By Lisa S. Kelsay

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Aftermath of a Crisis: How Colleges Respond to Prospective Students

Throughout the country and through the years, several colleges and universities have been the focal point of violence and tragedy. These tragedies include the brutal beating and murder of a gay student; a campus bonfire that killed 12 students and alumni; a residence hall fire that claimed the lives of three students; terrorist activities in two of America's urban centers; racial riots that effectively shut down a large city; and shootings of students and professors by college classmates.

When news of crises such as these makes national headlines, prospective students and their parents may reconsider attending or even withdraw their applications from the institutions associated with the crises. Universities and colleges must work hard to keep these students interested in their institutions, and assure parents and students that the institutions are safe.

Implications of the Study for Professional Practice

In all shapes and forms, crises occur almost daily throughout the country on college and university campuses. Baldridge and Julius (1998) determined that seven factors contribute to the potential increase of violence at or near higher education institutions. These factors include:

- college and university campuses are larger and more complex
- political movements historically have been part of campus life
- computer systems are a source of vulnerability
- an aggressive media makes a private crisis a public circus
- the legal environment accommodates those who seek litigation as an answer
- environmental concerns have had an impact, particularly in regard to hazardous waste disposal

- natural disasters and civil unrest increasingly threaten (232–234).

When a crisis occurs either on or near the college campus, a number of needs arise. For example, when the horrific events of 9/11 occurred, colleges and universities located in large metropolitan cities closed and evacuated for the safety of students, faculty and staff. Following the bonfire collapse at Texas A&M University (TX), the university declared a moratorium on the annual tradition of creating the bonfire (Lowery, 2000). Students living in the residence hall that burned at Seton Hall University (NJ) were re-located into other residence halls, and clothing and school supplies were found for them (Seton Hall University, 2003). Members and officers of the University of Wyoming Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Association (LGBTA) student organization received extra security as they hosted the LGBTA Gay Awareness Week activities during the week of the brutal beating death of Matthew Shepard (Hurst, 1999).

When crises occur on or near college or university campuses, crises management teams often convene to discuss how to meet related needs and assist current students, their parents, staff, and faculty members cope with the tragedy (Hoffman, Schuh and Fenske, 1998). The crisis

management team/committee may be composed of staff from residence life, the counseling center, academic affairs, public relations, and/or the campus police. The committee's responsibility is to create and implement a crisis management plan and to assist those on campus following a crisis, whether it is a natural, criminal or human crisis—Zdziarski describes the difference among these three types: a natural crisis could include weather events such as hurricanes; a criminal crisis includes homicide or rape; and a human crisis would be a death or suicide (2001).

To measure the effectiveness of institutions' crisis management teams' decisions, universities must consider how these events impact the views of prospective students. The following research discusses the ways a campus and/or community crisis may influence the college-choice decision of prospective students and their parents and offers recommendations to colleges. In addition, the following research discusses how crisis management teams can positively influence the college choice decision following a campus or community crisis.

Research Methodology

Three institutions participated in this study that vary in size, location and type (see Table 1). The crises investigated involve a residence hall fire, a racially-based community crisis and an on-campus student death. Each crisis selected is one that could potentially occur again on or near college or university campuses across the country.

A total of 21 professional admission representatives and senior administrators were interviewed in this study (see Table 2). Twenty of these individuals worked at the institution during the crisis. This continuity in employment allowed the opportunity to interview admission representatives at each institution who could share their direct experiences regarding the questions and comments raised by prospective students and parents following each crisis. Institutional names were altered to protect participants in this study.

The institutions selected allowed for the collection of admission data for a minimum of a three-year time span; the year prior to, the year of, and the year following the crisis. Also collected from each site were the crisis management plan/policies, publications and admitted student questionnaire (see Table 3).

