

UNDERAGE BINGE DRINKING ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES: AN EXAMINATION OF  
CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES FOR INSTITUTIONS IN THE EVENT OF  
TRAGEDY ON CAMPUS

by

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(Under the Direction of Ruth Ann Lariscy, Ph.D.)

ABSTRACT

Can corporate crisis response strategies be applied to universities facing a crisis as a result of underage binge drinking? This study examined Coombs' guidelines for the selection of appropriate crisis response strategies for the accident crisis type and applied the guidelines to three case studies involving crises where underage college students died from excessive alcohol use. The cases were studied to determine if Coombs' guidelines would operate as effectively for a university as they do for other types of organizations. The following questions were posed: must the type of organization be considered when choosing crisis response strategies? And, if so, what unique factors differentiate institutions of higher education from other industries in formulating crisis response strategies?

INDEX WORDS: Crisis response strategies, Crisis types, Higher education administration, Alcohol abuse, Public relations

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

All public relations practitioners eventually face the task of formulating a crisis communications plan aimed at saving their organization's reputation in a time of emergency or dilemma. So important is crisis strategy, nearly every public relations textbook for today's public relations students provides at least one chapter on the topic.

A crisis, in its simplest form, can be viewed as a threat to an organization, with the potential to damage reputation (Coombs, 1996). The purpose of a crisis response strategy is to eliminate or diminish this damage and to influence how the organization's publics view and interpret the situation.

The symbolic approach to crisis communication "emphasizes how communication can be used as a symbolic resource in attempts to protect the organization's image" (Coombs, 1998). This approach assumes two factors: that a crisis is a threat to an organization's image and that the characteristics of the crisis itself should dictate the options for communication.

Following the symbolic approach, crises must first be analyzed fully before applying appropriate crisis response strategies. Only then can the crisis manager proceed with the strategy best suited to the situation.

One link between the situation and the response is organizational responsibility—the level at which the public perceives the organization as being at fault for the said crisis. “As perceptions of crisis responsibility strengthen, the threat of image damage should strengthen, meaning crisis managers need to utilize more accommodative strategies” (Coombs, 1998). It would be appropriate to assume that responses such as denial in a case when responsibility is perceived to be high would further harm the organization’s image. Coombs suggests that “one approach to analyzing crisis situations is to use crisis responsibility as a grounding factor in the analytic framework” (1998).

While most crisis response theorists suggest that the appropriate communications plan is contingent upon the specific crisis, is it possible that the type and function of the organization also determines the effectiveness of such a plan? In addition, is it safe to assume that a textbook crisis response strategy would work as effectively for a small, private company as it would for a large, research university?

If it is feasible to expect that characteristics of the specific organization will dictate the effectiveness of a suggested crisis response strategy, then it is also necessary to analyze fully the organization and its perceived level of responsibility before proceeding with the development of such a response strategy.

In higher education, the administration, including the public affairs team, must answer not only to their many publics—students, parents, donors, alumni, employees, the board which governs the institution, prospective students, the general public, etc.—but must be mindful of protecting their most visible entity, the current student body, from controllable dangers, and often from itself. What happens, then, when a crisis emerges affecting that student body, specifically when that crisis proves harmful, or even fatal? When considering crisis response strategies needed to handle such a crisis, it is necessary to examine what factors lead to the institution's perceived level of responsibility.

Such is the case with the current problem of underage binge drinking facing universities. Is it the institution's responsibility to control and monitor situations encouraging this type of behavior? If not, is it the university's responsibility when a night of fun goes awry?

As reported in 2002 by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, "roughly 40 percent of college students are binge drinkers" (Chronicle of Higher Education, April 26, 2002). Interestingly, this same study asserts that those students most likely to drink are "first-year students, male, white, members of Greek societies, athletes, attending a college in the Northeast, or attending a college with prominent athletic teams." Those students who attend two-year institutions, religious institutions, commuter schools or historically black colleges are

the least likely to drink. Binge drinking can be defined as the consumption of five or more drinks at a time for men, and four for women (Flores, 2002).

A great debate within the world of higher education lies in whether these students are adults, having reached the legal age of 18, or whether they exist in some gray area where the university takes on the role of parent for these students away from home for the first time without supervision.

If the latter is the case, commonly tagged *in loco parentis*, or in place of the parent, then the university or college should be responsible not only for the safety of its students, but active in controlling abounding social problems affecting and harming these students.

## BACKGROUND

### *In Loco Parentis*

Fifty years ago, it was commonplace that most institutions enacted strict rules governing student conduct in order to supervise student behavior. Regulations on student life, from male/female contact to dress codes to curfews, prevailed on college campuses across the country. In this role, the university was looked upon as the "parent away from home."

Examples of these types of regulations permeate literature issued to college students at the time. For example, in 1969, Georgia Southern University supplied all female dormitory residents with a manual of codes and expectations for behavior.

Included in this material were rules outlining appropriate dress, time limits on phone calls, and dating guidelines. These women were not allowed to lock their room doors and were instructed to keep their window blinds closed during certain hours. They also had to gain parental permission in order to travel outside the county (Deal Hall, 1969).

However, the role of the university as parent began to quickly erode in the 1960s surrounding anti-war protests of the Vietnam War (Wade, 2000). How was it feasible for students to be constricted by such stringent social laws on college campuses when they were viewed as adults by the government and in fear of being drafted for military service? Should they not, by the same token, be treated as adults at their respective institutions of higher education?

The abandonment of the *in loco parentis* doctrine finally resulted with the U.S. Supreme Court's Tinker decision in 1969. This case resulted when a school system in Des Moines, Iowa, was found to have violated the First Amendment right to free expression by suspending two elementary school students who organized an anti-war protest. With this decision, and the fear of being found illegally suppressing student expression, many campuses deserted their strict codes of conduct (Wade, 2000).

Today, however, partly due to demand from the public, a trend is emerging with institutions taking back control over student behavior (Black, 2000). What is the reason for this return to the role of the university as parent? John Wade notes

in an article in CASE's April 2000 Currents publication that "the climate for enforcement and further supervision has changed recently . . . following several cases of binge drinking that resulted in student injury or death at institutions." There are some universities such as Lehigh University that now even require adult supervision at campus parties.

It may be that *in loco parentis* is not necessarily making a comeback, but that these new codes of conduct are fundamental in protecting the interests of the institution. Glenn Altschuler and Isaac Kramnick of Cornell University assert that these new policies are "little more than a series of new rules—adopted to minimize liability and litigation—to regulate the consumption of alcohol on campuses" (Chronicle of Higher Education, November 1999). If this is the case, it is apparent that institutions view themselves as vulnerable, and feel they could be found partly responsible, in the event that unregulated alcohol consumption results in injury or death.

An interesting dynamic encompasses this debate of whether students are adults allowed to act accordingly, or if the university should supervise activities to ensure these students' protection: federal laws surrounding the types of information universities are allowed to report regarding individual students' private education records.

## Federal Reporting Laws

When determining the perceived level of responsibility of an institution in the case of a crisis stemming from harmful or fatal results of underage binge drinking, it is necessary to examine the laws that both restrain and permit the institution in taking action to prevent the crisis through notification of unhealthy or dangerous behavior.

The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law applying to all schools which obtain any type of federal funding—including the funding of students in colleges and universities who receive federal tuition assistance in the form of loans or grants. This act secures the privacy of students in regards to their educational records. Before the age of 18, parents maintain certain rights to education records. But, after the student turns 18 or begins studies beyond the high school level, these rights transfer to that student, also known as the "eligible student."

FERPA protects the eligible student by mandating the right of the student to inspect and review his or her education records, the right to request that the school correct inaccurate or misleading records and the right for the student to require written permission before allowing the school to release any information from the record. However, the institution can freely release information in specific, outlined situations, such as to appropriate officials in the case of a health or safety emergency.

The greatest penalty resulting from severe misuse of educational records by the institution or consistent infractions regarding the release of confidential information is the loss of federal funding. Institutions are so wary of this law that it is understandable that they take all means necessary to guarantee that a students' records are kept as private as possible.

A more recent piece of legislation, however, has heightened the controversy of reporting laws on campus: an amendment to the Higher Education Reauthorization Act, passed by Congress in 1998, and sponsored by Sen. John Warner (R-Va.) following a number of alcohol-related deaths at public institutions in his state. This amendment allows for parental notification when an underage student (under 21) violates alcohol or drug laws.

Students claim that this law violates their right to privacy, as outlined in FERPA, and are usually vehemently opposed to its adoption in any form. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a student-run poll showed that students opposed the policy by a six-to-one margin (Currents, April 2000).

The question remains: to what degree of behavior justifies the notification of parents? Should the parents be aware of each and every infraction, or should the parents be notified only as a last resort when excessive behavior is witnessed and cannot be controlled by other means? It is possible that this notification could be used only when a student displays the capability of causing health or safety problems, as is allowed by FERPA.



Again, the issue of responsibility arises. Now that institutions are permitted to share information of underage alcohol and drug infractions with parents, it is likely, in the absence of such notification, that the institutions could be held liable in the event that a student with previous infractions again indulges in excessive alcohol or drug use, resulting in injury or death. Yet, it also seems unreasonable, especially at large institutions, to expect that the administration would be capable of carefully monitoring the behavior of individual students.

## THEORY

### Appropriate Crisis Response Strategy

Crisis managers in any organization should prepare in advance for a potential crisis. The biggest question facing an organization is what to say to the publics when a crisis occurs in order to effectively manage the situation. Communication shapes public perception of a crisis and the organization involved in the crisis (Russ, 1991), so it is necessary to have a thorough communications plan in place beforehand to better preserve the image of the organization.

In 1995, Coombs offered guidelines for the selection of appropriate responses to crisis situations. These guidelines, built on the framework of attribution theory, works on the assumption that "people make judgments about the causes of events based upon the dimensions of locus, stability and

controllability" (Coombs, 1995). These three factors are important in determining the level of responsibility assumed by the organization, which, in turn, should dictate the appropriate response.

Coombs (1995) offers crisis response guidelines in five broad categories: nonexistence, distance, ingratiation, mortification and suffering. Each category contains specific sub-strategies depending on the nature of the crisis.

The nonexistence strategy includes denial, clarification, attack and intimidation. Distance strategies include excuse, with both the denial of intention or the denial of volition, and justification where the response can vary from minimizing the injury to making the victim deserving to misrepresenting the actual event. Ingratiation strategies can include bolstering positive aspects of the organization, transcending the crisis to a larger context, or using praise to gain the approval of the target audience. Mortification appears in the form of either repentance, where the organization asks for forgiveness, or rectification, which involves taking action to prevent the recurrence of the crisis. Lastly, the suffering strategy plays on the sympathy of the audience in viewing the organization as an unfair victim of an outside source.

The selection of a response strategy depends on several conditions: the crisis type, the truth of evidence, the degree of damage and the performance history of the organization. It is assumed that these four crisis factors can form a decision

flowchart for determining the appropriate response to a particular crisis that "should affect how publics view responsibility for a crisis and the organization in crisis" (Coombs, 1995).

It is noted in Coombs' research that these guidelines only pertain to preserving the image of the organization and do not necessarily account for social responsibility of the characteristics surrounding the crisis. In the case of a crisis involving underage binge drinking on a college campus, it is conceivable that the social responsibility aspect would play actively in the perceived role of the university by the various publics. That is, the university could appear socially responsible for not preventing an incident such as the injury or death of a student from excessive alcohol or drug use. Could this level of responsibility be diminished if the university had previously have taken progressive steps to avoid such a crisis?

In addition, Coombs' states that these guidelines "are not recipes for success but recommendations for making reasoned choices when communicating to publics after a crisis" (Coombs, 1995). Coombs points out that, even following the guidelines precisely, a crisis response plan can still fail to achieve the desired results.

#### PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study will analyze Coombs' appropriate crisis response strategies by applying them to three specific crisis situations

involving underage binge drinking to determine if the universities involved responded appropriately to the crises according to Coombs' guidelines. After concluding whether the universities elicited the correct response, the outcome will be examined to determine if, indeed, Coombs' framework is applicable in managing a crisis in the field of higher education, specifically surrounding the issue of underage drinking on campus. If the strategy does not prove applicable to higher education, this study will attempt to ascertain if there are unique factors that inhibit this approach from effectively providing methods for managing crises and if there are alternatives for appropriate responses that would result in a favorable outcome.

The three cases that will be examined include:

1. **Louisiana State University:** A 20-year old student died from alcohol consumption in August 1997 while at an off campus fraternity house. In addition, three other students attending the function were hospitalized that same night from binge drinking. University officials stressed that the incident happened off campus.
2. **Massachusetts Institute of Technology:** An 18-year-old freshman and fraternity pledge died from alcohol poisoning in September 1997 at a fraternity house on campus. Immediately after the fatality, the university president acknowledged that, like many college campuses, MIT faced a serious problem of underage alcohol use by students.

3. **Duke University:** Excessive drinking led to the on campus death of a 20-year-old junior in November 1999. The university did not acknowledge that alcohol was the culprit until months later when several additional incidents of overconsumption occurred threatening the lives of other students.

To examine these cases, this study will use both primary materials produced by the universities after the occurrence of incidents, such as press releases, media advisories and speeches, and news articles generated in national media regarding the incident. This method will be used to determine if the representation of the incidents in the news media aligned with the universities official crisis responses, thus supplying the desired outcome of the crisis communication.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When exploring crisis response strategies, Benson proposes two challenges to researchers: to discover the range of crisis response strategies and to find the crisis response strategy best suited to the situation (Benson, 1998). While the range of crisis response strategies has expanded in recent years, researchers are still attempting to meet the second criterion to determine the best response to a crisis based on the particular crisis type.

According to Coombs, "an array of crisis response strategies must exist before they can be matched to crisis types" (1996). All of these varied strategies are developed and outlined with the goal of repairing an organization's image.

#### CRISIS RESPONSE STRATEGIES

Benoit (1995) attempts to answer Benson's appeal to find crisis response strategies best suited for a particular crisis type with his theory of image restoration based on strategies drawn from the apologia and account theories.

## Apologia

Ware and Linkugel (1973) developed the theory of apologia identifying four rhetorical factors of self-defense: denial, bolstering, differentiation and transcendence. The first factor of apologia, denial, occurs when those accused of wrongdoing disassociate themselves from the incident, and thus remove themselves from the audience's displeasure. This factor also includes the denial of bad intent, where the accused claims the undesirable act was made with good intentions.

The bolstering factor, unlike the denial factor, does not attempt to distance those accused of wrongdoing from the object of the audience's displeasure, but rather offsets the audience's aversion by associating the wrongdoer with a different, positive object of action. The goal is to persuade the audience to associate the speaker with the positive aspect instead of the negative act.

Differentiation, the third factor of self-defense, tries to separate the threat to the speaker's image from the larger context or environment. This is done in the hopes that it is the threat to the speaker's image that arouses negative feelings by the audience, not the speaker himself.

Transcendence seeks to place the object or speaker in a more favorable context, specifically one in which the audience does not presently place the object or speaker. Whereas differentiation attempts to separate the threat from the speaker

or object, the goal of transcendence is to have the audience view the speaker in a larger, more desirable environment.

In addition to the four factors of self-defense, Ware and Linkugel define crisis response strategies by outlining four subcategories called postures or stances for self-defense: absolute, vindictive, explanatory, and justificative. An absolute response employs both the denial and differentiation factors to dispute the wrongdoing and to separate the speaker from the threat to his image with the aim to exonerate the speaker from fault. The vindictive posture uses denial and transcendence to deny the action and advocate for the speaker to be viewed in a more favorable context. When applying the explanatory response, the speaker uses the bolstering and differentiation factors to encourage the audience to understand the actor's motives, therefore showing that he should not be subjected to condemnation. Lastly, the justificative posture utilizes the bolstering and transcendence factors to not only shed favorable light on the actor, but also on the perceived negative actions. Though it is possible that a posture may apply more than two factors, "the speeches of self-defense usually rely most heavily for their persuasive impact upon two of the factors" (Ware and Linkugel, 1973).

It has been argued, however, that the apologia theory is not effective in all situations, and limits itself only to those situations that respond to an attack on character (Kruse, 1981). Benoit acknowledges this shortcoming in the theory and notes that



this limitation excludes the term "apologia" where there is no formal attack or the attack focuses on policy or principle rather than character (Benoit, 1995).

While Benoit does examine Rosenfield's Theory of Mass Media Apology and Burke's Theory of Guilt, he relies heavily on Ware and Linkugel's Theory of Apologia, borrowing the self-defense factors of denial, bolstering, differentiation and transcendence.

### Accounts

The second idea on which Benoit builds his theory of image restoration is that of "accounts," which are usually grouped into "excuses" and "justifications." A very basic view of accounts sees excuses as being used as a crisis response when defense of an negative act is needed and the actor accepts responsibility for an act, but denies that it was necessarily wrong. Justifications are deemed necessary when the actor accepts that the act was negative, but does not take full responsibility for the action. Benoit finds that the use of excuses and justifications are simply "attempts to explain or justify our behavior against the unfavorable perceptions of others" (Benoit, 1995). Benoit reviews seven typologies of accounts from Sykes and Matza, Scott and Lyman, Goffman, Schonbach, Schlenker, Tedeschi and Reiss, and Semin and Manstead, finding that most describe accounts in some form of excuses and justifications.

From his review of account typologies, Benoit identifies the following key characteristics of account theory and image

restoration theory: (a) people generally want others to view them and their behavior favorably; and (b) people are motivated to offer explanations of their behavior to others. As Benoit notes, "this phenomenon is likely to occur when we believe others will hold us responsible for behavior which we believe they perceive as undesirable" (Benoit, 1995).

In addition to his finding of the key assumptions underlining account theory, Benoit, upon his examination of the seven typologies, identifies five stages of complete account sequence: the offense; a challenge, reproach or request for remedy by the injured party; the account, remedy, or offer; an evaluation of the account; and thanks or acceptance of the account (Benoit, 1995).

Furthermore, Benoit points to several trends regarding accounts: people are more likely to use excuses and concessions as accounts; people prefer to ignore the predicament or diminish its seriousness when embarrassed; severity of harm and apparent responsibility influence production of accounts; and if their personal preference or negligence is to blame, people are more likely to offer false accounts.

Benoit finds value in parts of all seven typologies, though observes that many of the options are general in nature. The limitations of these lengthy, and often cumbersome lists, show themselves in their complexity, making them quite difficult for realistic use. Benoit attempts, through his image restoration theory, to combine many of these typologies to form a usable,

concise list aimed at functionality for the communicator in crisis.

#### Benoit's theory of image restoration strategy

The two basic assumptions underlying Benoit's theory are that (a) communication is best conceptualized as a goal-directed activity and (b) maintaining a positive reputation is one of the central goals of communication. These two assumptions unite in this crisis response strategy in that "it focuses on one particular goal in discourse: restoring or protecting one's reputation" (Benoit, 1995).

Image restoration strategy focuses on message options in the event of an attack rather than the type of crisis situation. According to Benoit, an attack has two components: the accused is held responsible for an action and that act must be considered offensive (Benoit, 1997). It is important for the act to be offensive, for if it is not perceived to be offensive, the organization's image is not threatened. In addition, as Benoit notes, "perceptions are more important than reality" (Benoit, 1997).

Within the theory of image restoration strategy, there are five broad categories, some with subcategories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification. Denial and evasion both aim to absolve the accused from any responsibility for the attack. Reducing offensiveness and corrective action are strategies used to

minimize the severity of the act credited to the accused.

Mortification is used when the accused accepts responsibility for the act and asks for forgiveness.

The denial strategy is composed of two subcategories: simple denial and shifting the blame. With simple denial, the organization plainly denies that the act occurred, that it performed the act, or that the act was harmful. When shifting the blame, the organization argues that another actor is accountable for the offensive act. In this way of thinking, the organization being blamed is not at fault and its image should not be damaged.

The strategy of evading responsibility is comprised of four elements. The accused can declare he was provoked, simply acting in response to the act of another, thus employing the provocation rationale. A second option is to use defeasibility, claiming that the act occurred as a result of a lack of information or ability. The third and fourth choices of response are to assert that the act was caused by accident, or that, although the act is deemed offensive, it was done with good intentions.

An organization accused of committing a wrongful act can attempt to reduce its offensiveness through six options. Bolstering stresses the organization's positive traits, possibly offsetting the audience's negative feelings toward the accused. The organization can also employ minimization to persuade the public that the act was not as serious as perceived. Likewise, differentiation can be used to deem the act less offensive by

distinguishing it from other more offensive acts. Transcendence tries to persuade the audience that, although the act alone may be offensive, the act can prove to be positive in a larger context. The accused may also decide to attack its accuser, thus reducing the accuser's credibility. Lastly, the organization may use compensation to the victim of the negative act as a way to minimize its offensiveness.

The last two strategies of the image restoration theory are corrective action and mortification. When an organization takes corrective action, it hopes to satisfy the audience by planning to solve the problem and to prevent it in the future. Mortification is simply an apology where the accused confesses, takes full responsibility for the act, and begs forgiveness. Benoit points out that a "potential drawback to this strategy is that it might invite lawsuits from victims" (Benoit, 1995).

In addition to these response strategies, Benoit states that it is important to first understand the nature of the crisis in order to appropriately formulate responses. Second, the perceived severity of the offense must be understood in order to effectively tailor a response. In addition, when customizing response, Benoit stresses that it is imperative to identify the audience(s) and, if more than one, to prioritize them, making sure that the most important audience is satisfied first.

Lastly, is it always necessary for an organization to respond to an attack? Benoit says "if a charge is important to the audience, or if it is repeated enough by the attackers, a

business may well be forced to deal with that accusation" (Benoit, 1995). However, he also states that it is possible to redefine an attack, to refocus attention away from the attack, or to determine that the attack may not be important to the audience. In these cases, it may be reasonable not to respond directly to the charges.

### Impression Management Strategies

In addition to Benoit's work on image restoration strategies based on apologia and account theory, Allen and Caillouet (1994) designated their own list of response strategies. Their impression management strategies are built upon impression management literature and neoinstitutional theory, devoted to the concept of organizational legitimacy. Allen and Caillouet find that an organization must look to repair a crisis rather than focus on the crisis itself (1994). They also find in their research that, from the neoinstitutional perspective, response strategies should be used to invalidate the attack or persuade the audience to view the attack less negatively and the organization more positively.

Allen and Caillouet's impression management strategies include excuse, justification, apology, ingratiation, intimidation, denouncement and factual distortion. Of these, excuse, justification and apology all admit fault and may eventually promote an image of corporate honesty and trustworthiness. Allen and Caillouet do note, however, that

"neoinstitutional theory suggests dynamics in an organizational field can make it impossible for some corporate actors to admit fault" (1994). As stated in Benoit's research, this admission of guilt may result in litigation from the victims.

Ingratiation is used to gain the audience's approval by showing that the organization is legitimate and conforms to the "normative institutional environment's rules" (Allen and Caillouet, 1994). Actors using the ingratiation method emphasize belief, value and attitude similarity; convince the audience of the organization's positive qualities; and/or praise the audience to gain approval.

Of the remaining methods, intimidation, most usually accompanied by threats, frightens the audience and elicits a feeling of danger. The organization can also use denouncement to transfer the blame to another party or factual distortion to discredit the source of the allegations showing that the claims regarding the offensive act were either false or taken out of context.

While the works of Ware and Linkugel, Benoit, and Allen and Caillouet certainly do not exhaust all available research pertaining to crisis response theory, they all are components of Coombs' prescribed crisis response strategies, the symbolic approach, used for the purpose of this study.

