



EVOLUTION OF EMERGENCY OPERATIONS STRATEGIES: STRUCTURE AND PROCESS OF CRISIS RESPONSE IN COLLEGE STUDENT AFFAIRS

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A Dissertation Study by *C. Ryan Akers, Ph.D.*

Editor's Note:

The following is a brief summary of a mixed methods dissertation that analyzed crisis response strategies at 51 institutions of higher education across the U.S. Seven dichotomies of institutional type were utilized as was an analysis of institutional size based on student enrollment classification and an analysis of geographic location. Due to limited space in this newsletter, I invite your questions and comments by [email](#).

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Due to the rising number of campus crises today, it is easy to assume that during the course of a lengthy career in higher education, student affairs practitioners and other administrators will be faced with not just a single crisis, but many crises, whether they relate to student death, violence, or natural disasters (Duncan & Misner, 2000). Crisis response is a function of university administration that is often overlooked within student affairs divisions across the country. However, due to several recent events on campuses and the post-9/11 world in which we live, university officials are constantly reviewing and placing a strong emphasis on how to develop and implement their crisis response procedures and protocols. Incidents such as the recent Virginia Tech tragedy, the institutions directly affected by Hurricane Katrina damage, the Texas A&M bonfire in November of 1999, the public suicide of a highly visible campus protester at the University of Pennsylvania, the 1999 floods at East Carolina University, the residence hall fire at Seton Hall University in January of 2000, the 1996 fraternity house fire at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, the 2004 fire at the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity house fire at the University of Mississippi, and the student suicides at Harvard University in 1997, 1998, and 2001, are recent examples of campus tragedies that provide the context for this study.

Further instances of traumatic events on campus and in the adjacent community are the 2002 shooting at Clark University in Atlanta, Georgia, or the two separate instances of student deaths in 2002 at small Catawba College in Salisbury, North Carolina where three students were killed prior to another student death in a residence hall fire. From the aftermath of the 1998 Mathew Sheppard case in the University of Wyoming community to the faculty/student murder suicide at the University of Arkansas in August of 2000, and from faculty murders at Dartmouth to institutions of higher education in the shadows of the 2001 terrorist attacks, the effects of traumatic events can manifest themselves in even the best students and practitioners, possibly rendering them helpless to continue their education or careers in a formidable manner.

According to Barr and Desler (2000), "Crisis situations occur far too often on college campuses and student affairs staff members are often the first responders when a crisis occurs. The death of a student, a serious injury, fire, flood, or tornado all require sensitive responses on behalf of the institution and for those affected by the tragedy" (p. 637). Instances of trauma can take a toll on the residential areas on campus where the majority of the institution's students live and a high percentage of student affairs

[What is this?](#)

professionals are employed. When the residence hall environment is disrupted, the academic and student development missions of the institutions and the emotional livelihood of all involved are compromised. These critical incidents can also affect other areas of campus and areas in the surrounding community, specifically in smaller cities and towns and with those institutions that have a strong town/gown relationship. University administrators should concern themselves with the physical, mental, and emotional well being of their entire university populations as they progress through times of crisis related to student death and assault, weather-related emergencies, and terrorism and its threats to safety.

Data Collection Methods

The 114-item *Crisis Response Survey* was developed by the primary investigator and analyzed the definition of a crisis, the structure (the plan itself, or “the plan on paper” of the respective crisis response protocols (organization; education, preparation, training; assessment/evaluation; memorials), the process of crisis response (“the actual plan in action”; response to needs), and the overlap between the structure and the process and its components crisis communication and collaboration. A Likert scale was implemented with each quantitative item on the survey and a return rate of 94.44% was achieved. Quantitative data were then entered into an SPSS program and series of T-tests of independent means and ANOVAs were run. Fifty-one qualitative interviews were conducted via telephone over the span of 18 days and analyzed the same elements in the *Crisis Response Survey*. The initial point of contact with each participating institution was the Chief Student Affairs Officer. However, the task of study requirement completion could have been delegated to the appropriate staff member. The average interview lasted approximately 37 minutes. Qualitative data were then transcribed, coded, and analyzed. To eliminate potential researcher bias, member checks and peer reviews were implemented.

Research Questions (RQs) and Summary of Study Findings

Editor’s Note: (Qualitative data illustrations are not possible here due to space limitations. If interested, please contact Ryan Akers at cakers@humansci.msstate.edu.)