Bern College

Located in a large urban community, Bern College experienced a student death on its campus. Media attention about this student death started rumors throughout the campus,

Table 1. Selected Sites

Institutions	Crisis	Number of Enrolled Students	Minimum of Two Admission Staff
Interlaken University	Residence Hall Fire	Approx. 2,500	Yes
Bern College	Student Death	Approx. 6,400	Yes
Luzern University	Community Riot	Approx. 15,000	Yes

Table 2. Participants Selected

Title of Interview	Female	Male	Caucasian	Non-Caucasian
Admission Representatives	6	6	6	6
Senior Administrators	4	5	6	3

Table 3. Documents Collected

Institutions	Crisis Management Plan/Policy	Publications and/or Letters	Enrollment Data	Admitted Student Questionnaire
Luzern University	Yes	None sent	Yes	Did not participate
Interlaken University	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bern College	Not available	None sent	Yes	Did not participate

city and elsewhere. Original media reports stated that the student died from alcohol poisoning and/or suicide. Weeks after the student's death, medical examiner results found that a medical problem was the cause, rather that alcohol poisoning. Students and staff came together to support one another and support the family of the student by hosting a memorial on the campus and comforting those who were the student's closest friends on campus. Bern also experienced an off-campus murder of a staff member the previous year. This crisis was brought up by nearly everyone interviewed at Bern.

Interlaken University

Located in a rural community, Interlaken University experienced a residence hall fire on its campus. The residence hall fire destroyed a portion of the building, but the entire building was uninhabitable due to water and smoke damage.

All students living in that hall were immediately relocated. This residence hall fire received a great deal of local and national media attention. Members of the broader Interlaken community invited displaced students into their homes, brought clothes and personal items to campus, provided food and assisted where needed.

Luzern University

Located in a suburban area, Luzern University is located near where racially-based riots occurred in the surrounding community. This riot received extensive local and national media attention. Interviewees provided interesting and contrasting perspectives about the community riots. For example, interviewees spoke of how the riots affected the campus community itself, as well as how the riots affected their own personal lives away from campus as they interacted with the larger city environment.

Results

College Choice Factors Related to a Crisis

When looking at an institution, students explore many factors when choosing one institution over another. These factors include: student demographics, job market opportunities, costs, geographic location, admission requirements, financial aid awards, social atmosphere, campus traditions, academic programs and faculty, the institution's reputation, and alumni success (Geraghy, 1997; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990). Students also have peers, family members, high school guidance counselors, trusted teachers, coaches, and members of the clergy who could influence their choice in some way (Hossler, Schmit and Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997). Students want to feel safe and comfortable, and have the self-confidence that they are choosing well when they make their final enrollment decision. A student must feel safe in order to belong, gain self-confidence, succeed while in college, and discover what he or she "individually, is fitted for" (Maslow, 1970, p. 46).

The four most often reported common factors in this study include academics, cost/finances, location, and safety (as indicated in Table 4). Beyond the four common factors considered by prospective students and their parents, the extent of media attention, timing of the crisis during the recruitment year, and the nature of the crisis are factors believed by interviewees to be considered when a crisis occurs on or near the college campus.

Media

The amount of media attention provided about the crisis was identified as a major factor that could affect enrollment.

Table 4. College Choice Factors Reported by Institution Representatives

	Across All Sites	Interlaken University	Bern College	Luzern University
Media	86%	75%	100%	86%
Academics	80%	75%	67%	100%
Cost/ Finances	75%	88%	50%	83%
Location	55%	63%	50%	50%
Timing of Crisis	45%	63%	50%	17%
Safety	40%	25%	67%	33%
Nature of Crisis	40%	38%	67%	17%
Social	25%	25%	17%	33%
Faculty	20%	38%	17%	0%
Future Jobs	20%	25%	17%	17%
Reputation	20%	13%	0%	50%
Connection/ Fit	15%	13%	0%	33%
Housing	15%	13%	33%	0%
Internship/ Research	10%	0%	17%	17%
Size	10%	13%	17%	0%

Because prospective students and parents watch the news, Luzern's director of admissions stated that these students and parents "are only hearing the media's version of the events." Campus crises like those at Interlaken and Luzern received national media attention. The media attention brought concerned phone calls from family and friends to staff members, including Luzern's vice-president of legal issues. She reported:

"Responses from within our community [included] shock, disbelief and all of the things that people [in major metropolitan areas] who were watching the national news and seeing [would expect to find in their own geographic region of the country]."

Prospective students and parents did raise questions with admission representatives because of coverage from the national networks. Interlaken's director of admissions reported, "People may have commented on [the fire], or commented that they saw something on the news because it was on CNN, but it wasn't so much a concern, more of something they had heard about and commented on."