## COOMBS' CRISIS RESPONSE GUIDELINES

Coombs constructed his crisis response guidelines on the foundations of the theories of apologia, accounts, image restoration, neoinstitutionalism and impression management. The different strategies set forth by these previous researchers were integrated to dictate Coombs' final suggestion for crisis response. His final repertoire of crisis response strategies includes nonexistence, distance, ingratiation, mortification and suffering. When appropriate, each strategy was divided further into sub-strategies.

Nonexistence strategies seek to eliminate the crisis through responses such as denial, clarification, attack and intimidation. Coombs' argues that the "objective is to show that there is no link between the fictitious crisis and the organization" (1995). Denial simply states that the crisis did not happen and does not exist. Clarification takes the denial strategy further and attempts to explain why the crisis did not happen and why the report of the event is untrue. An attack confronts those subjects that wrongly accuse that the crisis exists and intimidation, the most aggressive of the nonexistence strategies, threatens organizational power against the accuser.

Unlike nonexistence strategies, distance strategies acknowledge that the crisis exists and aims to create public acceptance of the crisis. In addition, another goal of distance strategy is to decrease the association between the crisis and the organization. Of the distance strategies, an actor has the



option of using an excuse strategy or a justification response. Excuse attempts to minimize responsibility for the crisis through the denial of intention or the denial of volition. Justification seeks to minimize the damage resulting from the crisis rather than reducing the perceived level of responsibility. According to Coombs, "the potentially negative ramifications of the crisis should be diffused because the harm created by the crisis is minimized" (1995). Options for justification include minimizing the seriousness of the event, claiming the victim is deserving of the damage of the event, or asserting that the details of the crisis have been misrepresented.

Ingratiation strategies, as discussed in reviews of previous research, attempt to gain public approval by aligning the organization with positive objects valued by the publics. The organization may employ bolstering techniques to magnify positive aspects of the organization. Transcendence distracts the publics from the specifics of a crisis and places the crisis in a larger, more desirable context. As noted by Allen and Caillouet (1994), transcendence creates identification between the organization and its publics when the publics share the idea of the importance of the larger context. Lastly, an actor can praise others to lead the praised group to favor the organization.

Three mortification strategies—remediation, repentance, and rectification—seek to gain acceptance through asking for forgiveness. While repentance simply asks for forgiveness, remediation offers compensation to aid the victims affected by

the crisis. Those using rectification strategies not only admit responsibility, but also take action to ensure the prevention of a recurrence of the crisis in the future.

The final option for response, as outlined by Coombs, is the suffering strategy. With this strategy, the organization portrays itself as a victim of the crisis and seeks to gain sympathy from the publics, "a positive rather than a negative drawn from the link to the crisis" (Coombs, 1995).

Table 1: Crisis Response Strategies (Coombs, 1995)

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Nonexistence Strategies

1. Denial
2. Clarification
3. Attack
4. Intimidation

Distance Strategies

1. Excuse
  - a. Denial of intention
  - b. Denial of volition
2. Justification
  - a. Minimizing injury
  - b. Victim deserving
  - c. Misrepresentation of the crisis event

Ingratiation Strategies

1. Bolstering
2. Transcendence
3. Praising Others

Mortification Strategies

1. Remediation
2. Repentance
3. Rectification

Suffering Strategy

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When formulating crisis response strategies, the organization must first examine the crisis type. Coombs states

that a crisis varies based on how the publics see three attributions: locus, controllability and stability. For example, when publics attribute internal locus, controllability and stability to a crisis, this translates to the organization being viewed as the responsible party to the negative event. As Coombs finds, "the stronger the attributions of organizational responsibility, the more likely it is that the negative aspects of the crisis will damage the organization" (Coombs, 1995).

Using the concepts of locus and controllability, Coombs creates a matrix used to determine crisis type. The locus of control dimension is seen in the two variables of internal and external cause. The unintentional and intentional determinants result from the controllability attribution. As Coombs finds, when designating a crisis by internal and external cause and intentional and unintentional actions, the dimensions "can be crossed to form four mutually exclusive crisis types" (1995)

Table 2: Crisis Type Matrix (Coombs, 1995)

	UNINTENTIONAL	INTENTIONAL
EXTERNAL	Faux Pas	Terrorism
INTERNAL	Accidents	Transgression

Coombs finds that the four crisis types listed in the matrix cannot capture all variables involved in a situation. In addition to the locus and controllability factors, an organization must consider three other components of a crisis: veracity of evidence, damage and performance history. Veracity

of evidence refers to whether the evidence of the perceived crisis is true or false. If evidence is true, the crisis certainly happened. In the case that the evidence is false or ambiguous, it is usually due to an attack by an external agent on the morality or ethics involved.

The damage variable is important in that it can dictate the audience's perception of the organization's responsibility. Typically, when damage is severe, the audience prescribes greater responsibility to the organization for the incident. In examining the severity of damage, the issue of victims and non-victims arises. As Coombs illustrates, victims require a closure to a crisis, while non-victims tend seek assurance that other groups, specifically themselves, will not be affected by the crisis.

A positive performance history can help the organization when concerned with the perceptions of the publics. With a positive performance history, the cause of the crisis often appears to be unstable, or out of character for the organization, making the publics less likely to blame the organization for the situation. It is true that the publics may not be aware of past performance resulting in a neutral history. Neutral history works in the organization's favor by allowing its spokespeople to create a positive performance history by outlining past accomplishments. For the sake of Coombs' research, performance history is categorized as positive or negative.

When using the matrix to determine crisis type, a crisis that is unintentional in nature and is projected as a negative act by an external actor is designated a faux pas. In a faux pas situation, the organization stresses to the publics that there was no intention to do wrong and that it is the external actor that has determined that the action were inappropriate. The veracity evidence surrounding the faux pas may be false, ambiguous or true. Since in a faux pas there was no wrongdoing, damage and victims variables are irrelevant. However, the performance history is important in determining the correct response for the situation. Coombs finds that distance strategies or nonexistence strategies would work well in this case. Using distance strategies would allow the organization to strengthen the idea that the organization is not responsible, while nonexistence strategies would aid the organization in denying the claims and sustain their insistence that the actions surrounding the crisis were appropriate.

An accident occurs by fault of the organization, but it is unintentional. This unintentional nature usually leads to a low perceived level of organizational responsibility, making this type of situation perfect for the excuse strategy. In an accident, the evidence may be true or false. Damage and performance history must be assessed if the evidence is true. Distance strategies, specifically the excuse response, will seek to further diminish any claim of responsibility for the crisis. Accidents include both acts of nature and human error and,

although the level of perceived responsibility is much higher for human error, the excuse strategy is appropriate for either situation.

A transgression occurs when an organization intentionally and knowingly commits an act that will endanger its publics. Due to the internal locus and controllability of the situation, mortification strategies work best. Likewise, mortification is ideal when the evidence is true and damage, severe or limited, is present. When using mortification as its response to the crisis, the organization accepts responsibility for its actions and attempts to correct the result of the negative act. If the organization has a positive performance history, it is possible to use ingratiation strategies, as well. This would allow the organization to emphasize its positive qualities while making amends for its negative actions.

When an organization is faced with a crisis caused intentionally by external actors, it finds itself in a terrorism-type crisis. This type of crisis is designated by external locus and uncontrollability, making the suffering strategy the best option for response. Regardless of the damage, suffering is optimal as a response to both victims and non-victims, and can be used along with a mortification strategy in the case of severe damage. The performance history of the organization is important, and a positive history would only aid the actor in responding to the crisis.

## CONCLUSION

While the research on crisis response is wide and varied, Benson's call for researchers to determine the range of available crisis response strategies has been largely answered. However, there still remains a gap in the knowledge needed to develop and determine appropriate responses/strategies for specific crisis types. Coombs' guidelines for the selection of crisis response strategies provide a useful framework for crisis managers in determining the correct response, but these are still simply guidelines.

Coombs' notes that "the guidelines posit that a relationship does exist between the crisis-response strategies and the crisis situation" (1995). However, actual crisis cases in different industries are needed to examine the effectiveness of these guidelines. By examining specific cases, researchers can determine if Coombs' guidelines provide the best strategies, or if knowledge is still lacking.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHOD**

This study examined three specific crisis situations in the field of higher education management using Coombs' appropriate crisis response strategies. Whereas Coombs' guidelines typically have been applied to corporate crises, this study sought to determine if actions taken by universities during the time of crisis coincided with Coombs' prescribed strategies, as well. If so, did the strategies elicit the preferred outcome? If the strategy did not prove applicable to crises in the field of higher education, specifically in a situation of injury or fatality as a result of underage alcohol consumption on campus, are there unique factors that inhibit the approach from working effectively to dictate appropriate crisis responses for colleges and universities?

In Coombs' research (1995) on appropriate crisis response strategies, he called for future validation by testing the predictions of the selection of crisis strategies dependent on the situation and the effect of the strategies on the attributions connected to the crisis. His suggestion for proving the strategies to be effective is to examine specific cases and determine if the outcomes of the proposed guidelines were more



successful that those responses that would violate the guideline advice.

For each case examined in this research, a situation analysis is first provided, followed with the assessment of the institution's response gathered from primary materials (speeches, statements and press releases) and a comparison of that response with Coombs' suggested strategy. Finally, an examination of the content of press coverage from the time surrounding the issue of the response will lend insight into the effectiveness of the response in translating the institution's message.

#### SELECTION OF CASES FOR ANALYSIS

When inspecting crises in higher education involving the death or injury of an underage student as a result of binge drinking, it is apparent that these situations can be categorized as accidents. These types of crises happen beyond the immediate control of the university and occur without notice. They also are unintentional in nature and can be considered internal, since all these incidents involve students.

The three cases were chosen based on the time period that they occurred--all three incidents occurred between August 1997 and November 1999. By choosing the three main cases involving the death of student from binge drinking on college campuses during this time period, it is hoped that the climate surrounding this issue in this time frame is similar enough for all three cases to be accurately compared.

## PROCEDURES

After selecting the appropriate cases, primary materials were gathered from the institutions with the intent to examine the actual responses to the situations given by the universities. By searching each institution's Web site and placing telephone calls to each news office, primary materials were obtained from the web pages and through e-mails and telephone conversations with media officers. The primary materials presented themselves in the forms of press releases, published articles in campus publications, speeches made by university officials and issue statements distributed by the news offices. These materials provided content which was viewed as the official crisis response strategies used by the institutions.

For each case, newspaper articles published within 15 days of the onset of the incident were gathered relating to the crises for an analysis of content. This examination was conducted to determine if the messages disseminated by the institution actually appeared in the news media, thus received by the key publics. A comparison of the content of these articles in comparison with the content of the primary materials was used to determine the outcome and effectiveness of the crisis response strategy.