RQ1: What constitutes a crisis from the perspective of the institution and from the division of student affairs?

The definitions of crises at the institutional level and the division of student affairs level can best be illustrated through a series of four levels. Incidents at higher levels have an increased degree of campus impact and response effort. The first two levels are student emergencies and student crises, respectively. These incidents require a division response and are normally defined by the person affected and/or the division. These incidents normally affect only individuals and have a localized impact and require an individualized response. The third and fourth levels are termed campus crises and campus disasters, with the latter level being the most serious of the four categories. In contrast to the first two levels, campus crises and campus disasters require and an institution-wide and external response. These incidents are defined by the institution and external agencies. Incidents in these two levels normally affect both individuals and property and have a widespread impact that requires a systemic response. It should be noted that very small/small institutions are an exception to this rule presumably due to the smaller institutions having much more inclusive social environments. Additionally, student emergencies can escalate to higher level incidents without efficient recognition and response.

RQ2: Who is involved in the development of crisis response protocols and how do institutions prepare themselves for crisis?

Protocol development and response team membership was composed of five categories or levels. Primary membership was evident at the executive level (Presidents, Vice Presidents, Police Chiefs, and Legal Counsel) and at the division and departmental levels (Deans, Associate Deans, Assistant Deans, Directors, Assistant Directors). Secondary membership was sporadic among the 51 institutions and featured two categories or levels: community (external health and support agencies, neighborhood coalitions, alumni) and academic (professors, instructors). Institutions prepared for crises and critical events through five common methods: training (via simulated exercises, decentralized departmental training, and routine campus response team training); education (via campus education and prevention programs, professional development opportunities, and professional certification opportunities); collaboration/communication (specific to crisis response team, within internal departments, with external

agencies, and with other institutions) resource application (via new technology, new human resources, and physical and logistical resources); and organization/early preparation (via observation exercise, predetermining roles and responsibilities, establishing relationships prior to events, and establishing clear communication channels early). Of special note, the majority of participants suggested that preparation was an aspect of the crisis response plan that needed much improvement, advocating for more frequent training exercises with all stakeholders, opportunities and rewards for continuing education and enhanced collaboration, additional innovative technological advances, and early preparation and organization.

RQ3: Whose needs are being addressed in times of crisis and what are these needs? How are these needs being addressed?

There are five primary stakeholder groups represented in student affairs work with crises. The most relevant group to student affairs work is the student group, followed by parents, faculty/staff, the local community, and alumni/media in that descending order. Each group has its own needs and student affairs and the institution address those needs in a variety of ways. For example, students have the need for information dissemination or need to know what is going on. We meet that need through various communication mediums. Students also have needs for safety and security reassurance. We meet that need by detailing our plans and protocols at orientations, floor meetings, emails, etc. Students also have physical, psychological, spiritual, and academic needs. We meet those needs by providing food and shelter, immediate and sustained counseling, campus ministries, and liaisons with academic affairs. Parents also have the need for information dissemination, safety and security reassurance, and psychological and bereavement needs. We institute similar processes as found in our work with students and we also provide counseling services, attend funerals and memorials, provide physical assistance in moving belongings, and limiting irrelevant communications. We meet faculty/staff needs of information dissemination and safety and security reassurance in the same way as we do with other groups. We also assist faculty/staff in student behavior education and awareness by providing workshops, seminars, and training. We also provide them opportunities for rest and support by having backup teams, recognizing exemplary efforts in response, and via counseling programs. We respond to the information dissemination needs of the local community and alumni/media through various communication mediums. We also strive to meet the physical and psychological needs of the local community by providing shelter and occasional counseling. In the future, needs identification and assessment will grow in importance due to media awareness and societal expectations increasing in the face of increase threats to safety and security. The need for student affairs first responders who understand these processes is crucial.

RQ4: How are crisis response protocols evaluated and improved?

Institutions assess and evaluate their crisis response protocols through four common methods: simulated exercises (via campus wide drills, division and specific committee tabletops, and case studies); actual live crisis experiences (via debriefing, institutional benchmarking, and best practices research and review); internal discourse (via student, faculty/staff, parent feedback solicitation, appointed focus groups, and dedicated professional/committee review); and external discourse (via hired consultants, established external law enforcement/emergency management partnerships, and special task forces). The area of assessment and evaluation of crisis response plans was another area that participants indicated that much attention and improvement was needed. Just as evaluation and assessment is a top priority in our daily work, so too should it be in the area of crisis response. The potential consequences of no assessment are unacceptable.

