</p>	<p>Theme #1: The Perception of Crisis; The Reality of Crisis</p> <p>Theme #2: The Framing of Crisis by Leaders</p> <p>Theme #3: Crisis as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy</p>
<p>RQ4: What skills, values, and competencies are important for the work of crisis leaders in higher education?</p>	<p>Theme #1: Competencies, Skills, and Values Associated with Crisis Leadership in Higher Education</p> <p>Theme #2: The Role of Experience and Preparation in Detecting, Monitoring, and Leading During Crisis</p> <p>Theme #3: The Need for Training and Development</p>

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Chapter Preview

As discussed in the previous chapters, an understanding of crisis and crisis leadership matter within the context of higher education. It is also the case that these topics are complex matters as it relates to theory and practice, for the definitions of crisis are numerous, the potential impact of crisis situations is distributed across numerous divisions and units, and the nature and scope of crisis leadership vary considerably. This study makes clear that more exploration is needed to clarify these concepts theoretically, and to help leaders to consider the implications of these findings in addressing the challenges they face at their institutions.

This concluding chapter offers a discussion of the research questions identified at the outset of this project, and the linkages between them, along with a synthesis of the relevant literature to inform these conclusions. Specifically, building upon the findings from RQ1 and RQ2, the researcher questions claims of crisis in higher education. In response to the findings from RQ3, the researcher highlights the centrality of communication in the theory and practice of crisis leadership in higher education, and through a coupling of communication theory and the relevant findings from this project, the researcher posits a Crisis Leadership Communication Continuum as a tool for conceptualizing the nature of communication in crisis leadership. Finally, in considering the central findings from RQ4, the researcher offers a crisis-oriented adaptation of Ruben's (2012) Leadership Competencies Scorecard. In an attempt to reconcile both the contested nature of crisis with the high-stakes expectations placed on leaders during crisis-like situations, this chapter continues with a discussion of implications for the practice and preparation of crisis leadership in higher education. The dissertation concludes with suggestions for future research and closing comments.

RQ1 and RQ2: Challenging Claims of Crisis in Higher Education

In her work on the subject, Roitman (2014) claims that “Crisis is an omnipresent sign in almost all forms of narrative today; it is mobilized as the defining category of historical situations, past and present” (p. 3). The ubiquitous and casual invocation of crisis cuts across organizational sectors and bodies of literature; and as illustrated in the findings from the content analysis for this project, the popularity of crisis holds true for institutions of higher education. As this dissertation considers not only what characterizes crisis in higher education, but also how crises are shaped through communication and what is most at stake for the many stakeholders involved in crisis situations across institutions of higher education, the following extended passage by Roitman is useful:

Ultimately, I invite the reader to put less faith in crisis, which means asking what is at stake with crisis in-and-of-itself. ‘Crisis’ is a term that is bound up in the predicament of signifying human history, often serving as a transcendental placeholder in ostensible solutions to that problem. In that sense, the term ‘crisis’ serves as a primary enabling blind spot for the production of knowledge. That is, crisis is a point of view, or an observation, which itself is not viewed or observed. I apprehend the concept of crisis through the metaphor of a blind spot so as to apprehend crisis as an observation that, like all observations or cognitions, does not account for the very conditions of its observation. Consequentially, making that blind spot visible means asking questions about how we produce significance for ourselves (p. 13).

Certain narratives and questions remain possible through the invocation of crisis, yet this very invocation simultaneously forecloses other possibilities. Rather than take the notion of crisis for granted, Roitman’s claim aligns with the scope and findings of this current study whereby crisis

is both questioned and problematized as a topic for scholarly inquiry. By problematizing the phenomenon of crisis and questioning the assumptions embedded in this characterization, this project occurs at a time when many pundits and stakeholders declare—often with great confidence and conviction—of the unfolding “crisis in higher education.” For example, in her book *American Higher Education in Crisis?: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Blumenstyk (2014) posits the following in her introduction: “The doomsday narrative is seemingly everywhere, with predictions of a massive ‘shake-out’ coming to the postsecondary-education landscape because of rising costs and recession-weakened finances, and of a ‘college bubble’ on the verge of busting under the crushing weight of student debt” (p. 2). This idea echoes concerns by Readings (1996) of the “university in ruins,” due in part to an external legitimization crisis whereby “It is no longer clear what the place of the University is within society nor what the exact nature of that society is” (p. 2). Rather than taking the condition of crisis in higher education as a given, this project challenges this assumption by presenting crisis as a socially constructed, often subjective, and communicative phenomenon. As discussed in Chapter Four, the communication-oriented inquiry into crisis and crisis leadership found in this study may contribute to both contemporary thinking and practice, particularly in response to the growing chorus of higher education critics who predict “doomsday” for the sector.

As noted earlier, the researcher intentionally selected leaders from institutions that recently dealt with a crisis-like situation or incident to participate in this project. Each of these institutions faced a generally high profile event related to one of the crisis types identified in the content analysis (e.g., academic crisis, athletics crisis, technological crisis, facilities crisis, financial or business crisis, human resources crisis, leadership or governance crisis, natural disaster, public safety crisis, racial or identity conflict, or student affairs crisis). Recent examples

include student deaths and suicides (Erdley 2016; Parker, 2012), academic (Stripling, 2014) and athletic scandals (Wolverton, 2012), cyberattacks (Heyboer, 2015), bomb scares (Preston, 2012), natural disasters (Mangan, 2012), tensions due to race relations (Stripling, 2015), and leadership and governance challenges due to public debate and disagreement with the state legislature (Flaherty, 2016a; Flaherty, 2016b). Recalling existing definitions of “crisis” in the scholarly literature, these events and situations could logically be classified as “crises” due to the threat placed on stakeholders and the reputational implications placed on in the institution (Coombs, 2015; Heath & Millar, 2004; Ruff & Aziz, 2003). In many instances, these events or situations serve as “turning points” (Fink, 1986) for the institution—and at times, for the sector of higher education – in terms of how individuals and institutions conceptualize of, prepare for, and address these disruptions. Although it is easy to categorize these moments as crisis-like, it is worth heeding Roitman’s (2014) call to “put less faith in crisis” (p. 13), or like Blumenstyk (2014), to add a question mark to claims of American higher education in crisis. Rather, as the findings from this dissertation research seem to suggest, the language of social construction allows for a more complex analysis of crisis-like situations—an approach that allows for a broader conceptualization of crisis that is subjective, contested, and inherently communicative.

Both RQ1 and RQ2 explore the types of events/situations that are characterized as crises in higher education, and the process by which these events/situations become defined and labeled as crises. Despite the large number of news articles dealing with some type of institutional or environmental “crisis in higher education,” the findings from the qualitative interviews in this study point to the wide variety of definitions associated with crisis. In many instances, as acknowledged by Grint (2005), crisis does not necessarily emerge objectively, but it becomes a crisis “at the point at which a ‘crisis’ is pronounced by someone significant and becomes

accepted as such by significant others” (p. 1474). Put another way by Hay (1996), “Crisis, then, is not some objective condition or property of a system defining the contours for subsequent ideological contestation. Rather, it is subjectively perceived and hence brought into existence through narrative and discourse” (p. 255). Moving beyond a limited view of communication, leaders have an opportunity to frame events as “crises,” but this framing depends on the receptivity, expectations, and assumptions of other stakeholders inside and outside of the organization (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a, 2016b). The framing of crisis, then, is jointly shaped by both leaders and followers—and as such, it is difficult to analytically disentangle the situation from the jointly constructed framing of the situation. As Grint (2005) describes the difficulty of separating the situation from the leaders, “the former is often a consequence of the latter, in short leaders provide accounts of the world that are implicit in our understanding of ‘the situation’” (p. 1490). The researcher would add that this account is jointly shaped through communication by both the leader and the many stakeholders who have an interest in the organization and the crisis situation.

Adding to the complexity of the joint construction of crisis are the many stakeholders who have an interest in the work of higher education. As one Chancellor noted in an interview, *“I think there's a high degree of scrutiny of things that go on in higher education, where you have a number of vested interest groups from the legislature to the governor, media, alumni, and potential employers, so all of these groups are looking at what's going on here from different lenses. A crisis can have a lot of reverberations in lots of different ways”* (Participant 28). These stakeholders often have competing expectations for higher education, and as suggested by Lawrence (2017), “A significant leadership challenge results from the fact that there is often a fair amount of variance in understandings of a university/college’s mission among external

constituencies” (p. 56). The wide array of internal stakeholders, including students, faculty, staff, and administrators, also tend to view the institution of higher education through different lenses. Thus, what might be perceived as a “crisis” for one stakeholder group, may not be seen as such by other stakeholders. Leaders in higher education must understand these varying, and at times competing, assumptions and expectations from the different internal and external stakeholders, while still taking serious any perceptions of crisis from any of the groups. As one of the interviewees for this study noted, *“When you become a public higher education [leader] you have to manage up, down, and like 32 other directions. It's not just your board or your boss and your staff, it's all the other stakeholders”* (Participant 1). Within the context of crisis, this challenge is frequently urgent, public, and subject to a wide degree of scrutiny. For these reasons, it is important to call attention to the framing behaviors of leaders (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), as discussed in the findings, while also attending to the critical role of stakeholder perceptions and their joint efforts in the construction of the “crisis” frame.

The findings from this project point to the multiple definitions of crisis, the critical role of the leader in both detecting and monitoring higher education crises, and the socially constructed nature of crisis in higher education. Again, leaders must attend to events or situations that are perceived by others as “crises,” and leaders also have an opportunity to communicatively frame events or situations as “crises” for any number of reasons. Given these findings, what might this suggest about the widely-invoked condition of “crisis in American higher education?” The challenges are significant, and there does not appear to be a decrease of issues on the horizon for leaders in higher education. As mentioned by many of the respondents for this project, higher education leaders remain very much concerned about a wide array of issues facing colleges and universities—issues that could certainly elevate to the level of “crisis”—including, but not

limited to, financial pressures, campus violence and ongoing threats to student safety, and campus unrest due to racial tensions. In addition to the existence of these complex challenges, another finding from this project points to the pervasive role of social media in accelerating, accentuating, and escalating events to the level of crisis. Addressing recent racial unrest in particular, Cole and Harper (2016) note that “For decades, these types of racial incidents have been prevalent on college campuses, but today’s connectedness of people by social media, online news stories, blogs, and other forms of digital media visually captures and publicizes racial incidents faster and farther than ever before” (p. 1). This current historical moment is marked by the convergence of numerous institutional and environmental challenges, the existence of varying and at times competing stakeholder expectations, and the availability of a digital platform to publicly disseminate news and scrutinize leaders in higher education. A discussion of whether crisis in American higher education is overblown must consider these three distinct, yet interdependent, variables.