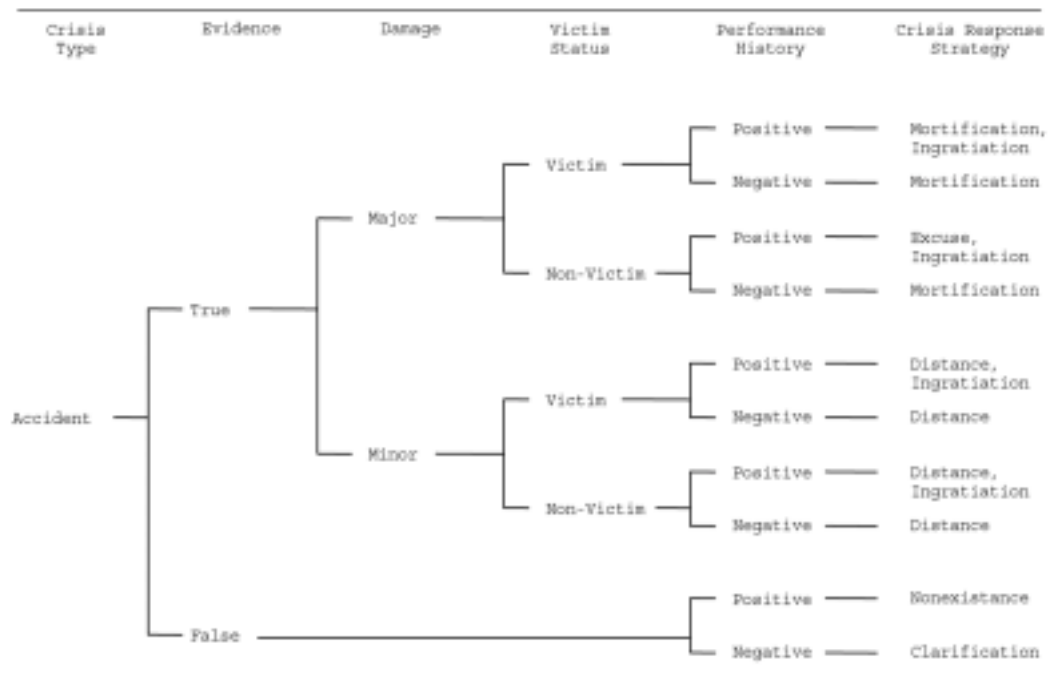
## METHODOLOGY

The details of each case were examined in order to provide a thorough understanding of the incident to be outlined in each case's individual situation analysis. Then, the responses of each institution to its respective situation were analyzed via primary materials gathered. Each case study was then subjected to Coombs' accident decision flowchart. Finally, each strategy used by the institution was examined in comparison to Coombs' suggested crisis response strategy to find similarities and differences between the two.

Once Coombs' suggested response strategy (nonexistence, distance, ingratiation, remediation and suffering) was determined and it was clear whether the response of the institution coordinated with this theoretical response, the newspaper articles were analyzed to determine if the outcome of the institution's response was the same as if Coombs' strategy had been applied.

It was also necessary to determine the damage, the victims and nonvictims, the veracity of evidence and the performance history of each situation in order to attempt to accurately employ Coombs' decision flowchart shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Accident Decision Flowchart (Coombs, 1995)



The success of the crisis response strategy was based solely on the resulting news coverage, whether positive or negative. In addition, any litigation filed against the university as a result of the incident will be discussed as a negative result.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **CASE STUDY: LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY**

Louisiana State University (LSU) serves as a major public university for the state of Louisiana with a current enrollment of more than 30,000 students. Due to the notoriety state universities have gained as "party schools," alcohol consumption remains a top concern for the administration. In addition, with active Greek systems at these types of universities, it is increasingly difficult to monitor the behaviors of students, especially in an off campus setting. As LSU Chancellor William Jenkins states, "What is frustrating is that there is no way to manage them (students) off campus. It is difficult enough managing on campus" (Chicago Tribune, Aug. 27, 1997).

On August 26, 1997, LSU faced a crisis involving the death of a 20-year-old student, Benjamin Wynne. Wynne died of acute alcohol poisoning after a party to celebrate fraternity pledge week at an off campus location. An autopsy showed that Wynne's blood alcohol level was nearly six times the legal limit at the time of his death. He was a transfer student from Southeastern Louisiana University who had recently been accepted as a pledge at Sigma Alpha Epsilon, a fraternity that, at the time, maintained a membership of 130 members and pledges.

## SITUATION ANALYSIS

At the time of the incident, students at LSU were partaking in the festivities of "pledge week," the period of time when fraternities take on new members not yet initiated. Interestingly, the university had recently been listed as number ten on a list of the nation's top party schools, compiled by the Princeton Review, a published college guide for high school seniors (Associated Press, Aug. 26, 1997).

The campus police department at LSU received an emergency call from the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity house on LSU's campus in the early morning hours of August 26, 1997. Upon arrival, police found nearly a dozen people passed out on the floor, among them was the student who died, Benjamin Wynne. Three other pledges were hospitalized due to binge drinking.

University officials stressed that the drinking had been done off campus and reiterated that alcohol was illegal on the LSU campus. Moreover, Chancellor Jenkins informed the Associated Press that no alcohol had been found during a routine check of all fraternity houses that Monday prior to the incident (August 26, 1997). Jenkins also indicated that there was no evidence that students had been forced to drink as part of any hazing rituals.

Immediately after the tragedy, Jenkins issued a letter to the LSU campus community, distributed by the LSU News Service. In the beginning of the letter, Jenkins expressed his sadness over the incident and pledged to employ all possible resources to

ensure that such an incident would never happen again. He followed by stressing that the university had "worked very hard to alert students about the terrible consequences of alcohol and substance abuse" (Sept. 1997). In the letter, he committed himself and the university community to search for answers to the problems of student alcohol abuse.

On September 8, 1997, LSU issued a media advisory publicizing arrests and citations issued for alcohol violations on campus. The advisory also updated media on the investigation activities surrounding Wynne's death. It stated that 55 witnesses had been interviewed and that police were continuing to conduct interviews with as many as 90 people whom they believed had information on the case. Included in the advisory was a memo to the police captain listing all alcohol citations both during and after a football game on campus the previous weekend. The punishment for the 31 people found in possession of alcohol was referral to the dean of students.

The chancellor again released a statement on September 11, 1997; this time he outlined two decisions reached in the aftermath of Wynne's death. First, he suspended "recognition and all activities of the Louisiana Epsilon Chapter of Sigma Alpha Epsilon until further notice." It is important to note that the national office of Sigma Alpha Epsilon had suspended the LSU chapter and halted all pledge activities pending an investigation on the day of incident. He also issued a direction for the dean of students to "review all aspects of the recent conduct and

behavior" of the Sigma Alpha Epsilon chapter and report immediately to determine the future of the chapter on LSU's campus. The second decision announced was for the creation of a Chancellor's Task Force on Greek Life and Related Issues. The purpose of the task force, comprised of "outstanding members" of the student body, faculty, staff and community members, was to examine the Greek system and evaluate its "benefits and deficiencies, as well as the issues of accountability and responsibility, operation and management, and involvement of advisers and parents." Ending the statement, the chancellor again expressed his sorrow regarding the student's death, and called upon students and student organizations to adhere to the policies in place to control the consumption of alcohol on campus.

The last piece of material provided by LSU's news office regarding the activities surrounding the crisis is a press release issued on September 19, 1997. In this release, the task force chair, a retired LSU professor of speech communications, was announced, and the members of the group were listed. As prescribed, the task force consisted of students, faculty, staff and members of the Baton Rouge community, including a local attorney named as an ex-officio member with experience on a previous task force on Greek life in 1992.



## Louisiana State University's Response

LSU's chancellor served as the spokesman regarding the crisis and employed several different crisis response strategies in his public statements. In his first statement, the open letter to the university community, he used suffering strategy by implying that the university was a victim in losing a student to underage alcohol consumption. The chancellor utilized the ingratiation strategy, specifically bolstering, when he noted all the positive things the university had done in the past to educate students on alcohol abuse and, thus, prevent such a crisis. He also used the rectification strategy, pledging that the university would do all possible to prevent a similar situation in the future.

In additional statements, Chancellor Jenkins continued to use the rectification strategy, as seen in his decisions to suspend and investigate Sigma Alpha Epsilon and to create a task force aimed at examining the alcohol issue within the Greek system on campus. He also, at times in subsequent statements, again used the suffering strategy to express the university's sorrow in the loss of one of its students. Furthermore, it is apparent that Jenkins used the excuse strategy in his statement to media stressing that it is nearly impossible to manage the off campus behavior of students, thus minimizing the university's responsibility.

### Coombs' Crisis Response Strategy Guidelines

This situation, beyond the control of the university, especially since the crisis occurred off campus, fits well into the category of accident. In order to determine Coombs' prescribed response strategy, it is necessary to determine the severity of the damage, the victim status and the performance history.

The severity of damage is perceived to be major, due to the death of the student. And, since the event led to a fatality, there most definitely is a victim. In addition to the student as victim, the parents can be viewed as victims, as can other students on campus. There are also non-victims evident in such a situation including members of the university, members of the national fraternity and members of the community. These non-victim groups often insist that steps be taken so such an incident does not recur.

Though the university had been labeled a "party school," performance history can be seen as neutral. That is, no previous known incidents of this type were publicized or noted in the documentation from either the university news office, or the news media. The spokesman took the opportunity to state that the university previously had taken steps to educate students on the dangers of alcohol and drug use. These factors allow the researcher to assume that the university exhibited a positive performance history.

So, with the situation classified as an accident with major damage, various victims and a positive performance history, Coombs' suggests mortification and ingratiation response strategies. With the mortification strategies, the university could offer some form of compensation to the victims through remediation, could ask for forgiveness for the incident through repentance, or could take action to prevent the crisis from recurring through rectification.

## CHAPTER 5

### CASE STUDY: MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston is a prestigious state-run institute of technology attracting top students nationally, as well as statewide. In 1997, the university also maintained an active and strong Greek system comprised of 39 fraternities and sororities.

Exactly one month after the incident at LSU, MIT faced a similar crisis involving the underage consumption of alcohol. Campus police were called to the Phi Gamma Delta house on September 26, 1997, to respond to a student who had collapsed. Eighteen-year-old Scott Krueger, a first year student and Phi Gamma Delta pledge, was transported to the local hospital where his blood alcohol level was found to be more than five times the legal level for intoxication. Krueger remained in an alcohol-induced coma before his demise three days later.

Immediately, the university suspended the fraternity pending investigation, barring all social activity. MIT President Charles Vest also issued a statement soon after the incident acknowledging the problem of alcohol abuse on campus saying "the use of alcohol is a serious problem on virtually every campus in America, and ours is no exception" (Newsday, Oct. 1, 1997).

Interestingly, upon Krueger's death, his case was opened as a homicide. Police stated that this is commonplace and that "all sudden deaths are initially investigated by homicide detectives" (Newsday, Oct. 1, 1997). To be ruled a homicide, investigators would have to prove that Krueger was forced to consume alcohol. The homicide designation would also be determined by the findings of the medical examiner.

#### SITUATION ANALYSIS

In 1992, MIT students warned the university of rampant drug and alcohol use on campus, as well as peer pressure to partake in drinking and drug use at fraternity houses. According to the Boston Globe, students Scott R. Velazquez and Robert Plotnick complained to the university, even supplying President Charles Vest and other officials with a 50-page booklet outlining their concerns (Oct. 1, 1997). The administration had promised to give consideration to the booklet, but later denied the students their requests for meetings. Five years later, on September 30, 1997, Krueger died from severe alcohol poisoning sustained at a party hosted at the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house.

MIT had a large, thriving Greek system on campus. And, to further illustrate their presence on campus, it must be noted that nearly one-third of MIT students lived in the university's off campus independent houses, such as fraternity and sorority houses. Part of the reason for the large number of students living in these residences is that MIT suffered from a "chronic

student-housing shortage," according to the Boston Globe (Oct. 1, 1997). Entering freshmen could choose to live in on campus residence halls, but were also allowed to live in fraternity or sorority houses as pledges in their first year. The local alumni chapter of the organization typically owned these houses.

MIT's president issued the first institute statement while Krueger was still hospitalized in a coma on Sunday, September 28, 1997. He issued his condolences to Krueger's family and others involved and stated that campus officials had worked to provide assistance to the family and the other students who were affected. While he promised to conduct a thorough review of policies on campus and search for ways to prevent the recurrence of such a crisis, he also stated that the use of alcohol is a serious problem on campuses nationwide, including MIT.

This statement was followed by a short release on September 30, 1997, by the president after Krueger's death expressing sympathy to the family and acknowledging that his death was a great loss to the institute, as well. Again, President Vest pledged to do all possible to ensure that this type of tragedy would not happen again.

