

Student Evaluations of a University Crisis Communication Response: The Gunman Threat at North Carolina A&T

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ABSTRACT

Through open-ended, structured interviews, 25 students evaluated a campus gunman threat. Themes revealed that the university's crisis communication response was evaluated positively by students who received word from a university-affiliated source first and were usually off campus. Students who received messages from non-university sources, and were usually on campus, evaluated the response negatively. Social media played a large role as information source, increasing the number of voices in the crisis. The paper concludes by integrating the findings into CERC and other crisis models, supports the importance of stakeholder emotions during crisis, and discusses the threat as a form of paracrisis.

Keywords: university crisis, interviews, paracrisis, crisis communication, CERC, crisis response, stakeholder emotions

University and school crisis have moved into the public eye since the Columbine High School and Virginia Tech shootings¹. Education institutions, along with many other organizations, have had to re-evaluate and re-position their crisis preparedness, response, and readiness (Veil & Mitchell, 2009). Little crisis communication scholarship has focused on the unique communication challenges faced by universities in cases of shootings, which are one of the ultimate campus crises (Atkinson, Vaughn, & VanCamp, 2009).

A broad body of crisis communication best practice literature exists. In public relations, many crisis studies relied on Image Restoration Theory or Situational Crisis Communication Theory. However, their focus on reputation repair may not capture the unique challenges posed by a crisis in which human lives are threatened. The public health model CERC (Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication) better addresses this aspect of crisis and provides helpful crisis communication insights (Reynolds & Seeger, 2014).

¹ Due to the limited number of university specific research studies on shootings, this study also reviews literature focusing on other education institutions such as high schools. The latter have a broad best practice crisis management literature. However, theory driven research is lacking for most education institution crisis research.

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Crisis communication scholarship has focused mainly on the crisis and recovery phase of organizational crisis. Few studies have been able to capture stakeholders' direct responses to the management of a crisis. Most studies have focused on media reporting or have been conducted weeks or months after the occurrence of a crisis. Both approaches provide helpful insights into understanding and improving crisis communication; however, without the direct insight from those immediately impacted by the crisis, communication response lacks theoretical support. This study has had the unique opportunity to interview students within a week of a gunman crisis on a university campus. In short; open-ended, structured interviews, 25 students provided their responses to the crisis handling of both the university (=organization) and the media; both are traditionally studied in crisis communication research.

The case: Gunman at North Carolina A&T State University campus

On April 12, 2013 North Carolina A&T State University (A&T), a historically black college/university (HBCU) went into crisis mode when "an unknown black male with a weapon" was spotted on campus (Huffington Post, 2013). The alleged weapon was suspected to be a rifle, partially visible where it protruded from a backpack. The approx. 10,000 students and 2,000 employees, as well as nearby high school students were informed of a campus lockdown on Friday morning. Faculty and students were first alerted of the situation through Aggie Alerts, the university's text message alert system (WFMY News, 2013). Faculty and students in buildings close to where the alleged gunman was sighted where evacuated and moved to a secure location on campus by a SWAT team once the nearby grounds were cleared. The lockdown included keeping doors and windows locked. The university lifted the lockdown around noon, after about three hours, and reported that no shots were fired (Newell Williamson, 2013; Reuters, 2013). After police searches failed to find the gunman, a review of camera footage suggested the alleged gunman might have been carrying an umbrella, which had been mistaken for a weapon (Newell Williamson, 2013).

In line with its emergency response protocol, A&T responded to the threat of a gunman by reporting about the campus lockdown on both its website and through its text alert system (Aggie Alert). A&T faculty, staff, students, and students' parents have the opportunity to sign up to receive Aggie Alerts and emergency email messages. Parents are given this opportunity at freshman orientation, faculty and staff, can opt in or out of Aggie Alerts at any time through Banner, an electronic management system, and students must choose to opt in or out each semester in order to register for classes. In accordance with its emergency protocol, the university disseminated information through Aggie Alert and the website as it became available. Beyond protocol, the university also shared these information updates through its Twitter and Facebook accounts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational crises have increasingly moved into the public eye and much scholarship has been dedicated to better understanding and theorizing crisis communication. Crises are traditionally defined as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2007a, pp. 2-3). This common definition focuses on the high destructive power of a crisis to an organization. It does not take into consideration, that organizations may face crisis without endangering their operations but by facing physical and psychological harm to main stakeholder groups.