Given the previously discussed findings and the various conceptualizations of crisis offered in this project, it seems as if claims of American higher education in a perpetual state of crisis may be exaggerated and overblown. As a senior leader representing Academic Affairs offered, *“I think [the description of higher education in crisis] is overblown. I do. I think what we are facing is somewhat of a public perception problem. I don't think we get our message out very well about what we're all about. Therefore, the public draws their own conclusions”* (Participant 29). Others challenged the public impression that *“the sky is falling”* (Participant 14), and as one leader suggested, *“I'm not trying to diminish the word ‘crisis,’ but I do think it could be indeed overblown because it's a provocative statement and makes people read the Chronicle [of Higher Education]”* (Participant 3). As noted earlier, an analysis of the media’s

attempt to exaggerate crises in higher education lies beyond the scope of this dissertation due to decisions regarding research design; however, the initial evidence from this project seems to suggest that although the discourse of crisis in higher education is certainly provocative, it may be unfair to depict the sector in a perpetual condition of “crisis.” Working from this assumption that higher education as a sector is not universally “in crisis,” the findings from this project advance a socially constructed conceptualization of the phenomenon of crisis that is brought into existence and very much shaped by communication. There are certainly individual institutions that are dealing with financial issues that threaten their long-term survival, and others that face isolated crisis-like situations. However, it appears that many of the general issues facing colleges and universities are better understood as challenges that demand leadership attention, and that “crisis” remains reserved for those isolated events or situations of significant magnitude that threaten reputations, impact the lives of those involved in the institution, disrupt the ways in which the organization functions, have a cascading influence on leadership responsibilities and obligations across units/divisions, and require an immediate response from leaders.

RQ3: Centrality of Communication in the Theory and Practice of Crisis Leadership

As noted earlier, according to Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), “We become leaders through our ability to decipher and communicate meaning out of complex and confusing situations... There is risk involved when stakes are high” (p. 2). Approaching this subject from a social construction angle shifts the focus of crisis from phenomenon that are “out there” to those that are constituted through communication between leaders and followers. Several claims made in the interviews highlighted the leader’s ability to construct and shape the perception of crisis through the act of framing. It is through framing that leaders communicatively shape the reality through which

others perceive and respond to crisis-like phenomena. Grint's (2005) insights on this topic are particularly germane to these findings:

when a crisis occurs the successful leader must become decisive, demonstrate a ruthless ability to focus on the problem and to ignore the siren calls of the sceptics and the cynics ... Quite what that crisis might be seems to vary considerably, indeed, whether calling a situation 'a crisis' is necessarily the appropriate response seems to depend less on what the situation allegedly 'is' and more on how that situation can be handled most advantageously – or least advantageously – by the leadership (p. 1468).

The context or situation is constituted and actively constructed through communication; and as depicted by a number of those interviewed for this study, the frequently objective, strategic, and intentional decision to frame a situation or event as a "crisis" emerged as a key finding in this study. Put another way, leadership involves the ability to situate and make sense of phenomenon in a way that is co-constructed with those individuals whom they lead. This idea is consistent with Grint's thoughts on the proactive role of leadership in the construction of context:

In effect, leadership involves the social construction of the context that both legitimates a particular form of action and constitutes the world in the process. If that rendering of the context is successful – for there are usually contending and competing renditions – the newly constituted context then limits the alternatives available such that those involved begin to act differently. Or to put it another way, we might begin to consider not what is the *situation*, but how it is *situated* (pp. 1470, 1471).

The pivot from noun to verb takes into consideration the ways in which situations, and crises in particular, are framed and constituted through communication, often to the advantage of the individual involved in the framing.

One of the major findings to emerge from this research relates to the earlier claim that while incidents *happen*, crises are *created*. The creation occurs through communication, and it is through communication that they must be addressed (B. Ruben, personal communication, December 5, 2016). Particularly in response to RQ3, the findings from this study highlight the role of communication in both shaping the perception of crisis and in the leadership act of framing crisis. Communication theory provides an appropriate conceptual orientation into the study of crisis in higher education, especially for it allows one to consider both the social construction of crisis and the enactment of crisis leadership. Perhaps not surprisingly, communication was found to be critical to both the study and practice of crisis leadership in this study, similar to previous dissertations on the subject of crises and critical incidents in higher education (Agnew, 2014; Garcia, 2015; Gill, 2012; Jacobsen, 2010; Menghini, 2014). For example, as one senior leader in Student Affairs posited,

the number one theme that has come out of all [live exercises and tabletop simulations] is communication. It's the number one thing that every time needs to be improved, regardless of how well you think you've done, you think you've prepared, how well you collaborate with others, communication is by far the number one that comes out of any of those exercises and any of those live events of things that we can be better, can do different, can do more of. I've never come across a situation where we have learned that we could do less, that we didn't need as much [communication] (Participant 9).

Given the pervasive interest in communication as it relates to the response to – and ultimately recovery from – crisis situations, what follows is a proposed Crisis Leadership Communication Continuum for scholarly and applied consideration. The proposed continuum builds upon the

existing leadership communication literature, and reflects the findings from this dissertation project.

Approaching leadership through the lens of social influence, leadership and influence outcomes are understood to be a consequence of a complex set of factors that include the relationship between leader(s), follower(s), message(s), and context(s) and the interpretive activities of those involved (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a). As summarized in Chapter Two, communication, a “universal human experience,” is critical to social behavior, yet familiar enough to lead it to be taken for granted (Thayer, 1968, 2003). According to Ruben (2005), “Communication is the process through which the social fabric of relationships, groups, organizations, societies, and world order – and disorder – is created and maintained” (p. 294). To be human is to communicate – and central to this dissertation project, to *lead* is to communicate. In fact, everything that the leader does is communicative in that it sends a message about both content and relationship (Bateson, 1972; Barge, 2014; Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). As noted by Witherspoon (2004), “leadership is first and foremost a communication process” (p. 2), an idea that is supported, reinforced, and further developed by recent communication scholarship (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014a, 2014b; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a, 2016b). From this perspective, communication is understood to be more than a tool or conduit for social influence. Rather, communication is an orientation, a standpoint, a way of understanding leadership dynamics that extends beyond the study of discourse. Bearing this in mind, the continuum offered below addresses the content of one’s response during crisis situations; but it also considers the leader’s relationships with followers, his or her understanding of organizational history, and one’s recognition of the precedent-setting nature of leadership communication. This perspective allows one to consider crisis leadership communication as

more than the public crisis response. Crisis leadership involves, but extends beyond, reputation management, and it is the result of an ongoing series of interactions with organizational stakeholders.

Borrowing from Mitroff's (2004) important work on the distinction of crisis management and crisis leadership, crisis leadership calls for a more expansive understanding of the types of risks that a unit, department, or institution faces—and a continual emphasis on personal and institutional learning at all phases of the crisis process. Additionally, as summarized in Gigliotti and Fortunato (2017), effective crisis leadership goes beyond delivering the most appropriate and timely response(s) to the most appropriate audience(s). In fact, this simplistic view of communication violates much of what is understood about human communication. Rather, communication theory would point to the importance of understanding the organization's history with crisis, appreciating the diverse needs of one's stakeholders, and leading with integrity throughout the entire crisis process (i.e., before, during, and after). Crisis leadership involves prevention and management, consistency and clarity, trust and transparency—with communication playing a critical role during each phase. By building and maintaining a “reservoir of goodwill” at the individual and collective levels, a foundation is set for authentic, values-centered dialogue when crises do occur. Specifically, it seems likely that the reputation and history that serve an individual leader and collective organization well during times of normalcy are essential for effective leadership and performance during times of crisis. This reputation provides a solid and sturdy foundation upon which to stand when crises strike.

The role of communication in crisis leadership is made prominent in two other models for crisis leadership. First, for Klann (2003), communication, clarity of vision and values, and caring relationships are critical components to crisis leadership. This emphasis on communication and

relationships is also central to Muffet-Willett's (2010) dissertation on the topic. In particular, Muffet-Willett posits five crisis leadership actions that are most relevant to colleges and universities in her crisis leadership practical process model, with communication and feedback mechanisms situated at multiple junctures in the process (see Figure 5.1). Administrative decision making is critical, but so too are those mechanisms for soliciting feedback from key stakeholders across the institution. The model also indirectly speaks to the inherent limitations of a focus on crisis management or crisis prevention. Rather, crisis leadership encompasses the communication that occurs within the senior-level decision making, in organization-wide training initiatives, and in the messages that occur before, during, and following the crisis situation.