On October 1, 1997, the MIT news office published an article regarding the crisis in *Tech Talk*, a publication produced by the institute. The piece, "Krueger dies after 3 days in alcohol-induced coma," quoted Senior Associate Dean Robert M. Randolph as denouncing underage drinking, stating that "it's against the law" (Oct. 1, 1997). This article also stated that the MIT Inter-

Fraternity Council cancelled all events where alcohol would be present until risk management policies were reviewed. The Dormitory Council also banned alcohol at all dormitory social functions until MIT housing alcohol policies were reviewed.

Two more articles were issued by the MIT news office on October 8, 1997. "Students voice grief and concerns about alcohol," describes events and dialogue on campus aimed at increasing awareness of the dangers of alcohol consumption. The Inter-Fraternity Council and the class of 2001, with whom Krueger would have graduated, sponsored a candlelight vigil. It is noted that not only did members of the faculty and administration attend the event, but also both President Vest and Dean Randolph were present as speakers. Afterwards, Vest told students that Krueger's death "has been terrible for us as I know it has been for you."

The second article issued by the MIT news office on October 8, "Sharp to co-chair committee to combat binge drinking," announced the appointment, by President Vest, of a professor to co-chair a committee on student alcohol abuse and binge drinking at MIT, as well as at other college campuses nationwide. The committee was also called to determine strategies to combat binge drinking. Members of the committee included faculty, students and "outside experts." Also stated in this article were President Vest's plans to construct additional on campus undergraduate housing and Vest's ban of the use of university funds to provide alcohol at events where underage students were

present. He also announced that he would be suspending alcohol at all functions hosted by the president's office during the month of October 1997 in order to gain attention of the problem of alcohol abuse.

This same article also sought to clarify issues where the institute felt it was wrongly accused. Although the two students who complained about alcohol use in 1992 were denied meetings with President Vest, they were referred to the dean for student services and did meet with university officials in evaluating MIT policies. The news office states that one of these students even helped write the literature that was distributed to the next year's incoming freshmen.

#### Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Response

The president of the institute served as the primary spokesperson in responding to Krueger's death, and utilized varied crisis response strategies, including suffering, rectification, and possibly justification, specifically the misrepresentation of portions of the crisis event.

The suffering strategy is seen immediately after Krueger's death when the president offers his condolences to the family, but also stresses that the loss of a student profoundly affects the university, as well. This strategy attempts to convince the audience that the institute is also a victim of Krueger's death.

President Vest's rectification strategies are seen consistently throughout his statements. He utilizes this type of



strategy to show that the institute is taking necessary steps to guarantee that such a crisis will not recur. Evidence of rectification is apparent in Vest's call to ban alcohol from functions where underage students are present to the move to construct additional on campus housing so that students would be encouraged to live in university-controlled residences during their undergraduate years. The creation of a committee to study the effects of alcohol on college campuses is also a sign of the rectification strategy.

The use of justification, specifically focusing on the misrepresentation of the events of the crisis, is not widespread in this case. It is seen, however, in the news office's response to the claims that students in 1992 alerted the institute to the problem of alcohol and drugs among students, specifically in fraternities. The administration made a specific statement saying the details of those complaints were misrepresented. It was clarified that the students, though not invited to meet with the president, were referred to another institute official and that at least one of the students was active in revising policy and creating literature for the incoming freshman class. If the university had not addressed these issues, it would have appeared that the university had been notified of problems on campus, but did not respond, possibly because it did not consider the situation serious. The use of justification in this aspect of the crisis seeks to minimize the damage associated with these claims.

### Coombs' Crisis Response Strategy Guidelines

Though the MIT crisis is deemed as an accident, as is the LSU case, the two differ in one important aspect: performance history. MIT's performance history is questionable due to the alert they received from students in 1992 outlining alcohol problems with fraternities on campus. It appears that the lack of action on the university's side leads the audience to view its performance history as negative. Like LSU, however, it is clear that damage is major and that victims are present. It is apparent that Krueger is a victim, but his parents, other students and affected faculty and staff can also be considered victims. In addition, it is also possible that there may be non-victims who demand a change on campus in regards to alcohol consumption to ensure that such an incident does not occur again.

Coombs' suggested response to a crisis situation that is accidental with major damage, victims and poor performance history is mortification, including remediation, repentance and/or rectification. In the aspect of this crisis where the publics were misled, according to the institute, on actions taken by the institute after students documented student alcohol and drug problems, Coombs suggestion would be clarification. This is recommended if the evidence was false and the institute's performance history is negative. The clarification strategy attempts to explain to the publics that there is no crisis and that the report of the crisis was untrue in some way.

## CHAPTER 6

### CASE STUDY: DUKE UNIVERSITY

Duke University, a private, liberal arts university located in Durham, North Carolina, had long been known for its alcohol-dependent social scene, according to The Chronicle, Duke's student newspaper.

It was in February 2000 that the student newspaper published an article addressing the binge drinking epidemic on Duke's campus and accused the university of concealing evidence that a 20-year-old student, Raheem Bath, died as a result of overconsumption of alcohol the previous November. The article claimed that, though the university was aware of the cause of Bath's death, officials took no steps to publicize the information or raise public awareness of the dangers of alcohol consumption.

It was not until this article was published in The Chronicle on February 17, 2000, that the university admitted the true causes of Bath's death. In addition, the near-death of a second student in January 2000 forced the administration to be more forthcoming with information in order slow the alcohol problems erupting on campus--more than 20 students had already been hospitalized for alcohol toxicity levels that academic year, stated John Burness, Duke's senior vice president for public

relations (Philadelphia Inquirer, Feb. 19, 2000). It was the second student's illness from alcohol consumption that prodded the administration to admit the alcohol connection in Bath's death.

#### SITUATION ANALYSIS

In 1993, the alcohol policy committee at Duke debated whether to limit the distribution of alcohol on campus and heard expert advice from a university professor on the relationship between alcohol availability and abuse (The Chronicle, April 13, 1993). Philip Cook, a public policy and economics professor, supported the theory that individuals would tend to drink more if they were a member of a social group where consumption was already high. Cook suggested to the university that if Duke limited on campus drinking, the university would see a dramatic drop in cases of alcohol abuse, specifically among students. So, it is apparent that Duke officials were aware of alcohol problems on campus long before Bath's death.

At the time of Bath's death, the university issued a statement in the Duke News Briefs through the news office. The statement listed Bath's death as a result of a "week-long battle with pneumonia." The brief says that Bath became ill before Thanksgiving, checked himself into the infirmary, and was later transferred to Duke Hospital. Noted in the brief was a comment from the director of the university's student health center saying that pneumonia is not rare on campus, but that it is

usually treated in an outpatient setting or in the student infirmary with oral antibiotics. In addition, Vice President for Student Affairs Janet Smith Dickerson relayed the university's shock and sadness over Bath's death.

The next piece of public information available from the university regarding the incident came in a Board of Trustees address by President Nan Keohane on February 14, 2000. In this speech, Keohane acknowledged the connection between Bath's death and his alcohol consumption, though she still stressed that he died of pneumonia, possibly due to "alcohol-induced vomiting." She also revealed that a second student had recently suffered a similar incident on campus. Before closing, she emphasized that a sorority and a fraternity on campus were currently restricted by the university due to alcohol-related hazing charges and that the university was investigating and willing to issue formal charges through the campus judicial system if evidence of alcohol abuse was found. Lastly, she pledged to open dialogue on campus to discuss dangers of alcohol consumption and to find better ways to educate students in order to provide a safer campus environment. While promising to promote awareness of responsible drinking, she also stated that members of the administration were concerned that students, and sometimes parents, were unable to "fully appreciate the consequences of alcohol-related behavior."

The next month, the Duke news office posted an op-ed piece written by two professors in the university's department of pharmacology and cancer biology asserting that the reason for

Bath's death was a lack of alcohol education on campus. The authors listed important facts for the students regarding alcohol and its use and called for the university to "take a multi-faceted approach to the problem of excessive drinking." Their suggestions included increasing enforcement measures, creating substance-free dormitories and offering alternative, alcohol-free social activities.

The news office also issued two releases in March 2000 in response to the heightened concern of excessive alcohol use on campus, "Parents Invited to Discuss Binge Drinking" and "Duke Targets Excessive Drinking". The first is a statement about a letter sent to parents by Janet Smith Dickerson, vice president for student affairs, encouraging them to talk to their children about "excessive drinking on campus and the importance of making good decisions." This letter, dated March 9, 2000, also informed parents of Bath's death and the suspension of two Greek organizations on campus accused of illegal activities involving alcohol. Also in this letter, Dickerson wrote that "excessive drinking has become the norm for many young adults who, in some cases, have had access to fake ID's since middle school." She did emphasize the strong "safety net" at Duke, noting the available medical personnel and student health educators on campus who were "expert at diagnosing and treating problems related to alcohol and drug overdoses." Dickerson stated that, although excessive drinking is rooted in Duke's culture, there were many students who drank responsibly, or not at all. This

letter was used as a call for parents to help the university address the problem.

The second release issued by the news office introduced the changes the Duke administration was making on campus in order to better educate students on responsible alcohol use. In addition, the release called for the students to play a larger role in the planning of changes to limit alcohol abuse. Included in the moves toward better alcohol awareness and education was the developed of a task force, comprised of students, faculty and staff, charged with gathering suggestions for changes in policy. As in the first release, officials found the major problem to be a lack of knowledge among undergraduates of consequences surrounding binge drinking. The news office stressed that alcohol policy had been changed in recent years to promote a safer campus by establishing freshmen orientation programs and training for resident advisers and campus police. Specific programs already in place were outlined, such as an initiative to fund groups hosting alcohol-free social events, the support and planning of alcohol-free campus-wide events, the requirement to register events where alcohol would be served with the university, and the structure of sanctions on alcohol policy violations established through the campus judicial system. An additional statement in this release specifically addressed the Bath situation. The university admitted to knowing the Bath died from alcohol-related pneumonia and outlined its choice not to disclose the alcohol connection out of privacy concerns and

respect for the parents. However, the university stated that administrators did discuss the issue to student leaders and trustees after Bath's mother mentioned at a December memorial service that alcohol was involved. In all primary research gathered, this is the first known statement where the university gave reason for its decision not to reveal the alcohol link in Bath's death.

#### Duke University's Response

The university addressed concerns resulting from Bath's death using two main spokespeople: President Nan Keohane and Vice President for Student Affairs Janet Smith Dickerson. This case differs from the LSU and MIT cases previously discussed in that the university did not speak out on the crisis until months later. The university actually did not reveal the details of the crisis to the public until approximately three months after the event.

The crisis, in this case, did not immediately evolve—not until the true facts of the case emerged in February 2000. At that time, the university employed the bolstering strategy in Keohane's speech to the Board of Trustees, stressing the steps the university had taken in the past to curb alcohol abuse on campus. Also seen is the justification response of denial of volition when Keohane states that students, and often parents, do not see the consequences of alcohol-related behavior.



This denial of volition is seen throughout the time that Duke responds to this crisis by continually stressing that this crisis occurred partly as a result of student ignorance. By bolstering their medical facilities and student health programs, Duke attempts to show that they are fully prepared to deal with alcohol problems on campus. It is implied that the problem lies in the students' and parents' lack of knowledge surrounding the issue.

The university also uses the rectification strategy as a response to the crisis pledging to change policy and institute education programs in order to prevent such a crisis from occurring again. Lastly, the university utilizes the praising others strategy of ingratiation to continually emphasize those students who act responsibly and do not take part in excessive drinking. Praising others is used to lead that group to view the organization in a favorable context.

#### Coombs' Crisis Response Strategy Guidelines

Like the other cases examined in this research, this crisis can be categorized as an accident. Though the university concealed evidence, the crisis was definitely an accident since the institution had no control over the actual incident. The evidence was true and was proven by medical records and the victims were similar to the victims in the other two cases, including the student who died, the family of the student, and members of the campus community who were affected by the

student's death. The damage, specifically the death of a student, was major and the performance history was questionable. For the sake of examination, the researcher presumes the audience perceived a negative performance history of the university due to the institution withholding, and possibly hiding, information.