Similar to public health crisis, a potential school shooting may not inherently threaten the existence of the organization, but demands an immediate crisis response. A more fitting crisis definition for universities may therefore be the broad and somewhat vague view Heath (2006) put forth: A crisis is a risk manifested. This definition captures the unique nature of various organizations and focuses on those risks that are most harmful to the organization. When these manifest, the organization is facing a crisis and has to respond accordingly. School shootings are typically viewed as crisis and require a crisis response from the organization. The alleged gunman sighting in this case required a crisis response from the university; yet, the threat never fully manifested. The situation may therefore be better described as a paracrisis, defined as a situation that resembles a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Crisis communication strategies

Crisis communication scholarship has grown rapidly since the 1980s with prominent theories guiding scholarship, most notably, Image Restoration Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Avery, Weaver Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). Although rooted in different paradigmatic research traditions, both theories predict communication strategies that would be most advantageous to overcoming different types of organizational crisis.

Image Restoration rests on the assumptions that organizational communication is goal-directed and one central goal is to maintain an organization’s reputation (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2010). Although this theory continues to provide helpful insights into organizational crisis, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) has gained in research use and popularity (Avery et al., 2010). Both theories assume reputational threats as main negative outcomes.

However, reputation repair may not be the main focus in crisis response for a number of crises and organizations (e.g., Avery & Hocke, 2011). In these situations, the safety and protection of human life may be of greater importance. Public health organizations tend to face crises, which threaten human safety and lives. In the aftermath of the 2001 Anthrax attacks, the CDC created a model to assist with crisis communication: crisis

and emergency risk communication (CERC). CERC has been the foundation for CDC and other health departments' crisis response in recent years, including prominent crisis such as SARS or H1N1 (Hocke & Avery, 2012; Seeger, Reynolds, & Sellnow, 2009).

According to the CDC's classifications for crisis communication, a crisis can be subdivided into two parts: initial and maintenance. Although the crisis may not change much during this time, the communication demands evolve from an initial response, which incorporates empathy statements, explanations of the immediate risk, establishing credibility and trust between the spokesperson and the publics, and committing the organization to solving the crisis. In the maintenance phase, the crisis is ongoing and more information becomes available. Stakeholders need to be understood in their needs and continuously informed with relevant information. As background information becomes available, it should be passed on to the stakeholders, enabling them to provide feedback but also to make informed decisions that will reduce their risks (Reynolds & Seeger, 2014).

CERC builds on the principle that during crisis, the accuracy of information combined with the speed of distribution, empathy and openness will increase trust and credibility of the organization in crisis. This in turn will lead to successful communication before, during, and after a crisis (Reynolds & Seeger, 2014). CERC has been successfully applied in public health contexts (e.g., Seeger et al., 2009). It has shown to be a helpful tool in training for public health crises (Freimuth, Hilyard, Barge, & Sokler, 2008; Hewitt, Spencer, Ramloll, & Trotta, 2008). Although this model has not been applied to crisis contexts outside of public health, the crisis communication recommendations intended to manage crisis where human lives are at risk seems appropriate for a school shooting crisis.

Stakeholders during crisis

Stakeholders are groups of people who affect an organization in achieving its goals; they have a stake in the organization (Kolk & Pinske, 2006). Students are one of the main internal stakeholder groups for universities. Parents, alumni and media are some of the main external stakeholders. Every organization maintains relationships with multiple stakeholders, which have different significance to the survival and workings of an organization. Building and maintaining good relationships with stakeholders is especially essential during time of crisis. Positive stakeholder management can be a useful resource and decreases negative perceptions and reactions to organizational crisis (Coombs, 2006). In addition, mismanaging stakeholder relationships can actually lead to crisis or worsen a crisis and its harm to an organization (Kolk & Pinske, 2006).

Although the importance of stakeholder groups during crisis has been established (Coombs, 2007b), crisis communication research has rarely focused on capturing those groups directly impacted by a crisis. Most crisis communication studies have studied public opinion by analyzing media outlets, Internet communication or press releases (e.g., Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002; Ihlen, 2002; Vlad, I., Sallot, L. M., & Reber, 2006; Vielhaber & Waltman, 2008).

To date few studies have captured the responses of key stakeholders directly affected by a crisis (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2012b; Jahansoozi, 2006; Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013; Schwarz, 2012; Ulmer, 2001). Two of these studies rely on what stakeholders posted in social media forums in response to crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012b; Schwarz, 2012). Social media is unique in allowing scholars to study immediate stakeholder reactions to crisis. The other studies focus on community stakeholders directly impacted by a crisis. The importance of building and maintaining long-lasting relationships through open and trusted communication was a common theme (Jahansoozi, 2006; Ulmer, 2001). In addition, emotions and trust impact the actions stakeholders take during and after crisis (Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013). Although students are often samples for research studies (e.g., Coombs, 2006), they have not received sufficient attention in matters where they are directly impacted by organizational actions, as for example during university crisis. One exception is Jin, Liu, Anagondahalli, and Austin (2014) who conducted a crisis experiment about university crisis and students' emotional responses.