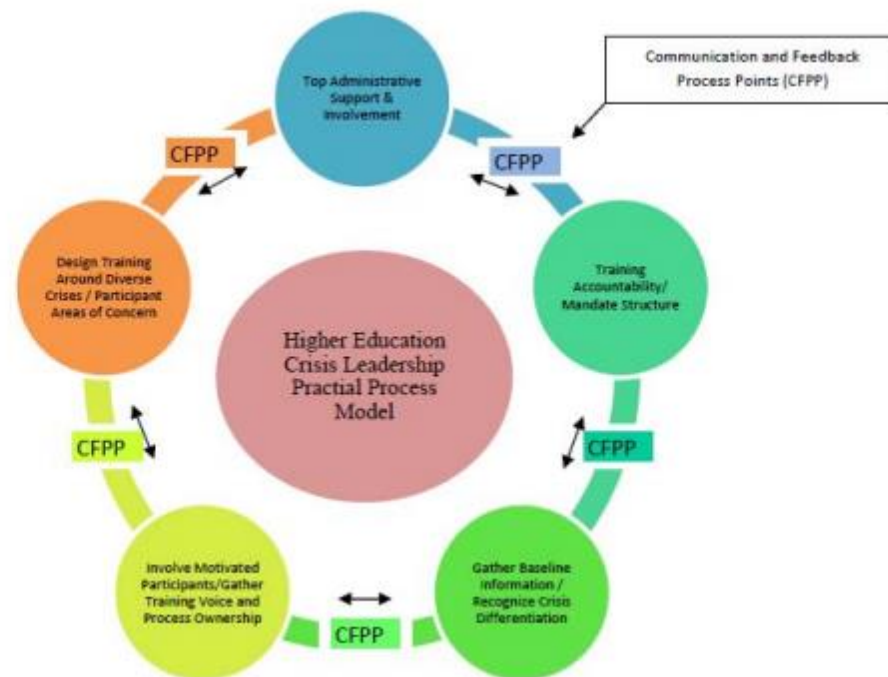


Figure 5.1. Higher Education Crisis Leadership Practical Process Model (Muffet-Willett, 2010)

The findings from this project, coupled with the growing body of scholarship on leadership communication, crisis communication, and crisis leadership, led the researcher to develop a Crisis Leadership Communication Continuum. As depicted in Figure 5.2, the continuum ranges from compliance to dialogue, with self-focus and other-focus positioned on opposite ends of the continuum. The model is meant to illustrate two opposing tensions that leaders must negotiate when communicating with internal and external audiences. Presented as a continuum, the framework suggests that individuals might be oriented more to one direction or the other of the continuum. For example, when crisis situations impact colleges and universities, the reaction often tends to be a “measured, legalistic response that so often dominates crisis management in academe” (Stripling & Thomason, 2015, para 2), what the researcher characterizes as a “compliance” approach in the model. This tendency to engage in self-oriented, compliance-driven communication in response to crisis situations is pervasive in higher education as in many other sectors, and one might argue that a concern about the reputation of the institution is the primary influence guiding the communication. One might consider the type of communication that often occurs in customary press conference following active shooter situations. There is a tendency for leaders to report primarily on the facts of the situation with a very careful effort to avoid acknowledgement of guilt or wrongdoing. On the opposite end of the continuum, lies the tension of an other-oriented, dialogue-driven response—one that is arguably motivated by a primary concern for those stakeholders most impacted by the crisis situation. Within this orientation, leaders are guided by a desire to recognize, learn from, and appropriately address the needs, expectations, values, and concerns of institutional stakeholders and invite them to co-construct the path forward for the institution. This latter approach privileges the role of communication as more than a tool for leadership influence. Instead, it allows for the

conceptual and operational pivot from a public relations/reputation-centered understanding of crisis leadership to a dialogic, follower-centered approach that best meets the multiple demands and stakeholders of concern. Note that this model does not dismiss the need for a measured, legalistic response to campus emergencies. Referring to the earlier example of the post-shooting press conference, leaders may acknowledge the legal needs of this communicative moment after clearly demonstrating a genuine concern for the victims of the incident and a sincere desire to learn from the situation. In such a situation, an argument could be made that the reaction from stakeholders would be less favorable if the compliance-oriented response is the only type of communication to occur before, during, or following crisis. Furthermore, a limited compliance and reputation-oriented response to campus crisis limits the potential for institutional learning and growth that might otherwise be possible in crisis situations.

The research findings also suggest that there is a broader communication backdrop that situates any crisis leadership interactions. This backdrop influences leadership decision making and communication behaviors, and it contributes to how individuals might perceive these leadership actions. The backdrop consists of the mission and core values of the organization, past experiences with crisis situations, and stakeholder expectations—all of which ultimately shape the ways in which leaders communicate during crisis situations. Finally, recognizing that leadership communication actually begins prior to the crisis itself, it is important to acknowledge that there is an ongoing history that precedes crisis situations, and the crisis casts the spotlight on leadership behaviors that might not otherwise receive immediate or focused attention.

This framework acknowledges the utility of approaching crisis leadership through a values-centered lens—an orientation that positions clarity, consistency, and congruency between the way that one leads during crisis and those core values that are most critical to an institution.

For example, referring to the seminal case of the Johnson and Johnson poisoning crisis from 1982 mentioned in Chapter Two, the company was forced to immediately respond to a situation threatening the health and safety of their “patients”—a stakeholder group recognized as the priority in their Credo (“Our Credo Values,” 2016). At the same time, the decisions made by organizational leaders would also have a lasting impact on the perception of the company by a wide array of current *and* future stakeholders. Crises often test the core values of an organization, and by using their Credo as a guide for decision making and communication in recalling the Tylenol product from every provider, the organization was successful in both protecting their reputation and demonstrating a genuine commitment to the care of their patients. This example further illustrates the limitations of a dichotomous way of thinking about crisis communication. As illustrated by the triangular fulcrums in the center of each dimension of the model, leaders must find the right balance in navigating the tensions associated with crisis communication, all the while remaining sensitive to the three pervasive factors playing an active role in the backdrop.

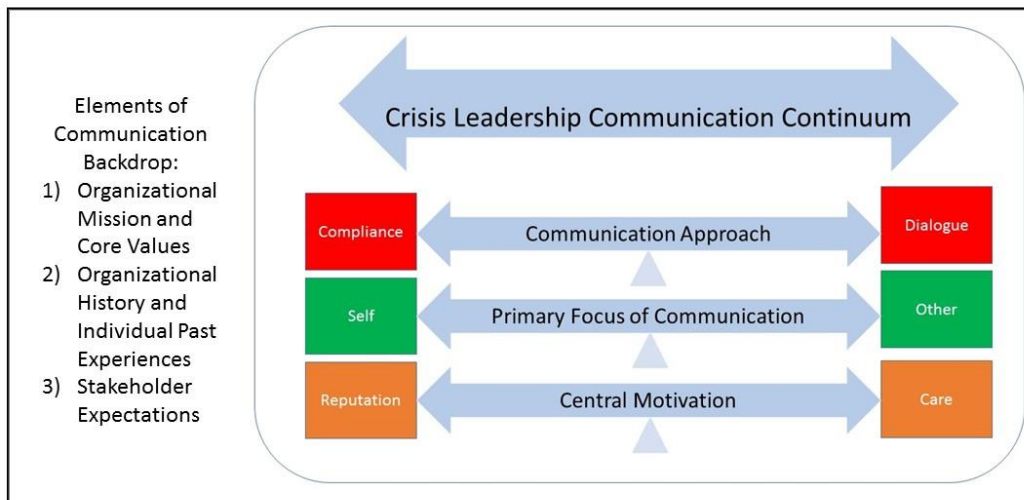


Figure 5.2. Crisis Leadership Communication Continuum

In his summary of a recent annual American Marketing Association’s higher-education conference, Lee Gardner (2016) from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* described the attendee emphasis on aligning public statements with the institution’s “missions and values, and their subsequent actions must validate their words” during crisis situations (Your Daily Briefing, 2016). As Rebecca John, vice president for marketing and communication at Augsburg College noted at the conference, “We are now in a post-‘thoughts-and-prayers’ world and an insincere or ineffective response may be worse than no response at all” (Your Daily Briefing, 2016). These insights reflect the findings from this project. As one senior administrator posited,

I think at the end of the day, I think honesty works best and the only kind of leader that I ever want to work for is someone who will do what is right and then figure out the narrative after. If you ever make decisions based on what the narrative will look like, I think you're doing it wrong. That becomes a spin game. I just think if we try to make it

look like we're doing the right thing as opposed to doing the right thing, people are smart enough to read through that. That can be really tough, but I really think that needs to be the most singular value that any leader that I would want to work for would have (Participant 1).

This sentiment was shared with many participants for this project. A review of the competencies, skills, and values identified as most critical for crisis leadership in higher education reflect the desire for a more authentic, honest, and stakeholder-centered communication strategy that is centered around integrity, principles, and “*doing what is right*” (Participant 16). As another leader described his institution’s approach to crisis leadership, “*the administration naturally wants to protect [their] brand and protect the university’s reputation which has taken years to build up and, you know, which it’s earned, which is legitimate and that’s a legitimate concern, but service to the brand can’t be, can’t take precedence over service to the truth or doing things right or acting according to your mission statement*” (Participant 8). Reflecting on the nature of dialogue, Arnett and Arneson’s (1999) summary of Buber holds true: “life is lived in the *between* – between persons, between person and event, between person and idea, even in crisis. Life is not captured in the other or in me, but between us” (p. 128).

Many of the leaders interviewed for this study identified the potential issues with the tendency for a self-focused, compliance-oriented, and reputation-driven approach to crisis communication in higher education. According to one senior leader from Student Affairs, “*I think our greatest shortcoming sometimes is that we focus too much on reputational risk. I think you will find that across the board in higher education ... Focusing on reputational risk over students, over people, is a huge shortcoming*” (Participant 13). She went on to acknowledge one of the provocative lessons found in *The Hunting Ground*, a popular documentary film about rape

crimes on college and university campuses across the country: *“In a crisis situation, nobody is going to follow somebody who's reading a script and saying now we're supposed to do this.*

Watch 'The Hunting Ground.' It will give you a nugget of wow, that institutional reputation, that overly scripted talking point. We just hammer on the same message no matter how ridiculous it is. It's off-putting” (Participant 13). Recognizing the limitations of a linear, transactional approach to leadership communication, the message alone is not sufficient. As another senior leader from University Communications acknowledged,

The easiest way to handle a crisis is to say, ‘This is a problem. This is what we're going to do. This is when we're going to do it,’ and then do it. If you do those three things, you can communicate not as well and come out the other end quite in good health. If you don't do those things, well then you can communicate as well as you want, you probably won't get very far (Participant 20).