Using the accident decision flowchart created by Coombs, an accident with true evidence, major damage, victim and a negative performance history would dictate mortification strategies. Of the mortification strategies, the university could use remediation to offer compensation to the surviving victims, repentance to ask for forgiveness in order to lessen the negatives associated with the crisis, or rectification to take action to prevent the recurrence of the crisis in the future.

## CHAPTER 7

### ANALYSIS OF DATA

The analysis of the data compiled in the examination of the specific case studies was conducted by comparing each university's crisis response strategy with the suggested response outlined in Coombs' accident response flowchart. After it was determined if the university's response matched that indicated in the flowchart, a selection of newspaper articles surrounding the individual events was reviewed to see if the specific universities, based on their response strategies, were viewed in a favorable manner and if the messages disseminated by the universities were carried in the news media. Lastly, any outside information gathered from the news articles that could validate the success or failure of the response strategies, such as lawsuits or statements from various publics, will be included to show the full scale of reaction to the crises.

The purpose of the analysis is to answer the question of whether crises involving alcohol-related student deaths at universities can be subjected to Coombs' crisis response guidelines to provide appropriate strategies for response by the institutions. If it is fitting to use Coombs' guidelines, suggestions for specific strategies listed in Coombs' research will be provided. If Coombs' guidelines prove not to apply in

these situations, the question remains: are unique factors present that inhibit the guidelines from effectively providing methods for managing crises and are there are alternatives for appropriate responses that would result in a favorable outcome?

#### CASE STUDY: LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

In the case of the death of Benjamin Wynne, a 20-year-old Louisiana State University (LSU) student, from overconsumption of alcohol, the university's chancellor, William L. Jenkins, acted as the spokesperson in responding to the crisis. Jenkins' responses came in the forms of an open letter to the campus community and a media advisory, a statement and a press release issued by the university's news office. Several different crisis response strategies are seen in these materials.

First, Jenkins employs the suffering strategy by presenting the university as a victim in the aftermath of losing a student. He expresses the campus community's sorrow numerous times throughout the response to the crisis. Second, the chancellor utilizes a form of ingratiation, the bolstering strategy, to outline positive actions the university has taken to educate students on the dangers of excessive alcohol use. He tries to show the positive actions of the university in taking steps to prevent such a crisis in order to alleviate the university's perceived level of responsibility for the crisis. In addition to using suffering and bolstering strategies, Jenkins offers rectification, a type of mortification strategy, pledging to

investigate the alcohol problem on campus, to review policy and to make necessary changes to ensure that such a crisis would not recur in the future. Lastly, Jenkins uses the excuse strategy, specifically the denial of volition. In a statement to the media, he stresses that it would be nearly impossible for the university to monitor the off campus behavior of students. This again is aimed at minimizing the university's level of responsibility surrounding the crisis.

Based on the facts that the accident resulted in major damage to victims and the performance history of the university was positive, Coombs' guidelines propose the use of mortification and ingratiation strategies. Using mortification, one could apologize using repentance, compensating the victims through remediation, or making changes to prevent the crisis from happening again by using the rectification strategy. With ingratiation strategies, there are three options: bolstering, transcendence, and praising others. Bolstering reminds the publics of positive aspects of the organization, transcendence places the crisis in a more desirable context and praising others is used to gain approval from specific targets.

Table 4: Comparison of LSU's crisis strategies vs. Coombs' suggested strategies

	LSU's actual response	Coombs' suggested response
Nonexistence		
Distance	X	
Ingratiation	X	X
Mortification	X	X
Suffering	X	

As seen in Table 4, LSU used both of Coombs' suggested crisis response strategies, ingratiation and mortification. In addition, LSU utilized distance strategy, specifically the denial of volition, and the suffering strategy. An examination of news articles resulting from the crisis will determine if the use of these additional strategies had any effect on the audience's perception of the crisis and if Coombs' suggested responses helped the university to recover from the crisis in a positive manner.

The first of the 13 news articles published in the 15 days after Wynne's death simply stated the facts of the event, noting that "heavy drinking was being investigated as a possible cause" (Chicago Tribune, Aug. 25, 1997) and that the incident occurred at a fraternity house. It does quote the chancellor as the source of details presented.

The second news article published by the Associated Press on August 26, 1997, further examines the incident and more pointedly

addresses the idea of "party schools" and underage binge drinking. The chancellor is quoted saying that none of the victims "had been forced to drink as part of any hazing ritual," and that the drinking occurred off campus, as alcohol is illegal on campus and no alcohol had been found during an inspection of fraternity houses the day before (Associated Press Online, Aug. 26, 1997). In addition, the article cites that just the week before, LSU had been named as tenth on a list of that nation's top party schools by the Princeton Review, a college guide for high school seniors. It is in this article that the chancellor is first quoted as declaring that "there is no way to manage them (students) off campus. It is difficult enough managing on campus." The article concludes with a statement by the university health services coordinator Nancy Matthews saying the heavy drinking at LSU is "a myth" and that surveys "show that we are about average" in student alcohol and drug use among other colleges and universities.

Subsequent articles surrounding the incident continue to credit the university with its campus-wide ban of alcohol, to note that the incident was not the result of hazing and to include Jenkins' statement that it is impossible for the university to regulate off campus behavior. In the Dallas Morning News on August 27, 1997, the chancellor is mentioned for ordering an "immediate investigation by the campus police and LSU's dean of students" in determining details of the event. This same article quotes Jenkins saying that the university has

"worked very hard to educate our students about the consequences of alcohol and substance abuse, and we've encouraged fraternities and other groups to behave responsibly" (Dallas Morning News, August 27, 1997). Jenkins also expresses his sympathy to the family.

As time progresses, the media begins to reflect that parties outside the university are responsible for the tragedy. As noted in an Associated Press article by Leslie Zganjar on August 27, 1997, a state-assembled team was formed to "investigate the binge-drinking death of a Louisiana State University student celebrating fraternity pledge week who was too young to buy alcohol legally." Only two days after the event, the media reports that the parties who provided the underage students with alcohol, be it the alcohol distributor or the fraternity, are likely to be at fault for Wynne's death. Moreover, a second Associated Press article by Guy Coates on August 27, 1997, characterizes the event as a "staggering blow to the university" where administrators "thought they had done everything right." Coates also portrays the university as one which had "struggled for years with an 'Animal House' perception of binge drinking and wild parties that sometimes end in death."

From this point on, the news articles reflect a positive image of the university representing it as a victim of the crisis and as an educator of the harms of extreme alcohol consumption. Likewise, the fraternity and the bar where the alcohol was consumed are depicted as the guilty and irresponsible parties in



the student's death. For example, the Washington Post on August 28, 1997 reports the university tried to educate students about the consequences of alcohol abuse and encouraged fraternities to act responsibly, and points to the "laissez-faire attitude" of the school and police as an inhibitor of the university's efforts. On the other hand, the article states that the bar where the drinking occurred "welcomes" younger drinkers and that the fraternity members "walked desultorily" in and out of the fraternity house "with heads lowered, shielding grim faces" when questioned by the press about the incident and their recent national suspension (Washington Post, August 28, 1997). An even more poignant example is the headline of a USA Today article on August 28, 1997 declaring the that "Drinking Death Deals a Blow to College Efforts."

However, a TIME magazine article on September 8, 1997, turns the focus back on the university by suggesting the possibility that the alcohol ban on campus drives students like Wynne off campus to drink irresponsibly. The article stresses that it is not only alcohol on campus that endangers students, but the availability of alcohol in the community, as well. William DeJong, a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health is quoted as saying that "the most important area for schools to focus on now is working with the larger community to ensure that students cannot abuse alcohol at private homes and bars" (TIME, September 8, 1997). It appears, from this article, that even

though the incident occurred off campus, the university is still to blame for not ensuring student safety at off campus locations.

An additional blow came to the university on September 9, 1997 when a student, Donald Hunt, filed suit against the fraternity, the bar and the university. The student, who was of legal age to consume alcohol, was hospitalized with alcohol poisoning for close to a week after the night of drinking that took Wynne's life. The suit "targets the university for allegedly failing to regulate or discourage bid night, when pledges are formally accepted into fraternities" (Associated Press Online, September 9, 1997). A university attorney is referred to as the source for all questions regarding the suit. A subsequent article on the lawsuit published the next day on September 10, 1997, in the Times-Picayune, however, again stresses the university's position against alcohol on campus and LSU's cooperation in investigating the incident and disciplining the fraternity. Yet again, the university's actions are reflected in a positive manner. In the end, only the fraternity and the bar were found responsible in Wynne's death and settled on criminal and civil charges. The severity of the suit filed by Hunt was diminished due to the fact that he was of legal age to consume alcohol and deemed as an adult, thus liable for his own actions.

As can be seen from the content of news coverage, the university's crisis response strategies were successful. Louisiana State University maintained a positive image in the majority of the news coverage at the onset of the crisis

stressing its lack of responsibility for off campus activity, its emphasis on substance abuse education, its openness to an investigation surrounding the incident and its willingness to remedy the situation of underage binge drinking by its students.

#### CASE STUDY: MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Exactly one month after the incident at LSU, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) was faced with a similar crisis when 18-year-old Scott Krueger lapsed into a coma from alcohol-related causes and, subsequently, died three days later. In responding to the crisis, the institute's president, Charles Vest, issued statements through MIT's news office in press releases and articles published in *Tech Talk*, a publication produced by the university. In his statements, Vest used a number of crisis response strategies.

Vest immediately offered the university's condolences to the student's family, but also emphasized the profound effect the crisis had on the campus community. Like LSU, Vest sought to portray the institute as a victim of the situation. The suffering response strategy aims to win sympathy from the publics, thus creating a positive link between the institute and the crisis. In additional statements, Vest used rectification messages to show that the institute was taking necessary steps to decrease the possibility of a similar crisis recurring in the future.

Justification strategies were also seen in the MIT case, though not in a denial of volition as with LSU. MIT sought to clarify what the institute perceived to be a misrepresentation of events concerning the crisis. Two students claimed that they approached the administration in 1992 to warn them of alcohol and drug problems on campus. At the time of the crisis, it was stated that the institute ignored these complaints and even refused to meet with the two students to discuss the issue. It was clarified that, though the students were denied a meeting with the president, they were referred to another official of the university. Moreover, at least one of the students was active in later revising campus policy and in helping to redesign orientation materials for incoming freshmen. Institute officials used the justification strategy in claiming this situation was misrepresented in an effort to diffuse any additional negative attention surrounding the crisis and tragedy of Krueger's death.

The crisis at MIT, considered an accident, differs from the LSU case when examining the performance history variable. Due to the claims by the two students who alerted the institute to the alcohol and drug problem on campus, MIT was considered by the researcher to have a negative performance history in dealing with underage drinking. According to Coombs, in an accident with major damage to victims, an organization with a poor performance history would be prescribed to respond to the crisis using the mortification strategies of remediation, repentance, and/or rectification. In order for the institute to respond to the

misrepresentation of facts surrounding the two students who alerted officials in 1992 of alcohol abuse on campus, Coombs would suggest the clarification strategy. Clarification is recommended when the evidence is false, but also when the organization maintains a poor performance history. Using the clarification strategy, the institute would try to explain to the public that there was no wrongdoing and the report was untrue in some way.

Table 5: Comparison of MIT's crisis strategies vs. Coombs' suggested strategies

	MIT's actual response	Coombs' suggested response
Nonexistence		X
Distance	X	
Ingratiation		
Mortification	X	X
Suffering	X	

As seen in Table 5, MIT used a justification strategy where Coombs' guidelines would have used a nonexistence approach in dealing with the students' complaints in 1992. Like LSU, MIT used Coombs' suggested mortification strategy, but also utilized the suffering strategy, although this was not one prescribed by Coombs. Analysis of news articles will show if these strategies achieved preferred outcomes.