University crisis

Universities, just as any other organization, have faced a number of crises (Leeper & Leeper, 2006). The literature is divided into best practice practitioner guides (e.g., Jackson & Terrel, 2007; Myer, James, & Moulton, 2011) and research articles, some of which advance theory but most provide practical applications. In addition, crisis topics vary greatly and include situations involving athletics, such as the Duke Lacrosse crisis, or scandals surrounding athletes and coaches (e.g., Fortunato, 2008; Jin, Park, & Len-Ríos, 2010; Len-Ríos, 2010; Varma, 2011; Wahlberg, 2004; Wigley, 2003). Other crises include strikes, budget problems, or scandals surrounding administration of universities (Castor, 2009; White, 2009). A few research studies have also analyzed shootings at universities (Atkinson et al., 2009; DeBrosse, 2013; Hoerl, 2009; Stein, 2006; Veil & Mitchell, 2010). Comparable to crisis scholarship, many university crisis studies follow a case study approach providing recommendations for improved future crisis communication. Most are based on media text analysis with only a few including interviews of directly impacted stakeholders (e.g., White, 2009). However, even in these the media texts are given higher importance or analytical value.

The best practice articles suggest that to successfully manage a university crisis, it is essential to build strong and open media relationships prior to the crisis (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2009; Madere, 2007; Tuggle, 1991). Preparedness is essential for successful crisis management. For universities this includes an all-hazard approach. Especially important are stable crisis management teams that practice crisis response (Mitroff, Diamond, & Alpaslan, 2006). Universities who have experienced crises tend to be better prepared for similar crises and less so for others. Most universities are not well prepared for terrorism crisis. Veil and Mitchell (2010) suggest that school shootings are a form of terrorism. Best practices for crisis are a strong leader and spokesperson that can further positively impact the outcome of a crisis (e.g., Farmer & Tvedt, 2005). Dialogue and negotiation have shown to be successful tools for internal publics (e.g.,

faculty) but also some external groups (e.g., community members) (e.g., Castor, 2009; Leeper & Leeper, 2006; Varma, 2011; Weinberg, & Eich, 1978; Wigley, 2003). Open, honest, and transparent communication during crises is evaluated as beneficial to a quick and positive crisis resolution.

A few papers focus on school shootings in both high schools and universities. School shootings worldwide have increased in the last decade (Atkinson et al., 2009; Veil & Mitchell, 2010), even bringing early cases – such as the 1970 Kent State shooting – back into the research agenda (DeBrosse, 2013; Hoerl, 2009). Although much research has focused on the unique nature of school shootings and those committing these violent acts, the crisis communication literature surprisingly has not provided many insights for institutions of higher education to prepare, respond, and recover from these types of crisis (Atkinson et al., 2009). Veil & Mitchell (2010) have reviewed the literature on school violence and school shootings and propose that school shootings do not fall into the same classification and definition as school violence but rather as an act of terrorism. The authors caution against university safety and awareness campaigns that increase vigilance towards school shootings without simultaneously stressing tolerance and acceptance of others. Similarly, Atkinson et al. (2009) suggested that restorative practices after school violence can strengthen communities and help people impacted heal from the experience.

After interviewing public information officers and journalists involved with the Thurston High School shooting, the author found that PIOs relied on crisis communication plans and combined their knowledge into a crisis management team to provide the highest level of guidance and response (Stein, 2006). The PIOs found that many of the principles described in CERC (although not directly referenced) assisted them in a positive management of this crisis. Littlefield et al. (2009) suggested that tenants proposed by crisis renewal theory can be helpful in assisting culturally diverse communities recover from school shootings.

As the literature review suggests, few researchers have had a chance to collect data from a key stakeholder group directly after a crisis occurred. This study therefore seeks to address this void by interviewing students after the gunman threat on A&T's campus by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: How did students at A&T evaluate the university's crisis response to the gunman threat?

RQ2: What additional impressions were left upon students as a result of their experience with the gunman threat?

During a crisis, individuals crave constant information, turning to both traditional media and social media to reduce uncertainty (Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011). To effectively manage crisis, communication through the media must be handled skillfully (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). In the days after the A&T crisis, the event was discussed at length amongst students both face-to-face and through social media. The main topic of discussion was not the crisis itself, but rather what was perceived to be unskillful

coverage by the media. Throughout the lockdown, news crews stationed close to campus including Fox, WFMY News, and WXII News 12 continuously filmed campus, updated the public on the crisis and interviewed stakeholders. Given the students' continual interest in the media coverage, the following research question was also asked:

RQ3: How did students at A&T evaluate the media's communication regarding the gunman threat?