Referring back to the Crisis Leadership Communication Continuum, one could envision a number of concepts that uphold, influence, and shape stakeholder perceptions of the leadership communication, including past precedent, leadership actions and behaviors, and the duration and degree of severity associated with the crisis event or situation. As one respondent raised in an interview, the pervasive emphasis on reputation *“clouds”* leadership communication, and *“Time is not on our side. As leaders, time is way against leadership. Time is way against thoughtful leadership, thoughtful value-driven leadership. It's just against it, because thoughtfulness can't be rushed. Yet that is the expectation today in crises”* (Participant 34). As noted earlier, crises occur through communication, and it is through communication that they must be addressed (B. Ruben, personal communication, December 5, 2016). A nuanced understanding of communication theory helps to point out the inherent limitations of a public relations/reputation-

oriented approach to crisis leadership, particular in juxtaposing this approach from what one senior leader labeled a genuine approach, or what the researcher would characterize as a dialogic approach. As he offered, *“The genuine part is to really understand what's going on and to understand it from the lens of the people involved, which means you have to suspend your own lens. The goal is simply to understand”* (Participant 35).

Given that communication is understood to be a conceptual orientation, as presented throughout this dissertation, this continuum is not meant to be a formulaic recipe for message design and delivery. Rather, the goal of the framework is meant to encourage greater reflection on behalf of leaders when considering the ways that they communicate and the content of their messages, and greater attention to the multiple needs of multiple stakeholders, and to the values that are important to the institution. As a conceptual framework designed to invite greater complexity and nuance to contemporary thinking around issues of crisis leadership and communication, this continuum can help to assess the type of communication that leaders engage in during crisis situations, and the model may also serve as a cautionary reminder for leaders of the limitations of approaching crisis situations from a purely “PR”/reputation-oriented lens. Finally, in light of the social construction approach taken in this project, the continuum seeks to address the many variables involved in the construction process, including leaders, stakeholders, message infrastructure, media environment, and historical context.

RQ4: Crisis Adaptation of Leadership Competencies Scorecard

As discussed in the findings to RQ4, when asked to describe the competencies, skills, or values that they found to be most useful to their roles as senior leaders during times of perceived crisis, the senior leaders offered a myriad of responses. Ruben’s (2012) leadership competencies scorecard provides a useful heuristic for thinking through the various characteristics of effective

crisis leadership. Although the scorecard was not necessarily designed to exclusively focus on crisis situations, nor was the scorecard used by the researcher as a primary theoretical construct for this project, the findings from this project map directly to the scorecard. Recall the two-dimensional model from Chapter Two that points to the need for excellence in both the position-specific or “vertical” competencies and cross-cutting or “horizontal” competencies (Ruben, 2012; Ruben, et al., 2017). Both sets of competencies are critical to effective leadership during events or situations that are characterized as crises in higher education, and the competencies, skills, and values associated with crisis leadership offered in this project align directly with these five primary competency areas, with communication, as discussed previously, arguably being the most critical competency area for the practice of crisis leadership in higher education.

Ruben’s (2012) leadership competencies scorecard is the result of his synthesis of the extensive professional literature on leadership, leading him to develop a diverse portfolio of requisite competencies based on five broad areas – analytic competencies, personal competencies, communication competencies, organizational competencies, and positional competencies. Each of these broad competency areas encompasses a number of themes, as illustrated in Figure 5.3.

LSC 2.0: Five Major Competency Themes, Each Including a Number of Specific Competency Areas				
Analytic	Personal	Organizational	Positional	Communication
Self-Assessment	Character, Personal Values, and Ethics	Vision-Setting, Strategy Development, Goal-Setting	Education	Credibility and Trust
Problem-Definition	Cognitive Ability and Creativity	Management and Supervision	Experience	Influence and Persuasion
Stakeholder Analysis	Enthusiasm	Information/Knowledge Management and Boundary Spanning	Expertise	Interpersonal and Group Relations, and Team Building
Systems/Organizational Analysis	High Standards	Technological Capability	Knowledge of Sector	Listening, Attention, Questioning, and Learning
Analysis of Technology to Support Leadership	Personal Conviction and Persistence	Collaborative Decision Making and Empowerment	Knowledge of Organization	Writing and Public Speaking
Problem-Solving	Self-Discipline and Self-Confidence	Teaching and Coaching	Familiarity with Work	Diversity and Intercultural Relations
Review and Analysis of Results	Role Modeling	Change, Risk, and Crisis Management	Professional Involvement	Facilitation, Negotiation, and Conflict Resolution

Figure 5.3. Leadership Competency Scorecard Themes (Ruben, 2012)

As Ruben describes these broad and expansive competencies, he argues that the many challenges that leaders face require a diverse portfolio of knowledge and skills, “and the ability to analyze situations and employ those competencies as needed” (p. 2). Crisis situations demand a unique set of leadership competencies, skills, and values, as discussed in the previous chapter, and these attributes map directly to the scorecard’s framework.

As noted earlier, the competencies, skills, and values discussed in the last chapter were each recognized by more than one administrator as critical for effective crisis leadership in higher education: analysis, synthesis, and triage; adaptable/flexible; calmness; care and aftercare; collaboration; confidence and courage; do the right thing; empathy and compassion; humility; institutional focus; information gathering and dissemination; learning; presence and availability; resilience; safety; transparency and honesty; trust; and values-based leadership. Additionally, as

discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, appropriate preparation is critical for leadership effectiveness in crisis situations, along with the ability to define crisis, detect and monitor crisis, and analyze stakeholder perceptions. Using Ruben's scorecard as a conceptual guide and the findings from this project as empirical evidence, the researcher developed the following crisis adaptation of the scorecard as illustrated in Table 5.1.

Analytic Competencies	Personal Competencies	Organizational Competencies	Positional Competencies	Communication Competencies
<p>An ability to analyze the situation, the environment, and the perceptions from diverse stakeholders, including the following</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • analysis, synthesis, and triage • defining crisis • detecting and monitoring crisis • analyzing stakeholder perceptions 	<p>An array of personal values associated with the practice of crisis leadership, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • calmness • care and aftercare • collaboration • confidence and courage • do the right thing • empathy and compassion • humility • presence and availability • resilience • transparency and honesty • trust • values-based leadership 	<p>An understanding of the policies, behaviors, and norms that require organizational abilities and focus on the organization as a unit of analysis:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adaptable/flexible • familiarity with crisis management plans, procedures, and protocols • information and knowledge management • institutional focus • learning • safety 	<p>An understanding of the positional and sector-specific roles, responsibilities, and expectations, based on Ruben's (2012) original positional themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • education • experience • expertise • knowledge of sector • knowledge of organization • familiarity with work • professional involvement • knowledge of crisis avoidance, prevention, and resolution 	<p>An understanding of communication and the ability to effectively communicate before, during, and following crisis, based on Ruben's (2012) original communication themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • credibility and trust • influence and persuasion • interpersonal and group relations, and team building • listening, attention, questioning, and learning • writing and public speaking

Analytic Competencies	Personal Competencies	Organizational Competencies	Positional Competencies	Communication Competencies
			in higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • diversity and intercultural relations • facilitation, negotiation, and conflict resolution

Table 5.1. Crisis Adaptation of Leadership Competencies Scorecard

As suggested previously, and reflected in the conceptualization presented in Table 5.1, the notion of crisis leadership, particularly crisis leadership in higher education, extends beyond reputation management, the prevention of a crisis, and the public relations-oriented management of a unit, department, or institutional crisis, as represented by the diverse and broad array of required competencies, skills, and values offered above. The tendency to foreground and privilege reputational implications over the many other requisite crisis leadership behaviors is not only limited, but it may also be detrimental to one's overall leadership effectiveness. As one senior administrator suggested, this tendency is problematic for it leads administrators to consider *"not what is the right thing to do, but what impact is this going to have"* (Participant 34)? By interrogating the use of the "crisis" label to describe events and situations in higher education and depicting a more holistic portrayal of crisis leadership, the findings from this project advance contemporary thinking of crisis leadership in higher education as a phenomenon that involves, but extends beyond, reputation management. The focus on the concept of crisis leadership throughout this project and the crisis adaptation of Ruben's scorecard highlight the broad portfolio of competencies required for leadership during these critical, public, and high-

stakes moments of organizational disruption. There is additional value of viewing crisis leadership in terms of Ruben's model, particularly in that it allows for a broader conceptualization of leadership across competency areas and that it is intricately tied to a variety of existing leadership theories. Finally, the model makes clear that while crisis leadership competencies are reflective of position and experience, like general leadership effectiveness (Agnew, 2014; Ruben, 2012; Ruben & Gigliotti, under review), many of the competencies needed for crisis leadership are cross-cutting in nature.

Implications for Crisis Leadership in Higher Education

The findings from this dissertation may advance both the study *and* practice of crisis and crisis leadership in higher education. Recall earlier claims for communication research to be consequential (Daly, 2000), and for communication theory to “reflect far more stridently on the relevance of practice (Zelizer, 2015). What follows is a summary of concepts, principles, and takeaways – all of which align with the prominent findings from this project - that have implications for the practice of crisis leadership in higher education. As an engaged scholarly research endeavor, it the researcher's hope that these theory-informed and research-driven implications are germane for the practice of crisis leadership across institutions of higher education. In addition to the three earlier concepts introduced in this chapter—challenging claims of crisis in higher education, the Crisis Leadership Communication Continuum, and the crisis adaptation of Ruben's (2012) leadership competencies scorecard—the findings from this project raise a series of additional implications.

Perception Matters

Given that crises are perceived and defined differently by a wide array of institutional stakeholders, leaders in higher education must seriously attend to these varying perceptions from

both internal and external constituent groups. Individual perceptions matter, and as noted earlier in this project, as a socially constructed phenomenon, crises exist if others perceive the existence of crisis. As suggested by Menghini (2014), “leaders play a key role in determining when a crisis is a crisis...by [relying] on intuition and experience, as well as on cues about what threats the situations might pose to both their institutions and their individual ability to lead” (pp. 180, 182). It would be wise for leaders to err on the side of taking stakeholder perceptions seriously, as opposed to discarding claims of “crisis” as isolated examples of negative or unfavorable individual sentiment. Furthermore, by encouraging distributed leadership and cultivating collective awareness of stakeholder perceptions, senior leaders can invite others into this important and ongoing process of audience analysis.