As in the examination of the LSU case, news articles dating 15 days after the student's death were gathered to examine MIT's image in the media surrounding the crisis. (Note: two additional articles that were published between the time of incident and the student's death—the period of time he was in a coma—were also included.) The first article, published the day after Scott Krueger slipped into a coma from alcohol poisoning, focuses on the fraternity, Phi Gamma Delta. Unlike at LSU, Krueger's fraternity house at MIT was on campus. An unnamed MIT spokesperson acknowledged that "it appears that alcohol may have been involved in the incident" (Boston Globe, September 28, 1997). The university is also noted for immediately suspending the fraternity pending the investigation.

The second article, published while Krueger still remained in a coma, is the first where the university expresses regret for the incident. MIT held a press conference where the Boston Herald (September 29, 1997) reported that underage students at MIT are prohibited from drinking anywhere, even at fraternity houses. This article again states that MIT acted quickly to suspend all social activities of the fraternity, though students were allowed to continue living in the house. The institute's president, Charles M. Vest, also was quoted as saying that "the use of alcohol is a serious problem on virtually every campus in America and ours is no exception" (Boston Herald, September 29, 1997).

Newsday published an article the day following Krueger's death reporting that President Vest promised that "the MIT community will do all that we can to see that this kind of tragedy never happens here again" (Newsday, October 1, 1997). This article, like the first two, focuses on the fraternity as the responsible party rather than the institute. Additionally, the same day, the New York Times headline proclaims that the crisis "rattles elite MIT" and notes that this is the first time a student has died of alcohol poisoning at the institute. The article also reports that MIT had examined the incident and was discussing the "question of how to educate and persuade—and punish" those underage students who excessively consume alcohol on campus (New York Times, October 1, 1997). Up to this point, the institute seems to be maintaining its stance as the educator and protector of students, and the media is not making assumptions that the institute is responsible for Kreuger's death.

However, the Boston Globe also reports on October 1, 1997, that two students previously had warned President Vest and other administrators of the drinking problems at MIT's fraternities. The article reveals that the students, a year after administrators refused to meet with them concerning the issue, sent a letter in July 1993 asking "when a student is killed or dies at an MIT fraternity, how will MIT explain its full knowledge of dangerous and illegal practices unchecked over a period of years?" (Boston Globe, October 1, 1997). It is in this

article that institute administrators refuse to comment, directing the media to prepared statements issued by the president. The Boston Globe also notes that other students and MIT officials "said part of the reason for the apparent lack of action by administrators may stem from the financial and logistical interdependence" between the institute and fraternities. Interestingly, the university depends on fraternity housing because MIT "continues to suffer from a chronic student-housing shortage." However, it is also noted that the university "has no direct oversight of the independent houses, except to require that they meet all local and state housing and alcohol laws."

In following articles, the institute is characterized as "aggressively silent" in addressing the tragedy of Krueger's death (Boston Herald, October 1, 1997). News articles are also still focusing on the fraternity as the guilty party contributing the Krueger's death. The institute's secrecy is also forcing the media to rely and report solely on prepared statements issued by the president expressing the community's sorrow over the incident and the promise that MIT will do all it can to prevent a similar incident in the future.

Two days after Krueger's death, The Boston Globe reports that President Vest, in a press conference, "promised a complete review of its alcohol policies and pledged to create new residence halls for undergraduate students" (The Boston Globe, October 2, 1997). In this article, it seems that the institute



is struggling to maintain its image. The president acknowledges that the administration "could have responded more aggressively to complaints of heavy drinking at fraternities" and that "we've been inadequate." A number of excuses for this lack of action are made in this article, including financial constraints for building additional housing due to a budget deficit. Though experts quoted in this article suggest that Vest's idea for requiring freshmen and underclassmen to live on campus "would be an important step for MIT to tackle the drinking problem among students," they also criticize MIT's lack of action in investigating previous student complaints regarding excessive drinking on campus. Though the perceived responsibility of the crisis still rests on the fraternity in this article, it is evident that the media is beginning to provide reasons to blame the institute, as well.

Again, MIT is portrayed negatively in an Associated Press article on October 2, 1997, after it is revealed that the institute was warned about alcohol on campus years before Krueger's death. "A student on the 1991 committee said they complained of heavy drinking, particularly in fraternities, but were ignored by university officials" (Associated Press, October 2, 1997). This article also reiterated Vest's statement that "the school's response had been inadequate." Vest also appeared on Today with Katie Couric on October 3, 1997, to defend the institute's actions and discuss the death of Scott Krueger. Couric asks Vest to explain the charges that MIT was aware of

alcohol abuse on campus and that the administration refused to meet with the students making these complaints. Vest's response was that, due to his busy schedule, he was unable to personally meet with the students and referred them to other members of the administration (Today, October 3, 1997).

MIT's perceived level of responsibility escalates when Newsweek reports on October 13, 1997, that "there's plenty of blame to go around." The article notes the guilt of the fraternity and the fraternity members in contributing to Kreuger's death, but also states that the district attorney is "looking into possible involuntary-manslaughter charges against university officials" and that "Krueger's family is said to be furious at the school and could file suit" (Newsweek, October 13, 1997).

Finally, on October 14, 1997, the campus paper, The Tech, accuses the institute of inhibiting the investigation due to its lack of cooperation and states that the institute could be charged as a guilty party due to the fact that it had "knowledge of heavy drinking in fraternities as early as 1991" (The Tech, October 14, 1997). This charged would be based on a landmark decision in 1994 by the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts making it possible to criminally charge individuals not at the scene of a crime if there was "willful, wanton or reckless conduct," according to the article. Though at the time the article was published, no charges had been brought against the institute, it is noted that the institute could be charged as a

corporation resulting in financial penalty or individuals of the institute could be charged which could result in fines and prison time.

It is apparent that the crisis response strategies employed by MIT did not work in this case. Perhaps the issue that damaged the institute the most was the revelation that students had complained years earlier of excessive alcohol use on campus. The one strategy that MIT did not use that Coombs would have prescribed was the clarification method, which would have been used to describe more accurately the events surrounding the statements that the two students made in 1991 alerting the administration to a problem on campus. Where the institute attempted to show that the events were misrepresented, Coombs would have suggested using clarification to show that the claims that the institute did not act on the notification were untrue. While it is impossible to predict if the media would have reported the events differently had the institute used this method, it is an important aspect to consider. Notably, MIT eventually accepted a degree of responsibility for the incident and agreed to pay \$6 million--\$1.25 million to endow a scholarship that Krueger's parents established in his name and \$4.75 million in compensatory damages to the family (The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 29, 2000).

## CASE STUDY: DUKE UNIVERSITY

Duke University's case is unique in comparison to LSU's and MIT's in that Duke did not initially respond to the incident when Raheem Bath, a 20-year-old student, died from alcohol-related pneumonia. Bath died in Duke's hospital in November 1999. At the time of his death, the university did not provide the link between his case of pneumonia and his excessive alcohol consumption that led to his illness. Only after a second student faced a near-death situation in January 2000 as a result from overconsumption and the school newspaper published the true facts of Bath's death, did the university respond. The initial response came in a speech by the university's president, Nan Keohane, to Duke's Board of Trustees. Following the president's speech, the news office distributed an op-ed piece written by two health professors and issued two news releases focusing on underage drinking and, specifically, Bath's death.

Both President Keohane and Vice President for Student Affairs Janet Smith Dickerson served as university spokespeople. Several different crisis response strategies are used in Keohane's speech, the op-ed piece and the releases issued by the news office. Bolstering, a form of ingratiation, is used when Keohane stressed that the university had previously taken steps to educate students and curb excessive drinking on campus. Another form of ingratiation, praising others, is used when Duke officials applauds those students on campus who do not consume alcohol or drink responsibly. An organization that praises a

public does so in attempt to gain approval from that target group. The denial of volition, a justification strategy, was used when Keohane claimed that students, and even some parents, do not recognize the consequences of alcohol abuse, thus making the tragedies that result from alcohol consumption beyond the university's control. This strategy is also apparent each time Duke officials blame excessive drinking on the students' ignorance toward the dangers involved in such activities. Lastly, the university uses mortification strategies, specifically rectification, to show that the university was taking steps to prevent a similar incident in the future.

Though there was a lapse of time between the incident and the response, this case can still use Coombs' guidelines for crisis strategy. As an accident, this crisis invoked major damage on the victims, and the institution's unwillingness to respond and provide details translated into a poor performance history. Like in the MIT case, Coombs' proposed strategies would be the use of mortification, either through an apology, compensation to the victim, or action taken to prevent this type of crisis in the future.

Table 6: Comparison of Duke's crisis strategies vs. Coombs' suggested strategies

	Duke's actual response	Coombs' suggested response
Nonexistence		
Distance	X	
Ingratiation	X	
Mortification	X	X
Suffering	X	

Again, as in the other two cases, the university used additional crisis response strategies combined with Coombs' suggested response. The use of distance, or more specifically the denial of volition, showed that the university did not intentionally withhold information regarding the alcohol-related incident. The suffering strategy was used to show that the university was a victim of the crisis, as well, and the praising of others, a type of ingratiation, was used to gain support from those students who drink responsibly. An analysis of articles appearing in the news media will determine if these responses produced favorable results.

The Duke University case is unique in that the university did not acknowledge that Raheem Bath's death on November 27, 1999 was a result of alcohol consumption. It was not until February 17, 2000 that the connection was first realized in the student newspaper, The Chronicle. Therefore, it was not possible to gather news articles surrounding Bath's death. As a result, news

articles resulting in the 15 days following the university's confirmation that Bath's death resulted from overconsumption of alcohol were collected to analyze the university's response and the media's reaction concerning the crisis.

The initial news article published by The Chronicle on February 17, 2000, criticized Duke's "alcohol-dependent social scene" and the university's delay in action which could have resulted in an "official attempt to raise public awareness" of alcohol abuse on campus. The president of the university, Nan Keohane, is quoted in the article as saying that Duke did not intentionally cover-up the incident, but were waiting for permission from Bath's parents before discussing the details surrounding his death. In addition, The Chronicle notes that the university admitted the connection between alcohol consumption and Bath's death after another student was hospitalized for excessive drinking and questions whether "officials and campus leaders should have used the momentum from [Bath's] death to demonstrate the dangers of alcohol use" (The Chronicle, February 17, 2000). It is stressed in the article that Duke had begun discussions to educate students about the dangers of binge drinking and that administrators felt that "discussing the issue of excessive drinking is the first step to its prevention."

In an Associated Press article the next day, a university news release was quoted saying that Duke did not mention the connection between Bath's death and binge drinking due to doctor-patient confidentiality. Only when a second student faced a

similar incident, though survived, did the university see the "need to talk more openly about the illness" (Associated Press, February 18, 2000). In addition to this second student who faced alcohol-related pneumonia, The Philadelphia Inquirer quoted a Duke official stating that more than 20 other students had been hospitalized for toxic levels of alcohol that year (The Philadelphia Inquirer, February 19, 2000). This article also points out that while Duke had programs in place that were designed to encourage responsible drinking behavior, the university was exploring what else it could do to prevent a similar situation and to alleviate what it had begun to view as a "public health crisis."

However, The Herald-Sun attacks Duke for its lack of disclosure surrounding the circumstances of Bath's death in an article published on February 20, 2000. The article declares Duke's response "disappointing" and says that concerns for doctor-patient confidentiality "does not excuse Duke for its silence on the danger of alcohol abuse following Bath's death" (The Herald-Sun, February 20, 2000). Experts quoted in The Chronicle of Higher Education on February 21, 2000, said Duke missed a "teachable moment by initially withholding the details of Mr. Bath's death" and that "the sudden acknowledgement has angered some students as well as alcohol experts who say the university should have reported the circumstances . . . as a cautionary tale about the dangers of binge drinking." This article goes further to ponder whether the delay in relaying



details will question whether Duke takes excessive drinking seriously.