Interviewees at Bern compared the on-campus student death portrayed in this study against the off-campus murder of a staff member a year earlier. They shared that prospective students and parents took the off-campus staff murder much more seriously than the on-campus student death. This may be the result of the media coverage of the two tragedies. The media followed the murder of the staff member through to the arrest of the alleged murderer, but dropped coverage when it was determined that a medical condition caused the death of the student on-campus.

Overall, 86 percent of the interviewees across the three institutions made comments associating the media attention of the crisis to college choice factors considered by prospective students and parents. Luzern's vice president of student affairs stated that the crises and the media attention received are situational. He also stated that the media attention "has a life of its own for a period of time, but then it has a half life and it diminishes over time." Speculation based on conversations with interviewees would suggest that the extent of media attention increases and involves coverage for more days when a campus crisis occurs in a rural geographic region more so than in a metropolitan area. This is due, in part, to the many competing news stories typically found in a larger urban media market.

Timing of crisis
Another significant finding from these interviews involves the timing of the crisis within the recruitment year. Two crises reviewed occurred in the spring and one occurred in the fall. Luzern's associate director of admissions commented first on this phenomenon:

"If [the riot] would have been earlier, it may have [affected enrollment], but my gut feeling is that [the riot occurred] so late in the high school senior year that many students [had] made a commitment to come to this university. We did not see a decline in any sort of enrollment that year."

The vice president of admissions at Interlaken agreed, "Timing, I think, made a difference because the fire occurred [late spring]" and Interlaken's director of admission stated that she "didn't think it had a profound effect on that class" because "it was pretty late in the admission season." Bern's assistant director of admission mentioned that since the crisis at her institution occurred in the fall, that "…students aren't really thinking about it at that time." Repeatedly, interviewees stated that timing of the crisis during the school year was crucial to enrollment. The director of admissions at Interlaken remarked that institutions "have to think about multiple years of students who may be affected in different ways by what they hear and their decision-making process" when a crisis occurs. In general, she summed up:

Overall, factors affected other factors and combined to influence prospective students and their parents in making their college choices. Institutions, crisis management teams and those who work directly with prospective students should be aware of these factors, as well as the crisis management plan, when speaking with or marketing the institution to prospective students and parents.

"I think the time of year affects [enrollment]. We're not just dealing with current students and parents, but prospective students with parents, with guidance counselors, with the potential incoming seniors but also with the juniors. Sort of like the 9/11 crisis, everyone was worried about the seniors at that time but nobody really thought about the juniors and the sophomores who may be affected in very different ways as the country changed."

Nature of crisis
Interviewees speculated that had the crisis been different—had students died in the residence hall, had the riots entered the campus, or had the student death been a murder—the impact on enrollment may have been different. Interlaken's vice president of admission stated, "The fact that there was no death associated with the fire was clearly a big positive." She acknowledged, "The greatest tragedy is the loss of a student's life, and that's extremely difficult for any university community to absorb."

Overall, interviewees shared that, for their institutions, the nature of the crisis led to a positive outcome. Interlaken's vice president of admission mentioned, "When the television crews were interviewing students or interviewing people on the campus, they were all talking about how awful this is, but how wonderful everyone had been." There was speculation on what the outcome would be if someone had died in the fire or as Interlaken's director of housing asked, "What [would have] happened if the fire had spread farther? What [would have] happened if it had spread over to one of the two adjoining buildings?" In general, interviewees said that many 'what if' questions were asked by prospective students and family members.

Summary
Interviewees reported that the factors described in this section may have impacted students' decisions to attend specific institutions. It is difficult to consider the potential influence of each factor separately, as each factor appears to relate to one or more of the other factors. For example, the location of an institution (urban/rural) influenced perceptions of the safety and security of the campus and surrounding community; the timing of the crisis intersects with the nature of the crisis and can influence enrollment; and the location of an institution may determine the extent and length of media attention. Overall, factors affected other factors and combined to influence prospective students and their parents in making their college choices. Institutions, crisis management teams and those who work directly with prospective students should be aware of these factors, as well as the crisis management plan, when speaking with or marketing the institution to prospective students and parents.

Recommendations by Participants
Interviewees had two major recommendations to share with colleges based on their own experiences: communication and establishing a crisis management plan.