Institutional Scope

The interdependent influence of crisis situations demands attention and vigilance from all senior leaders. Although there is a natural tendency to focus primarily on those crises that are most germane to one's unit or division, the findings from this project suggest that crises—as opposed to more localized incidents, problems, or difficulties—require an institutional focus and may often have a cascading impact across individual units or divisions and across institutions. Recall the previously shared comment by a Vice President for Student Affairs, *“I don’t think about these crises as student affairs crises, I think of them just as institutional crises, and so, you know, I have a portfolio that involves some of the crises that occur, but they’re really institutional crises”* (Participant 21). She went on to acknowledge later in the interview that as an *“institutional officer, your purview is not just your portfolio...So, like when we had this racist, misogynist e-mail, that wasn’t just a student affairs problem, that was a campus-wide problem”* (Participant 21). By adopting an institutional lens, senior leaders in higher education can better

grapple with the interdependent complexities associated with crisis situations in higher education.

High Performing Incident Response Teams

Related to the above point, the responsibilities for preparing for, managing, and responding to crisis situations in higher education often extend beyond one individual or one department. The interdependent influence of these situations calls for high performing incident response teams that share primary responsibility over all aspects of the crisis event. These teams can ascertain the facts surrounding crisis situations, particularly since “*in crisis, the facts are not entirely clear*” (Participant 15), and subdivide the immediate and long-term tasks for moving forward based on one’s primary responsibility and area of expertise. Recall that for the purposes of this project, leadership is understood to be a process of social influence that is inherently communicative (Ruben, et al., 2017; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016a; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016b). The growing body of literature on distributed leadership (Bennett, et al, 2003; Bolden, 2011; Gronn, 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2006) is particularly useful as one considers the ways in which leadership and social influence in higher education is distributed in crisis situations. As defined by Bennett, et al. (2003), “Distributed leadership is not something ‘done’ by an individual ‘to’ others, or a set of individual actions through which people contribute to a group or organization...[it] is a group activity that works through and within relationships, rather than individual action (p. 3).

Although one or more individuals will likely take on a dominant leadership role in shaping the actions of the team, an outcome of a high performing team is that “*you don’t have to make decisions in isolation*” (Participant 23). This collective approach to leadership, particularly in crisis situations, is consistent with the sacrosanct tradition of shared governance in American higher education.

The Counter-Cultural Need for Agility

As suggested earlier in this project, colleges and universities face a noteworthy obstacle when it comes to effective crisis management, communication, and leadership due, in part, to the decentralized organizational structure. The pervasive tradition of committee-based decision making and the tradition of shared governance further complicate the rapid response demanded by crisis situations. Crises require immediate attention (Laermer, 2003; Mitroff, 2004), yet there is a longstanding expectation of careful, deliberate, and democratic decision making efforts. Colleges and universities are regularly criticized for being slow-moving operations (Krakowsky, 2008; Ruben, et al., 2008); and agility may at times seem countercultural. One of the primary goals for leaders is to create a culture of preparedness that allows for agile and swift—yet also sound and thoughtful, values-based and stakeholder-centered—decision making when crisis situations occur. Note that this need builds upon the previous items, in that it requires attention to stakeholder perceptions, demands an institutional focus, and relies very much on the collective and collaborative spirit of decision making found in higher education institutions.

Infrastructure for Using and Monitoring Social Media Activity

Social media, and the use of digital media more broadly, emerged as a central theme in this dissertation project. The data from this project highlight the role of social media in accelerating, accentuating, and elevating events to the level of crisis. As a democratizing force, the media can be used to the advantage of institutional representatives as a way of disseminating information and helping to communicatively shape perceptions associated with crisis situations. In much the same way as social media allow for a rapid and broad dissemination of information on the institution's behalf, they may also create the conditions for the rapid and broad dissemination of undesirable information among the diverse users. In a recent feature on social

media and university leadership in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Gardner (2016) posited the following: “When a protest begins or a racial incident is reported, a clock starts ticking. A president and his or her team must evaluate how to respond, and quickly. If they delay, the competing voices of social media can quickly take over the narrative, or it can appear that the president is insensitive or oblivious to the situation” (p. 4). Leaders in higher education must not only accept the medium of social media as a platform for communicating with geographically diverse stakeholder groups, but individuals must develop expertise in monitoring social media activity as it relates to crisis preparation. As one Chief of Staff for a Chancellor put it, “*we’re doing as best we can, but I don’t think most universities have thought about putting together a sophisticated infrastructure...as it relates to the rise in social media*” (Participant 25). A number of organizations, such as the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, Academic Impressions, and the Social Media Strategies Summit, are now offering conferences, webinars, and white papers on how best to use and monitor social media for the benefit of higher education. Additionally, there is a quickly growing array of proprietary software that colleges and universities may purchase to help monitor and manage their social media activity, including Hootsuite, Sprout Social, Brandwatch, and NetBase. The art and science involved in detecting and monitoring crises, as offered in this project, requires a commitment of resources on behalf of university leadership.

Preparing for The Inevitability of “Crisis”

In supporting his position for more crisis-oriented training and development for leaders in higher education, one administrator suggested that “*The world gets more complicated. It doesn’t get simpler. There’s always going to be either evil people doing horrific things or stupid people doing stupid things or systems that are corrupt. Inevitably, yeah, you’re going to confront it. It’s*

just the sense of what's the magnitude of the challenge, but you're going to have challenges"

(Participant 30). Given the ubiquity of crisis-like situations in higher education, crisis preparation is paramount. There are many linear and prescriptive strategies in the literature that one might adopt to prevent, avoid, or prepare for crisis situations (Benoit, 1995, 1997; Coombs, 2015; Fortunato, 2008; Heath & Millar, 2004; Mitroff, 2004; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). The crisis taxonomy offered in the earlier chapter may serve as a guide for designing crisis preparation efforts, ensuring that leaders in higher education consider the diversity of crisis situations that might impact their institution. Furthermore, consistent with cultivating an institutional orientation, there may be value in encouraging leaders to consider possible cases that extend across one's individual unit or division. As noted by a senior leader representing Facilities Management, *"just plan and plan and plan and think you've planned for everything, but when the incident comes down, there's always going to be a ton of things that you didn't plan for. You almost need to plan for the worst case scenario, always. Hopefully, when something happens it's not the worst case scenario and you're much better prepared for it"* (Participant 2). Popular approaches to crisis planning include informal and formal seminars and workshops, emergency tabletop exercises, full-scale operational exercises, crisis communication simulations, operations-based exercises, functional exercises, and full-scale exercises (Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program, 2013).⁴ The results from this study seem to suggest that these approaches to crisis planning, particularly those that currently utilized by colleges and universities, are not fully adequate.

⁴ See Zdziarski, Dunkel, and Rollo (2007) for a more specific exploration into crisis planning in higher education.

Media Training

Media training is often embedded in broader crisis preparation efforts. As noted throughout this dissertation, the framing of situations or events as “crises” plays a critical role in shaping stakeholder perceptions. Additionally, leaders are not the only actors involved in framing behaviors, as media professionals also hold responsibility for these framing decisions. When asked to reflect on his advice following a major institutional crisis, a senior Academic Affairs leader offered the following: *“anybody who wants to be an administrator should get some very, very good media training, because it looks awful whenever you have the information, and you say, ‘no comment,’ or just can't answer the question, you're too scared, or you say something stupid, and it makes the situation worse. Media training is extremely valuable when the crisis hits”* (Participant 4). Of the voluminous writing on best practices for communicating with the media during crisis, three principles stand out as most useful by Coombs (2006): be quick, be consistent, and be open. Related to this final principle, the following insight from Doug Lederman, co-editor of *Inside Higher Ed*, is especially critical to the notion of crisis leadership raised in this project: “I can say that in crisis, one should be honest and forthright. Don’t ever try to hide the truth because if the media believe you are covering up the truth, or if it is found that there were truths being covered up, there is a good chance that will be worse than the actual crisis itself.” (as cited in Parrot, 2014, p. 171).

The media have responsibility to make decisions about what news is covered and the tone of the coverage. Many senior leaders involved in this project acknowledged the media’s role in *“driving a crisis”* (Participant 13), so much so that *“they’ll pick up on a story if it already supports an existing narrative”* (Participant 5). Thus, as it relates to media training, it is not enough for leaders in higher education to gain comfort and confidence in communicating with the

media. Leaders must also proactively identify ways of cultivating relationships of trust with media professionals, recognizing their key framing role when crisis situations occur. According to Lawson (2007), “Indeed, during a crisis, the manner in which an institution responds to media inquiries may make a real difference in how the institution’s responsiveness or professionalism is portrayed to each of its target audiences and the general public” (p. 107). When facts are falsely presented in the media’s report of an event or situation, leaders in higher education need to also determine the best ways to correct inaccuracies using the most appropriate channels available. Given the emphasis on stakeholders throughout this project, it is worth reiterating the media’s role as a critical stakeholder that deserves attention from leaders in higher education.

Training and Development

Building upon the previous points of careful and deliberate preparation, in general, and the role of media training, specifically, the findings from this dissertation raise several important implications for the role of training and development in higher education. Many respondents commented on the utility and value of their participation in formal and informal training and development initiatives related to crisis management and crisis communication, and as previously discussed, the kind of training that is needed depends on the way that one thinks about crisis and their crisis responsibilities.

Additionally, the findings from this study point to the need for more thorough and deliberate preparation of leaders in higher education, particularly as it relates to the complex evolution of crisis situations. The “trial by fire” approach that many respondents identified in this project is arguably not suitable or sustainable. As leaders make the transition into roles with more extensive institution-wide responsibility, formal and informal mentoring and shadowing opportunities may be useful as individuals “*see other people in crisis and how they respond to it*”

(Participant 8). Succession planning efforts can also be used to carefully identify, recruit, and prepare leaders who are equipped to navigate these demanding crisis situations. Additionally, taking into consideration the constructionist approach used in this study, leadership training and development efforts could focus more directly on strategies for preventing situations from evolving into crises. By gaining a deeper understanding of the role of “framing” in higher education leadership, as discussed throughout this dissertation, leaders can more carefully treat crisis situations as ongoing phenomena that require routine attention.