Interestingly, an article published on February 22, 2000, in The Chronicle quotes Bath's mother and her perception of what contributed to her son's death. Catherine Bath does not fully blame the "mixed messages" concerning drinking in the university community, but rather characterizes her son's death as a nationwide problem. It is important to note that this article states that both Mrs. Bath and her husband are Muslim and do not drink and although she is "uncomfortable with the publicity surrounding her son's death, she hopes her loss will help prevent others" (The Chronicle, February 22, 2000). She states that they "got pulled into this," but that she hopes it results in "full-blown education" regarding alcohol. It is apparent from this statement that the "permission" Duke was waiting for from the family before discussing the details of the case actually may have been what inhibited the university from immediately disclosing information. However, this aspect is not realized in subsequent articles and Duke is continually referred to as "neglecting" to mention that Bath's death was in connection with alcohol consumption and "failing to educate students" on the dangers of alcohol (Cavalier Daily, February 25, 2000).

Duke does not seem to take the bashing in the media that MIT did, though. President Keohane readily admitted that "she was too slow to talk publicly" but immediately "pledged a more vigorous effort to change Duke's drinking culture" (The News and

Observer, February 26, 2000). The administration is quoted as taking specific steps to "combat dangerous alcohol use." The News and Observer also states that "it's not too late to send a powerful message." It seems that it is reflected in this article that the emphasis should be on educating the students, and not on the delay between when Bath died and when the university publicly acknowledged the cause.

The media reflects that Keohane immediately acknowledged that the "lack of official public comment about the issue . . . was wrong" and promised that, in the future, she would be "vocal, visible and visionary" (The Herald-Sun, February 26, 2000). Other articles that follow praise Duke for its "progressive" alcohol policies and its notification to parents of first-year students upon a second alcohol offense (The Herald-Sun, February 27, 2000). It seems that, though in nearly every news article surrounding the university's disclosure of information Keohane admits the university's fault in the delay, Duke continues to be shown in a favorable manner and its efforts to combat the problem are repeatedly highlighted as a positive aspect.

Perhaps it was Keohane's quick apology for withholding information and her immediate and specifically outlined plan for programs on campus to combat underage drinking that helped preserve the university's image in the media. These two aspects, both strategies Coombs proposed to use as mortification responses in this case, appear to have been successful. Duke has also taken a pioneer's approach in using its strength to report

alcohol-related incidents to parents of underage students, a provision made by Congress to the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act in 1998 (The Herald-Sun, November 16, 2000). While, on the surface, Duke appears to have made the gravest mistake by not disclosing the truth at the time of the crisis, the result was that Duke managed to preserve its image better than either LSU or MIT, with no lawsuits and very little negative news coverage.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

In all industries, crises are inevitable and it is necessary for the public relations practitioners to have well-developed crisis management plans in order to act quickly at the onset of a crisis, hopefully resulting in the preservation of the organization's image. An integral part of a crisis management plan is to have designated strategies prescribed for different crisis situations. Coombs' research on appropriate crisis response strategies provide a framework for practitioners either formulating a crisis management plan or seeking counsel on strategies to be used immediately in a crisis.

This research has sought to determine if Coombs' crisis response guidelines are specific to corporate crises, or if they can be applied in other areas, specifically in higher education. As Coombs' states, these guidelines "are not recipes for success but recommendations for making reasoned choices when communicating to publics after a crisis" (Coombs, 1995). Coombs points out that, even following the guidelines precisely, a crisis response plan can still fail to achieve the desired results.

As can be seen from the case studies, underage binge drinking on college campuses is a growing problem facing

institutions of higher education. By ignoring the issue, university officials are only inviting disaster. In the unfortunate case that a student dies as a result of excessive alcohol consumption, the university must be prepared to deal with all publics--students, parents, faculty, staff, etc. This type of crisis is a tragedy which affects the entire campus community. Therefore, it is imperative that the university act swiftly to disseminate information in a sensitive, caring and concerned manner.

This research does not focus on measures used to prevent such a crisis, but rather the techniques necessary in responding when a crisis occurs. Coombs' techniques are adequate guidelines for a crisis situation affecting an institution of higher education, but additional strategies may be necessary due to higher education's unique nature. The findings indicate that due to a perceived heightened level of responsibility for universities in caring for their students, additional response strategies such as suffering may be necessary to gain approval from the audience.

The three cases studied in this research vary in ways which would lead Coombs to suggest differing responses depending on the circumstances. In addition, there are issues within each crisis that complicate the response strategy decision and make it difficult for the communicator to settle on the specific strategies outlined in Coombs' accident-type crisis response flowchart. For example, MIT's poor performance history

eliminates the option of using an ingratiation strategy and dictates that the organization use only the mortification strategy. However, the cause of this poor performance characterization, the claim that MIT ignored alerts to the drinking problem on campus years prior to the incident and MIT's denial to this claim, calls for an additional justification strategy to explain why this claim is untrue.

It seems, from the findings of this research, that unique factors abound in the type of crises affecting institutions of higher education when dealing with injury or death as a result of underage binge drinking on campus. These factors, including the *in loco parentis* debate and the federal reporting laws, limit the effectiveness of Coombs' suggested crisis response strategies. Higher education communicators have more at stake when considering legal ramifications, such that the *in loco parentis* function of a university, no matter how slight this has become, still designates more responsibility to the institution. This is not a major concern for corporations outside of higher education.

#### LIMITATIONS

Coombs' crisis-type matrix presents problems when determining the type of crisis facing a university when a death occurs on campus due to binge drinking. It is difficult to characterize this type of crisis as either a faux pas or an accident based on the characteristics offered by the matrix. For the purpose of this study, these crises were considered

accidents, being that they were unintentional on the part of the university, that they happened during the course of normal operations and that they were generally random. However, based on the *in loco parentis* factor, it is debatable whether these "accidents" were uncontrollable and that the organization lacked responsibility for the crisis. Though this research does not intend to prove or suggest that the institutions examined were responsible for the deaths of the students, it is questionable whether the various publics view different degrees of institutional responsibility. The lawsuits which faced both LSU and MIT are examples that some level of responsibility must have been perceived.

If the crisis had been considered to be a faux pas, the incident would have had to occur by an unintentional action by the institution that an external agent attempted to transform into a crisis. The institution would have believed its actions were appropriate, though there was no intention to do wrong (Coombs, 1995). Coombs points out that "social responsibility tends to be the focal point of most faux pas." Aspects of these crises could definitely be deemed a faux pas such as Duke's reluctance to disclose information concerning the death of the student based on respect for the family and doctor-patient confidentiality. Granted, though Duke's decision not to release information was an intentional action, the intention was one viewed as appropriate by the institution in order to exercise concern for the parents. However, Duke's lack of communication

regarding the cause of the student's death was not the bulk of the crisis facing the university—the most important aspect of the crisis was the death itself.

This research proposes that additional categories be included in the crisis-type matrix that would better classify crises such as the ones examined in this study. Perhaps a type that would result from unintentional, random acts that occurred during normal operations with a variable level of social responsibility defined by the publics. With this questionable level of social responsibility, a choice of appropriate strategies would be presented to allow the institution to choose based on the specific circumstances involved in the incident.

Coombs may have realized this problem of his guidelines of appropriate crisis response strategies when he further tested his ideas in 1998. Still using crisis responsibility as the "grounding factor" for the framework of response strategy, Coombs offers an accommodative-defensive continuum that presents varying strategies as the level of perceived responsibility increases. It is his assertion, with which this researcher agrees, that "as perceptions of crisis responsibility strengthen, the threat of image damage should strengthen, meaning crisis managers need to utilize more accommodative strategies" (Coombs, 1998). By using this continuum, the communicator could choose different strategies based on the current level of perceived responsibility. As seen with this type of crisis in the three case studies examined in this research, the level of perceived



responsibility can differ from institution to institution and this level can also fluctuate during a crisis, depending on how the institution is responding to the publics. It seems that poor response, such as in the MIT case, creates a perception of greater institutional responsibility, a possible backlash from the publics.

Another difficult aspect of using Coombs' guidelines for this type of crisis is the decision between minor and major damage that must be made when using the flowchart. While most would consider the death of a student to be "major" damage, other publics exist which are exposed to varying degrees of damage related to the incident, such as other students affected indirectly by the student's death. For example, in the LSU case, damage could have occurred for members of Wynne's fraternity, though they may not actually have known the deceased student. In order to effectively react to all publics, it seems that an institution would need alternate strategies to respond to these groups. Perhaps a continuum of crisis severity would offer greater aid to the communicator, giving the institution additional choices beyond simply "minor" and "major." In later research by Coombs (1998), he does acknowledge this limitation and states that crises do "vary in the severity of damage they inflict."

Aside from the concerns regarding the crisis-type matrix and the degree of damage variable, Coombs' guidelines do prove helpful for any public relations practitioner facing an

organizational crisis, even those crisis managers in higher education. Most importantly, the framework set forth by Coombs' approach requires the communicator to identify specific variables such as truth of evidence, victim status, and performance history. By first distinguishing these variables, the communicator then can more clearly define specific response strategies in the event of a crisis. An important quality of Coombs' guidelines is that they offer the crisis team a formula around which to produce responses. As Coombs' states, these guidelines are just a guide to be used to devise crisis communications responses, and that they are not guaranteed to produce successful results each and every time.

#### IMPLICATIONS

Through the three cases studied, this research sought to determine whether colleges and universities can use Coombs' guidelines to effectively communicate during a crisis when a student dies as a result of underage binge drinking. Of the three, it appears that Duke University provided the most successful crisis response strategies. Success was measured by the content of news media coverage surrounding the time the crisis surfaced, specifically whether the institutions were capable of efficiently translating their messages to the media.

Due to Duke's large quantity of positive news coverage, it is important to look at the aspects of the crisis strategies employed by Duke in order to exemplify this case for other

institutions facing similar crises. Most importantly, Duke showed the willingness to set forth a designated and specific program to educate its students about the dangers of alcohol immediately after the death of the student was made known. This rectification strategy, also prescribed by Coombs, helped Duke assure the public that it would take all steps necessary to ensure that such an incident did not recur.

Of the three, Duke was the one that appeared to abandon any sense of self-preservation and act out of care and concern—first for the family of the victim, and then for the campus community. By delineating a specific plan of action for alcohol education and policy change, along with issuing its statements coinciding with its crisis response strategies, Duke gained the support of the student's family, and eventually the campus community and the media. It is interesting to note that Duke is also the one that most closely follows the *in loco parentis* rule. Not only does the university take some level of responsibility for educating its students on alcohol and substance abuse, it also is one of the few universities nationwide that report alcohol infractions to the parents of underage students, a result of the changes recently made to the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act.

However, it is difficult to take these three individual cases and universally apply them to all universities facing similar crises. There are important points that can be gathered from these cases, though, for others to consider. It is noted that the institution that faced a lawsuit and was financially

punished as a result of the crisis, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was the one that had the highest level of perceived responsibility for preventing the crisis. If MIT had not previously been notified of the excessive alcohol use on campus, it may have been able to better preserve its image. By admitting its fault in not taking previous action on these claims, the institute left itself vulnerable to litigation dependent on its degree of responsibility. As Benoit warns, an admission of guilt may result in litigation from the victims (1995). Whereas both LSU and Duke previously had attempted to address the problem of binge drinking on campus, MIT had ignored blatant warnings. This poor performance history had the most drastic impact on the institute's crisis communications plan.

More research is needed on crisis response strategies specific to higher education. One area that should be studied in the future is whether different types of institutions with their unique visions react and respond differently to negative events. One could examine the differences in responses from private vs. public schools, from large schools vs. small schools, or from school located in communities of varying size.

With the high level of responsibility bestowed upon institutions for their campus communities, it cannot be determined whether prescribed responses would work for these types of organization. Coombs' approach provides adequate guidelines, but it is not feasible that these will always be fitting to the crisis or for response to specific publics. This

research finds that the performance history and previous issues management conducted by a university may be more telling of the outcome of a crisis than the actual response strategies issued at the time of the incident.

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