Communication/Team Needs
The first recommendation addressed communication during and following a campus crisis. Interviewees recommended that communication be increased between crisis management team members and those who work with students, the broader community, and prospective students and families. Interlaken's vice president of admission advised:

"It's very important to share information with people, to not keep it a secret or act like it is something to be hidden but to talk openly about what's happening so students can take appropriate precautionary measures."

Interlaken's director of admission also felt that the administration should:

"…have a conversation with staff about the possibility of questions. Give them all the tools available to answer questions about safety on campus, what's being done, all the steps taken, and make sure that they are in the loop about the entire process."

Bern's associate director of admission agreed, "The people actually touching the prospective students (and current students) should be just as well-informed as the people making the decisions at the top."

A key communication idea they suggested was to have cell phone numbers of those who needed to be contacted in a crisis. At Interlaken, business-size cards were created with contact information for each crisis management team member, making it easy to get in touch.

Interviewees also suggested that a statement of some type should be sent to prospective students but others, like Bern's associate director of admission, argued to not send any message by email, letter or phone "because we don't want to bring attention to it, if it's not necessary." However, she did report that if the nature of the crisis was different or if the office had received many questions from a student's hometown, that a message might be sent to those individuals. Addditionally, Interlaken's assistant director of admission reflected that prospective students and their parents would likely see what was happening on the campus on the news, saying:

"If I'm a prospective student sitting at home, I'm going to see that. I think that if I never hear a communiqué from the school, and I've applied there, I think I might draw some erroneous conclusions."

Interviewees concurred that if crises occurred, institutions be upfront with the public and not hide anything. Bern's assistant director of residence life recommended that institutions "be as honest as [they] can" and that students and parents "don't want to hear [the institutions] talk around the issue and make something up." Bern's associate director of admission added, "Be open with the media. You don't need to tell them everything, but if the media feels like you are responding to them… they tend to back off." Everyone on campus should be informed enough to offer honest and appropriate responses to questions from prospective students and parents.

Broekemier and Seshadri (1999) state that when institutions market to prospective students, they:

"…should emphasize available programs of study, cost advantages, availability of financial aid/scholarships, job placement after graduation, and facility quality. In addition, greater emphasis should be placed on academic reputation and safety when attempting to attract female students. To parents, available programs of study, safety, cost advantages, academic reputation, and facility quality are the most important criteria. (p. 11)"

According to the study conducted by Broekemier and Seshadri (1999), students believed that parents had the most influence and that high school teachers had the least influence. This knowledge may be helpful when marketing a college or university following a crisis on or near the campus.

For example, a targeted mailing could be sent to parents of prospective students to address safety and security concerns and issues.

Crisis Management Team and Plan

The second recommendation by interviewees was to have a crisis management plan in place and to have a member of the admission staff on the crisis management team. Interviewees realized that crisis management teams may not have included admission staff members, despite the fact that they would have been essential because they work specifically with recruiting prospective students and therefore, would best be prepared for questions students and family members would ask in a crisis. Admission representatives in this study expected a member of the admission staff to be on the crisis management team. Surprisingly, often times the vice president or dean who oversees the office of admission represented the department.

Institutions must understand team organization, designate responsibilities, and train the campus community to take the proper steps prior to, during and after a crisis. Interlaken's associate director of admission stated that having a crisis management plan in place ahead of time is crucial, but that there should also be a communication plan. Interlaken's director of housing said, "Be prepared ahead of time. Know your plan, know your communication, know your obvious immediate response issues, and make sure that everyone has been accounted for."

Bern's dean of students felt there should "be a clear understanding who the chief student affairs officer is and who is going to be responsible for managing these situations." In times of campus reorganization or restructuring, the roles or responsibilities of key officers can blur. In times of crisis, the clearly-identified person must take charge, regardless of how unclear the structure may be or what a job description states.

Regarding training methods, Interlaken's vice president of admission suggested, "Create a couple crisis scenarios so you are used to thinking through who needs to know and in what order, how to handle responses and how to coordinate." Utilizing "trial runs" may help prepare the campus community for any crisis that may occur in the future. A comprehensive plan should address all steps and should address all populations, including prospective students and their families, current students and their families, alumni, faculty, and staff. It should also be familiar to members of the campus community.