Crisis situations demand a unique set of leadership competencies, skills, and values – all of which might be included in the wide array of existing higher education training and development programs summarized in Chapter Two. Furthermore, a comprehensive leadership communication orientation may add greater nuance and depth to these existing leadership development initiatives. Put another way, rather than solely emphasizing the reputational impact of crisis situations, these initiatives have an opportunity to highlight the socially constructed and often subjective emergence of crises in higher education, to prepare leaders for the multifaceted practice of crisis leadership, and to equip leaders with an orientation that extends beyond their individual unit, department, or institution. Additionally, crisis situations and the corresponding leadership decisions can serve as unique examples for teaching and learning in a wide array of training and development initiatives. These findings highlight the importance of emergency planning and media training, but they also point to the need for sophisticated training in the area of higher education crisis leadership.

Learning from Crises and Crisis Leadership Across Sectors

As mentioned in Chapter Two, institutions of higher education may be unique from other types of organizations based on a number of characteristics, including the following: multiple,

sometimes blurry purpose(s)/mission(s); unclear “bottom line;” structural complexity; loosely coupled elements, decentralization, and “shadow systems,” whereby individual departments and units create their own structures and services (e.g., technology and accounting functions) because the central systems do not provide adequate or necessary services; distinctive internal administrative and academic units with (often vastly) different structures, cultures, accountability requirements, core values, and leadership traditions and practices; differing core values among administration, academics, staff, and students; decentralized decision making; traditions of autonomy, self-direction, academic freedom, and collegial decision making; and an absence of attention to succession and transition planning (Ruben & Gigliotti, under review). In many other ways, however, colleges and universities share much in common with other organizations. For example, corporations, government, non-profits, and religiously affiliated organizations all have an extensive array of internal and external stakeholders who influence and are influenced by the activities of the organization (Ruben & Gigliotti, under review). Additionally, as suggested earlier, while crisis leadership competencies are reflective of position and experience, many of the competencies needed for crisis leadership are cross-cutting in nature. Positional experience cuts both ways in that it can inform how one approaches future situations, but it can also limit leaders from adapting to the complexities of a changing environment. Working from the assumption that crises are socially constructed through communication, the principles, values, and characteristics of crisis leadership offered in this dissertation arguably extend across organizational types. Given that there are many similar expectations placed on colleges and universities as they relate to the practice of crisis leadership, there is an opportunity for higher education leaders to learn from crises and responses to crises across organizational types in order to inform approaches to crisis leadership within higher education.

High Expectations; Potentially Limited Reality

Despite the many similarities between institutions of higher education and other organizations, there is a unique variable that emerged in this research that deserves mention. When situations perceived as crises occur, many look to the senior leader for guidance, hope, and a sense of security. The leader plays a critical role in the “management of meaning” (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) during these disruptive moments. Many administrators in this project acknowledged this important role. As one interviewee mentioned, *“The leader’s job is to control as much fear, and make sure people are safe. So yes, the leader is critically important”* (Participant 4). Or as another individual noted, *“People want to hear from [the leader] for a whole host of reasons. Maybe they want to feel comforted and safe. Maybe they want information. Maybe it’s all about hearing from that chief executive officer, because that voice at that time, indicates how important the issue is”* (Participant 34). Leaders hold a great deal of responsibility for the well-being of the institution and of its stakeholders, and crisis situations heighten emotions, raise expectations, and orient internal and external audiences towards the words and actions of the leaders.

Despite the tremendous responsibility and expectations placed on leaders during crisis events or situations, the individual leader or collective group of senior leaders in higher education are somewhat limited in terms of what they can individually accomplish. As already suggested, unlike corporations and other organizations, leadership is widely distributed, decision making remains shared among various actors and governing bodies, and change often occurs at a slow pace – all of which run to counter to the agile, nimble, and swift response to crisis that is widely expected. Consider the recent example of protests across the country regarding race relations, and the significant demands placed on senior leaders by students and other stakeholders. Chancellors and presidents across the country certainly hold great influence and authority, yet they remain

fully accountable to governing boards, they share responsibility with faculty as part of shared governance structures, and as offered throughout this project, they must weigh a diverse array of expectations across stakeholder groups. Furthermore, there is often disagreement as to how best to move forward in the face of crisis situations. As Berrett and Hoover (2015) describe this tension in light of recent campus racial protests, “Many institutions—some riven by protests or shamed by bigotry—are weighing lists of demands, an array of strategies for promoting inclusion. But changing a racial climate is a long-term struggle, students, faculty, and administrators agree. And nobody, anywhere, can say exactly what it would mean to win” (para 7). As Walter Kimbrough, president of Dillard University, acknowledges in this article, “Some demands go beyond the power of even well-intentioned administrators. ‘You’re trying to change the entire culture of a campus...and I don’t think any president or student affairs office can do that’” (para 7). The reality of high expectations and limited decision making, deserves further consideration as it relates to the practice of crisis leadership in higher education. Some might advocate that higher education be run more like other organizations in order to keep up with the expectations placed on leaders during crisis situations. Other alternatives include the identification of alternative metrics for assessing leaders in higher education during crisis situations, or equipping these leaders with the skills to set realistic expectations in response to stakeholder demands. The researcher advocates that leaders in higher education be challenged to aspire to a higher standard in terms of ethical decision making, value-centered leadership, and dialogic communication during crisis; yet, the reality of leadership limitations in higher education deserve acknowledgement and attention. Put another way, leaders in higher education face quite a paradox—at a time when institutions of higher education and their leaders should aspire to the noble role of societal standard bearers as it relates to the practice of leadership, they

face a reality of complex challenges, a decentralized system of decision making, and a culture of debate, discord, and disagreement in regards to their core purpose(s) and their future.

Implications for Future Research

Future research may build upon the concepts, claims, and findings offered in this dissertation. First, as suggested in this project, the decision to invoke the label of “crisis” places certain demands and expectations on senior administrators who maintain leadership responsibility for the unit, division, and/or institution. Additional research in this area may explore the nature of social construction and the role of communication through interviews with other stakeholder groups most impacted by crisis situations, including students, faculty, staff, governing boards, and alumni, in order to better understand the similarities and differences among these groups. Future scholarship may further explore the distributed notion of crisis leadership by broadening the scope of institutions and/or the individuals beyond the senior level with crisis responsibilities. It may also be useful to compare higher education crisis types, crisis responses, and leadership behaviors and expectations with other sectors, including business, non-profits, government, healthcare, and religious organizations.

The researcher identified over 1,000 recent articles from higher education news outlets that characterize some type of “crisis” in higher education, yet, the motivations and interests of the authors of these articles remain unclear. It may be worth interviewing or surveying the authors of these articles (or others that write about higher education “crisis”) to assess their reasons and motivations for choosing the “crisis” label. The various models and frameworks presented in this dissertation could also benefit from further empirical research in order to further validate their adequacy and accuracy. For example, does expertise across leadership competency domains result in a quicker recovery following perceived crises, does a more dialogic approach

to leadership communication result in greater trust from those most impacted by crisis situations, or do the various crisis classification schemes offered in this project capture future instances of crisis in higher education? Finally, the researcher remains very interested in the notion of crisis leadership as an act of improvisation for future scholarship (Gigliotti, 2016). Given the proliferation of acts of violence or athletics scandals on college and university campuses, there are preexisting scripts that leaders are expected to follow. These scripts tend to limit communication to what the researcher identified as a compliance or reputation-focused orientation whereby leaders go through the motions, say the “right” thing, and “spin” the framing as a way of protecting the best interests of the individual or organization. By conducting research on crisis leadership as improvisation, future scholarship may explore the ways in which leaders “act first, think second,” (Gigliotti, 2016, p. 188) despite the wealth of literature that suggests the importance of deliberate, rational, and logical decision making.

The findings from this project highlight both the cross-cutting and role-specific competencies, values, and skills associated with the practice of crisis leadership, and the need for additional crisis leadership training and development emerges as an important goal. One final avenue for future research involves the ways in which formal and informal training and development efforts prepare leaders for these multifaceted leadership roles, particularly as institutions and their leaders navigate a rapidly changing environment. Future research can more closely explore existing approaches to crisis leadership training and development, and can identify specific ways of incorporating the findings from this study into these leadership development opportunities.

Conclusion

The communicative focus on the social construction of crisis and the theory and practice of crisis leadership in higher education discussed in this dissertation will likely remain a relevant topic for colleges and universities. The multi-method investigation of this topic led to a number of rich findings for scholars and practitioners. First, there exist a myriad of different types of incidents or situations that are typically classified as “crises” in higher education – crises that are cross-cutting in nature – based on the following taxonomy: academic, athletics, technological, facilities, financial/business, human resources, leadership/ governance, natural disaster, public safety, racial or identity conflict, and student affairs. Next, the senior leaders interviewed for this project addressed three central findings related to the process of defining and labeling phenomena as crises: there are multiple, and at times conflicting, definitions of crisis, crises are distinct from other types of events or situations, and many factors contribute to the elevation of an incident to the level of crisis, most notably the use of social media. The third set of findings capture the communicative construction of crisis in higher education. Specifically, crises are said to exist if other perceive them to exist, crises may be called into existence based on the framing of events or situations by leaders, and crisis often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy based on one’s decision to designate an event or series of events as a crisis. Finally, there are many core skills, values, and competencies associated with the practice of crisis leadership in higher education that may be cultivated through formal training and development efforts.