RQ5: Does type of institutional influence campus crisis response?

Primary influences on crisis response are based on the commuter/residential and public/private dichotomies. Secondary influences on crisis response are based on the liberal arts/non-liberal arts, land grant/non-land grant, and faith based/non faith-based dichotomies. Finally, there were tertiary influences, or factors associated with institutional type, that influenced crisis response including being a largely decentralized institution, having a high percentage of out of state and international students, and having the state "flagship" reputation. Quantitative data indicated the highest number of significant items at the .05 level being found within the Structure analysis (organization; education, preparation, and training; assessment; memorials). Education, preparation, and training produced the most significant survey items across all dichotomies. Each type dichotomy produced further interesting findings. Publics scored higher on familiarity of symptoms and stages of Acute Traumatic Stress, while Privates scored

higher when addressing concerns of students and families. Commuters scored lower than residential participants on all significant items. Interestingly enough, the quantitative data yielded many significant survey items in the HBCU/PWI dichotomy and Two-Year/Four-Year dichotomies. However, no themes were found in the qualitative data that would suggest these type dichotomies had an influence on crisis protocols. HBCUs did respond less favorably to communication efforts with stakeholders and collaboration with internal units. Liberal arts institutions have crisis response plans that focus on and address the entire campus community and are more likely to lead campus-wide memorial services and to utilize dedications in the recovery process, than their non-liberal arts counterparts. Land grants scored consistently higher in each of the significant survey items in this dichotomy. Faith-based institutions scored consistently lower on each of the significant survey items with respect to the faith based/non-faith based dichotomy.

RQ6: Does institutional size classification influence campus crisis response?

Institutional size based on student enrollment classification positively and negatively influences campus crisis response. Positive influences of smaller institutions included having simplified tasks, increased partnership and support, and fewer incidents. Negative influences of smaller institutions included fewer resources, increased expectations, and complacency issues. Positive influences of larger institutions included increased staffing, increased experience and expertise of staff and administration, and increased services and programs offered for community. Negative influences of larger institutions included difficulties in community notification, responder role confusion, and difficulty in outreach services. Quantitative data yielded 16 significant items at the .05 level with 14 from the Structure analysis (education, preparation, and training; memorials). Very large institutions scored higher than medium sized institutions in educating first responders to assist in emotional, natural, and facility crises, and in assisting victims of sexual assault, drug/alcohol abuse, and secondary victims. Smaller institutions scored higher than medium sized institutions in addressing faculty/staff and neighboring community needs.

RQ7: Does the geographic location of an institution influence campus crisis response?

Geographic location does influence crisis management protocols on campus. The influence is two-fold with respect proximity to areas with a high potential for natural crises (coastal and "tornado alley" institutions) and proximity to major metropolitan areas due to crime and threats of terrorism). Rurally located institutions indicated an increased ability to contain their crises in part because of the concept of total campus involvement in the response effort. However, rural campuses indicated increased expectations from the surrounding community. In contrast, urban institutions suggested their location afforded increased resources and partnership. However, being an urban institution resulted in increased frequency and range in crises, immediacy of media engagement, and hyperawareness of constant threats to safety and security. The survey data yielded five items of significance at the .05 level with four being from the analysis of structure (organization; education, preparation, and training). Large mean disparities found only between urban and rural institutions suggest comfortable resources and efficient protocols for suburban institutions. Additionally, proximity to federal buildings and prominent landmarks influence crisis response. Institutions located in urban areas and in areas at-risk for inclement weather are doubly influenced by their location.

Areas of Future Research

After completing this dissertation and other projects related to the effects of crisis and critical incidents on campus populations and the learning environment, I am pleased with the vast array of research opportunities that exist in this area of our field. Unfortunately, there is no policy that administrators can enact that will prevent crises and critical incidents from occurring. Areas ripe for future research include: real-time crisis communication and technology strategies; certification of practitioners in emergency management and the use of ICS and NIMS; functions of behavioral and threat assessment teams; gun ownership and information disclosure; increased college application scrutiny; development of cultures of reporting; faculty education and workshops; campus-wide physical safety features, and much more.