Interviewees indicated that a communication plan should be created as a key component of the crisis management plan. In creating a communication plan, Interlaken's associate director of admission stated that a skeleton of the plan should list:

"…how we are going to communicate, not just in print, but electronic communication, and phone calls so you can jump into that triage approach, quickly knowing what we need to consider, what we know, and no matter what kind of crisis, what we need to do."

Luzern's director of admission said:
"Be upfront in your communications. Quickness is also very important—allowing a delay with students and parents can be a problem, because otherwise, they are only hearing the media's version of the events."

It was also indicated by interviewees that institutions should delegate to the campus media relations responsibility for dealing with media reporters. Lauer and Barnes (1998) created six steps that should be followed when establishing a crisis communication plan:

- Identify the person responsible for managing the situation, usually the chief communication officer, with the close involvement of the president
- Outline procedures for gathering the facts
- Define public versus private information. State the university's views on privacy, open records and confidentiality
- Decide how spokespersons will be identified. Who will be the chief spokesperson?
- Determine how the university will handle overly-aggressive reporters
- Decide what the organization will say when it cannot—or does not want to—say anything. (p. 253)

At institutions visited, the presence of crisis management plans was inconsistent. Even at institutions that had existing plans, members of the staff who worked directly with current and prospective students were unaware of details (and sometimes even that plans existed). Every staff and faculty member of an institution must be educated about the basics of crisis management plan—who should be contacted if a crisis occurs and how to respond to questions from prospective students and parents. This training should occur when a new staff or faculty member joins the institution, and continue periodically. Luzern's associate director of admission and Interlaken's assistant director of admission both admitted that it is easy to become complacent when everything is peaceful. Bern's assistant director of admission and other interviewees said that they, as staff members, should be knowledgeable about the plan and team, not only for their own information, but also to respond to questions.

Summary

Overall, interviewees had many suggestions for institutions that may face similar crises. Concluding, Interlaken's associate director of admission said:

> "You have to figure out why it happened, acknowledge it, take ownership of it, learn from it, and move on. Be prepared to talk about it honestly, not just that semester but even in future semesters. Find a story to tell that makes it a positive [learning experience]."

Conclusions

Following the tragedy of 9/11, New York University's (NY) first priority was to students and their loved ones. The NYU Web site gave up-to-the-minute information on what was happening on campus, campus services and volunteer opportunities. Parents and friends responded to the Web site stating:

> "I just wanted you to know how helpful it was to have an update on the NYU home page so quickly after the disaster… Your quick action avoided [an] untold amount of worry and suffering for friends, parents and family members with NYU ties" (Words of Support From Parents and Friends, 2001, p.2).

Interviewees in this study were frustrated because they did not have answers to questions regarding crisis management plans on their campus—having knowledge of the campus plan is very important, especially following the terrorist activities of 9/11, because the type of questions raised by prospective students and parents changed somewhat after that tragic event. Admission representatives report a need to be educated about plans at their institutions so that information can be conveyed.

Through reviewing personal interviews and institutional enrollment data, none of the three crises appears to have influenced the enrollment of the first-year class entering the fall semester/quarter immediately following the crisis. However, two institutions experienced a drop in enrollment two years following the crises. The timing of the crises during the recruitment year might have influenced enrollment results and, within the recruitment cycle, could have determined what type of responses the institution provided. In the case of Luzern and Interlaken, crises occurred late in the recruitment year with very little time from the date of the crisis to the May 1 enrollment deposit deadline for current high school seniors. Had those crises occurred perhaps two to three months earlier, the response by the institution may have been vastly different because at that time, undecided high school seniors are still weighing options and acceptance letters.

Institutions should review the membership of their crisis management team and verify that members represent populations currently on the campus, as well as potential future populations (i.e., prospective students). Teams should also evaluate their crisis management plans to reflect current tragedies, such as murders, fires, riots, and terrorism. They should share information with front-line staff members, the individuals who work on a daily basis with prospective and current students, parents, and the general public.

Crises, no matter how small or large, will occur on campuses and in communities. Students must feel safe to succeed (Maslow, 1970). How institutions respond can help students feel safe, resulting in informed college-choice decisions that create successful students and future leaders.

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