If crisis is a socially constructed, subjective, and communicative phenomenon, as highlighted in this project, then the notion of crisis is one that cannot be taken for granted. Given these findings, it seems important for scholars and practitioners to further interrogate the characterization and definition of crisis, the ways that leaders navigate crisis-like situations, and

the communication strategies used before, during, and following crisis that extend beyond the compliance or reputation orientation that is pervasive in higher education. A more dialogic and stakeholder-centered approach to communication can help to advance colleges and universities, and their leaders, when perceived crises occur. This approach privileges the many internal and external stakeholders that are often most directly impacted by crisis-like situations. Additionally, the findings from this communication project allow for a conceptual pivot away from more traditional reputation-oriented, formulaic, mechanistic, and prescriptive approaches to crisis management. These findings contribute to an understanding of crisis leadership in higher education as a more robust, comprehensive, and dynamic area of study and practice – one that will likely continue to evolve as institutions of higher education, and the required skills for effective leadership, evolve to meet the needs of a rapidly changing and increasingly complex environment.

Despite the many complications and challenges, American colleges and universities remain widely regarded as among the finest in the world. To a certain extent, these institutions are also held to a higher standard than other types of organizations. Crises shift the national, and at times international, spotlight on these institutions. These critical moments of organizational disruption provide an opportunity for leaders to model the values and principles that are most consistent with the mission of higher education. To succeed in this effort, it will be increasingly important for communication scholars and practitioners to more seriously consider the complexity and nuance of crisis and crisis leadership in higher education and their implications for effective crisis leadership practice

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

Good evening,

My name is Ralph Gigliotti and I am doctoral candidate in the School of Communication & Information at Rutgers University. I hope this e-mail finds you well.

For my dissertation project, I am exploring the topic of crisis leadership in higher education. I am hoping to interview a purposeful sample of senior leaders from a broad cross-section of disciplines at AAU institutions for this project, and I am hoping you will be willing to participate in a 30-45 minute interview. I will be in the _____ area on _____. I recognize your schedule must be busy as we near the end of the semester, but I would be most appreciative if you would be willing to assist me in the study of this important topic.

I have received IRB approval to conduct these interviews (Protocol #16-419M) and would be happy to provide you with additional information regarding the scope of the project.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this request.

Sincerely,

Ralph Gigliotti

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Ralph Gigliotti, who is a Doctoral Candidate in the Communication Department at Rutgers University. The purpose of this research is to explore crisis leadership in higher education through a content analysis of various media outlets and qualitative interviews with faculty, staff, and administrative leaders of colleges and universities.

Approximately 15 subjects who are at least 21 years of age or older will participate in the study, and each individual's participation will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Additionally, if needed, the investigator may contact you with follow up questions through e-mail.

Your participation in this study involves being asked a series of open-ended questions about your experiences with crises in higher education. By signing this form, you are allowing the researcher to take detailed notes throughout the interview. Additionally, before starting the interview, the researcher will also take your permission to audio record the interview.

This research is confidential and a pseudonym will be used in the final report. The research records will include some information about you and this information will be stored in such a manner that some linkage between your identity and the response in the research exists. Some of the information collected about you includes your job title and types of employer. Please note that we will keep this information confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location. All audio recordings will be kept in a password-protected file in the researcher's media.

The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only confidential results will be noted. All study data will be kept for three years.

There are no foreseeable risks to participation in this study. You have been told that the benefits of taking part in this study include the advancement of theory in understanding the role of communication in crisis leadership, the application of sophisticated research methods for studying this topic within the context of higher education, and the development of updated models and guides to improve practice in the area of crisis leadership. Participants will be offered a final summary of findings from this research study. However, you may receive no direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact Ralph Gigliotti at:

Center for Organizational Development & Leadership
Rutgers University
57 US Highway 1
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Tel: 848-932-3965
Email: ralph.gigliotti@rutgers.edu

Or you can contact my advisor Dr. Brent Ruben at:
Center for Organizational Development & Leadership
Rutgers University
57 US Highway 1
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Tel: 848-932-7612
Email: bruben@rutgers.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Institutional Review Board
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
Liberty Plaza / Suite 3200
335 George Street, 3rd Floor
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu
(732)235-9806

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

Subject (Print) _____

Subject Signature _____

Date _____

Principal Investigator Signature _____

Date _____

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about the ways in which crises emerge and are dealt with by higher education institutions, and particularly by senior leaders. As a reminder, unless you choose otherwise, your participation will be entirely confidential and pseudonyms will be used in the final report.

We will begin by talking broadly about how the word “crisis” is defined in higher education and the way the label is used to characterize certain situations and events...

1) What does the word “crisis” mean to you, thinking particularly about the context of higher education?

2) What factors/conditions play a role in treating a particular event/set of events as a crisis to which leaders must pay particular attention and respond? In other words, as a senior leader in higher education, how do you know when you have a “crisis” on your hands or a mere routine problem?

Potential probes...

- a) What is the impact and/or consequences of these events?
- b) What reactions from internal and external stakeholders may elevate something to the level of crisis?
- c) Do you think that the way in which leaders talk about events can make them seem more like or less like a crisis?
- d) Impact of particularly influential individuals – when they name something as a crisis, what then do leaders have to do to strategically respond?

e) When communicating to internal/external audiences during an ongoing problematic event, would you resist using the term “crisis” – why/why not? When would it be appropriate to adopt that term? What are the implications of calling an ongoing problem/set of problems a “crisis”? Are there disadvantages to labeling something as a crisis?

4) Can you recall a time when something was labeled a crisis, but in doing so, the label got in the way of a good solution?

Potential probes...

a) If something is called a crisis, whose interests does it serve?

b) Can a crisis be used for good? Or can a crisis be used for ill? Can you describe an example of each?

We will now discuss specific approaches to addressing crises at your institution that will help me to better understand various types of crises facing colleges and universities and the ways institutions respond. As a reminder, your responses will remain confidential and I will refer to the responses when addressing the broader crisis categories in the write-up of the final report.

5) Does your institution have a structured procedure or process for preparing for or dealing with crises? If so, please describe its components.

Potential probes...

a) Is there a university-level process or does this occur within individual units – or both?

b) Systematic approach for preparing for crisis or for post-incident reviews?

6) In my review of 1,000 news articles during the first phase of this project, I identified several categories of crises that are most common for institutions of higher education. I recognize that your institution recently dealt with a crisis related to Category X. Could you describe the way in which the institution dealt with the situation and your role, as a senior leader, in responding to this crisis?

Potential probes...

- a) Did you/the institution anticipate, prepare for, manage, and debrief/learn from this crisis? Please describe.
- b) Which internal offices/groups and external groups were significantly involved?
- c) What do you think caused this event to escalate to a crisis?
- d) Did particular values or priorities guide your approach to this crisis?
- e) What particular leadership challenges did you encounter?

We will conclude by focusing on the preparation of leaders in higher education and the development of crisis leadership competencies...

7) Do you think crises are “pervasive” in higher education? If not, why not? If so, why?

Potential probes...

- a) If so, what do you think makes colleges and universities especially susceptible to crises?
- 8) What role, if any, can or should leadership development programs play in preparing higher education leaders for organizational crisis?

Potential probes...

- a) In what ways can campuses better anticipate, prepare for, anticipate, manage, and learn from crises?
 - b) What competencies do you believe are most important for crisis leadership in higher education?
 - c) Which skills are most directly related to communication?
- 9) Do you have other thoughts on this topic that may be useful to this project?
- 10) Can you identify any other leaders from your institution that may be helpful in my efforts to gain an understanding of this topic?

Appendix D: Interview Codebook

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
Crisis domain	<p>Institutional crises – incidents that occur at one particular college or university</p> <p>Environmental crises – broader issues in the higher education environment that present challenges to the larger system</p>	
<p>Crisis examples – code for the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Academic crisis (e.g., debate over tenure, plagiarism, academic job crisis) b) Athletics crisis c) Cyberattack or technological crisis d) Facilities crisis (e.g., water main break, chemical spill, damages to university infrastructure) e) Financial or business crisis f) Human resources crisis g) Leadership or governance crisis (e.g., conflict between university leadership and state legislature) h) Natural disaster i) Public safety crisis (e.g., active shooter, sexual assault, suicide or death) j) Racial or identity conflict k) Student affairs crisis 	<p>Narratives and vignettes describing experiences dealing with specific types of crisis</p>	

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
Crisis failures or lack of preparation/planning	Comments associated with poor planning/preparation or overall failures in responding to and dealing with crisis situations	“It really was. I had never been in an incident like that, a major incident like that at a college or university. I found myself so unprepared.”
Crisis planning and preparation	Making the necessary arrangements to prepare for crisis situations (e.g. tabletop simulations, functional exercises, full-scale operational exercises, heatmaps)	<p>“Every one of us gets a table top and we plan for something blowing up or somebody shooting on campus, those are the really easy ones.”</p> <p>“In other words, just plan and plan and plan and think you've planned for everything but when the incident comes down there's always going to be a ton of things that you didn't plan for. You almost need to plan for the worst case scenario, always. Hopefully, when something happens it's not the worst case scenario and you're much better prepared for it.”</p> <p>“And we do heat maps across the university and then subunits, student affairs does a heat map, athletics has a heat map, and so on and what that, what that exercise really is doing is, is evaluating where crises are likely to arise and then the seriousness of those crises and, and then to think about what, what would that mean to respond, to</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
		<p>the outside world, to everything else.”</p> <p>“Be much more careful, and more, I don't want to say suspecting, but be more open to the fact that something may be going on, and not ignore it. And the fact that even though we say, "We are University X," things can, and do happen. Just be much more prepared for that. We were not prepared for what happened, because we figured, "It happens to Baylor. It happens to Virginia Tech. It happens to other places." We were in for a rude awakening.”</p>
Definitions of crisis	Attempts to state or describe exactly the nature, scope, or meaning of the word “crisis”	<p>“When there's a singular incident, it's an incident. When they become multiple, it becomes a crisis.”</p> <p>“Crisis is something that involves a lot of people, or it could involve a lot of people, or you think it involves a lot of people, and it has a significant impact on the functioning of the university.”</p>
Detecting and monitoring what could develop into a crisis	Assessing environment for crises and differentiating crises for problem, nuisance, or inconvenient situations	<p>“You really don't know what's a crisis that's unfolding before you.”</p> <p>“We are to the point now where I think the president really does understand the</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
		difference now between a crisis and a nuisance.”
General leadership lessons	General advice and insights for leadership in higher education based on experiences and observations that extend beyond crisis situations	<p>“Some chancellors were really good at managing up, some were really good at managing down and none of them really mastered managing both ways. I think that's true of almost every manager in life, some are really good at managing up, some are really good at managing down, and there are a handful in the world that are skilled at being able to manage both ways. When you become a public higher education president you have to manage up, down, and like 32 other directions. It's not just your board or your boss and your staff it's all the other stakeholders.</p> <p>“The one trait that I look for involves calmness, and a capacity to get as much accurate information as possible.”</p>
Higher education in crisis	The notion that higher education as an entire sector is in crisis	<p>“Some people suggest that higher ed is in crisis anyway. It doesn't necessarily have to be a disaster of some kind. There's budgetary crisis, financial crisis, there's all kinds of external influences on public and private institutions.”</p>
Human generated crises vs. natural disasters	Statements that describe the differences between man-	“All of mine were human generated as opposed to a

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
	made crises and natural disasters	natural disaster is a totally different kind of crisis and I didn't look at anything that was outside of the control of the institution."
Limitations of public relations approach to crisis management	Comments that speak to the limitations of the "spin game" associated with public relations approaches to crisis management	<p>"the only kind of leader that I ever want to work for is do what is right and then figure out the narrative after. If you ever make decisions based on what the narrative will look like, I think you're doing it wrong. That becomes a spin game. I just think if we try to make it look like we're doing the right thing as opposed to doing the right thing, people are smart enough to read through that. That can be really tough, but I really think that needs to be the most singular value that any leader that I would want to work for would have."</p> <p>"Because of the value of our brand and the, the administration naturally wants to protect that brand and protect the university's reputation which has taken years to build up and, you know, which it's earned, which is legitimate and that's a legitimate concern, but, but service to the brand can't be, can't take precedence over service to the truth or doing things right or acting according to your mission statement."</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
Media relations	Interactions with local and national media in response to campus crises	<p>“The whole parking lot was basically filled with media trucks; CNN, Pittsburgh, Washington, NBC, CBS, all that. The whole parking lot was full of big trucks. It was like that for about three weeks, and then the day that the firings went down, the whole parking lot back here was filled with trucks, and stuff, and they knew the board was meeting that night. Anybody who walked out the door, they just latched on them.”</p> <p>“I would say, anybody who wants to be an administrator should get some very, very good media training, because it looks awful whenever you have the information, and you say, ‘No comment,’ or just can't answer the question, you're too scared, or you say something stupid, and it makes the situation worse. Media training is extremely invaluable when the crisis hits...I chose my words very, very carefully.”</p> <p>“the media who can certainly drive a crisis, um, are lazy and they'll pick up on a story if it already supports an existing narrative”</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
Reputation – code for both <u>individual</u> and <u>institutional</u>	<p>Statements dealing directly with the perception of the unit, department, institution, or higher education sector</p>	<p>“This situation has nothing to do with the academics of this university. This is an athletic matter, and I'm not going to let the academic reputation of this university go down through the mud.”</p> <p>“One of the things that he, and I talked about a lot is, "How do you not let the numbers, and the reputation go down?" I think in many respects, from an academic standpoint, what we went through actually makes the university a lot stronger, because it made a statement that, "I'm not letting the academics of the university; you're not going to bring us through the mud. The worst you can do is fire me, but you're not my boss. Fine." I defended the university, and the reputation. It was tough. That was tough.”</p> <p>“it became a very big deal and it became a big deal for us because this reputational threat actually went to the heart of what we are as a research institution, right, this threat compromised our reputation as a research institution and that's why we were, we were really hypersensitive to it.”</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
		<p>“One of the things we talk about a lot is, in the last 4, 5 years is risk of reputational damage and, and the likelihood of risk and so we spend a lot of time thinking about what could go wrong what, what's the likelihood and what's the magnitude of the reputational damage if it goes wrong and in, and we do this across the university, we do heat maps.”</p>
<p>Social construction/declaration/invocation of crisis</p>	<p>The existence of a crisis because people perceive it as such or because of the ways that leaders talk about it</p>	<p>“I would also argue that in probably nine cases out of ten, we make things into crises.”</p> <p>“As more people talk about it, we see it as a crisis.”</p> <p>“when it comes to certain issues, whatever, we don't necessarily label things crisis. I don't know if that denotes something that cannot be achieved or cannot be remedied. Crisis is a word that, wow that's a crisis. I don't think we can get past it. Well, we don't have that. I don't think we've run across an issue that we haven't been able to get past. You just deal with it.”</p> <p>“And so it only takes a little spark to, to create, on that particular issue, to create something that might turn into a crisis, and</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
		<p>so if there was an issue that hadn't been made public yet that would, that had dealt with race, we would say ok, this, this really does have the potential to do that, if it's a bit of an outlier issue, um, then, then we can say you know this is, this is, even if this went public, it wouldn't, it wouldn't spark much of a thing, so, so in two ways, it's a long answer, but in two ways it's the science of evaluating what's out there and then there's a little bit of art on our best guess on what, what, based on our relationships with the media and watching national trends on whether or not we think it's gonna blossom into a full blown crisis."</p>
Social media	The use of interactive technology that allows for the development of virtual communities and networks in a 24/7 environment.	"I think that the, the rise of the 24 hour media cycle and the rise of social media has made um reputational threats more pervasive"
Stakeholders	"Any group of individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 6).	"Public institutions of higher education have a much broader stakeholder group than a private counterpart. Not just because we have to be responsive to a legislature, but we have a whole state citizenry that all of our institutions have an obligation to serve in some fashion."

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
Teamwork and Emergency/Incident Response Teams	Working well with others to design plans, address problems, and collaborate	<p>“The way you compile your team matters a great deal. Presidents think they can do everything themselves generally can't, they get themselves into more trouble. Those who seek the counsel of others do a better job.”</p> <p>“I felt a broader team with a broad base skill set with people willing to work outside of their formal roles tended to be the most successful.”</p>
The ubiquity of crisis in higher education	Statements that focus on the “overblown” or “exaggerated” sentiment of crises in higher education—or those that comment on the pervasive nature of crises in higher education.	<p>“Crisis sells papers. Crisis is a word that I think resonates with the public and makes you want to read it. Provocative in such a way, like oh my god, higher ed's in a serious ... Well, okay everything's in crisis. Look at our election. I mean in some, our political structure, that's crisis right? Or is it? Or is it just the nature of the beast? I don't know.”</p> <p>“I'm not trying to diminish the word crisis, but I do think it could be indeed overblown because it's a provocative statement and makes people read the Chronicle.”</p> <p>“The unfortunate truth is that universities because we are essentially small cities and the university is actually not that small. I</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
		<p>mean we have 50,000 people between faculty, staff, and students everyday so, you know, shit happens all the time and so rarely a month goes by without some kind of um issue, reputational threat to deal with so you know we, we're very used to, to doing that."</p>
<p>Training and development</p>	<p>Preparing leaders in higher education for dealing with crisis situations</p>	<p>"I think it's both about training and education and I also think it's a little bit about how we recruit people into leadership roles in higher education. There are a lot of people who were a biology professor and then became a biology chair and then became an associate dean in the college and then ultimately became a provost and then became president. And they never had any administrative training and they certainly haven't managed any sort of crisis except how to run a DSL free lab. No discredit to those people, but these enterprises are become enormously complicated and how do we prepare people who come up through the academic ranks who have a whole wealth of knowledge that's incredibly valuable to the academic enterprise? How do we help them see the administrative and the business enterprise sides of</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
		<p>things? Just as a basic level of understanding steps that they can even identify the things that will become crises. I think that's what actually causes some of these crises, people are not able to see how this incident in its small way is going to blow up if it's not managed well into a crisis. That's in large part because they've not had the experience to do it.”</p> <p>“we need more leadership training for the chairs, for the deans, because how do you take these insane resources of faculty, who are kind of independent contractors maybe in their own minds to some degree, and rally around a certain theme or strategy that solves your local problems in your community, whatever they might be.”</p>
Uniqueness of higher education	Comments that speak to the perception of higher education as distinct from other sectors	“I think in terms of crisis in higher ed, in my job and other's jobs, it's very different than private sector because we have to do a lot of inclusion work, bringing people into the fray to help solve the crisis.”
Values, competencies, and priorities for leading during crisis – code for the following: a) Analysis, Synthesis, and Triage b) Adaptable/Flexible	Important and lasting beliefs, ideals, principles, skills, or priorities that influence behavior and decision making	“I think it's really important that a leader be willing to stand up and make decisions and own them as him or herself, but also think that it's really

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> c) Calmness d) Care and Aftercare e) Collaboration f) Confidence and Courage g) Do the Right Thing h) Empathy and Compassion i) Humility j) Information Gathering and Dissemination k) Institutional Focus l) Learning m) Presence and Availability n) Resilience o) Safety p) Transparency and Honesty q) Trust r) Values-Based Leadership s) Other 		<p>important that they build a culture among their leadership team such that seen as a, not always unified, but a collective hard-working team who has the best interest of the institution and shares an understanding and commitment to the mission of the institution. No one person can run a place alone and you're going to need those people to work on your behalf if you're leading it and ... I would say one of the single most important things a leader can do is build a meaningful team. I think it's probably one of the hardest tasks that they have because many leaders inherit people. I think that creates a... Sometimes it works really well and sometimes it makes it really hard to move things forward. Other values, I think honesty and a willingness to be transparent are key. Also knowing when to stand up for what you believe is right.”</p> <p>“Generally what I also say is if it's good for the university ... What is best for the university is the path we will take. We have to think in broad terms of what makes this university great or better. Really when it comes down to it,</p>

Theme/Subtheme	Definition of Themes	Relevant Quotes
		we're a people organization. It's about relationships, openness, honesty, kind of core values of things. I don't preach really, but I think my expectations are high. I don't preach that but I hope that it's visible and people see that and really want to be a part of it.”
Type of institution	Public Private	
Gender	Male Female	
Role in institution		
Juicy quotes	Illustrative, provocative, or rich quotes for further consideration	

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