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions, this study relied on open-ended, structured interviews with students attending A&T. This approach allowed for a quick IRB processing, short response time after the actual crisis occurred, and provided the researchers with open-ended insights into the main stakeholder group during a potential school shooting crisis: students. Interviews are furthermore the best tool to "understanding the social actor's experience, knowledge, and worldviews" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 173). The crisis occurred on a Friday, April 12, 2013. On Monday, April 15, 2013, an IRB application was filed and permission to begin interviews was granted on Tuesday, April 16. Interviews took place for a week following approval.

Participants

The participants were gathered through snowball sampling. One of the researchers, a faculty member at A&T, announced the study in each of her two courses. Students were invited to share their experiences in the office of the researcher. They were also asked to invite other students who wanted to share their experiences. For the interviews to be successful, the students needed to be willing to discuss their experiences openly (McCracken, 1988); thus, drafting students for the procedure would not have likely been as productive. This method of solicitation resulted in 25 interviews.

All participants were undergraduates at A&T. Three participants were nontraditional students and the other 22 were traditional (ages 18-24 years old). Among these participant volunteers, 21 were students invited directly by the researcher and four came through invitation of the researcher's students. Also, 17 students were female and eight were male. All students were scheduled to have class in one of the three evacuated buildings at some point during the lockdown.

Procedure

Students made appointments to meet in the researcher's office. Students were assured that everything they said would be kept confidential: interviews would be audio recorded and then transcribed to remove all identifying information; immediately after transcription, the audio files would be deleted. Students were asked to share their experiences honestly. An interview schedule with a structured set of questions (Appendix A) was used to guide the interview, with deviations only made when the

researcher required more clarity (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). On average, interviews were 10 minutes long.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim². All researchers received a copy of the transcriptions to review independently in search of recurring themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The researchers then compared their reoccurring themes to ensure that they had bracketed their experiences and were presenting results that most accurately reflect the participants' descriptions. Final conclusions were drawn after all interviews were completed and the researchers convened to compare results.

These results will be presented by the natural categorization (common redundant themes). Participants' responses are grouped into categories that help explain the shared experience of A&T students on the day of the crisis. These categories will be supported by direct quotes from the interviews.

ANALYSIS

The analysis revealed mixed student evaluations of A&T's response to the gunman incident. In contrast, the evaluation of the media portrayal was consistently negative. Also, the importance of social media as an important information source became very apparent.

Student evaluation of A&T's response

Students evaluated A&T's response on three levels: the communication, the physical, and the long-term response. The communication response was evaluated positively by most students (n=16). However, nine students perceived some flaws in the response leading to a negative evaluation. All students evaluated the physical response positively. Those students who addressed the long-term implications displayed a sense of "positive uncertainty."

Satisfaction with communication among students

Students tended to view the response as more positive if they received notices about the gunman from sources that were closely affiliated with A&T. This could include a staff member, a friend from campus, the police, or the Aggie Alert system, as this student described: "I believe they handled it well. A lot of people had negative feedback about it but, as I said before, I had the Aggie Alert and I also had my NCAT email" (P803-8). This pattern also emerged when a student heard about the situation from an outside source but could immediately verify the information because of communication from the university, such as a text message, an e-mail or the website. These students tended to be off campus or asleep in their dorm rooms, as this example showcases:

² All identifying information was removed. Numbers were assigned to each participant and are used in the analysis.

[After seeing a news report on the lockdown:] When I looked at my phone, and turned it on, the alert was there, and so I looked down and saw the alert coming in, you know, lockdown at the school. So, I was very informed on everything that was going on. Like, another 15 minutes later I got a second alert. So, each time something went on, I was informed. (P803-7)

The positive evaluation usually referenced that A&T did everything that could be expected. The student was informed about the situation, what actions to take, and what actions were taken by the university. They felt informed about the process and suggested that they felt safe the entire time. Some also expressed positive emotions about not being on campus and out of harm's way, as this student exemplifies: "With me being off campus, I think that it was handled effectively. I wasn't here physically to see what took place or, you know, how things were handled. But on my end, I was happy to receive the alert being off campus" (P803-15).

Dissatisfaction with communication among students on campus

In contrast, if the student heard about the crisis through the media or a friend outside of A&T first, the evaluation tended to be more critical. These students also tended to be on campus or even in the evacuated building. As students rely upon Aggie Alerts for crisis updates the delay in time, or not being notified at all, increased a sense of threat and thus a negative evaluation. Interviewees reported receiving their first Aggie Alert over a two hour window of time on the day of the gunman scare, as this student explains: "I know they sent out an Aggie Alert, but it was kind of delayed, and some people did not get the Aggie Alert. I feel like they could have communicated a little better to us, just because our lives were in jeopardy" (P803-4). As such, many students came onto campus, unaware of the threat, walking into a potentially dangerous lockdown situation. Among these students, most first received word of the potential threat through friends and parents who had received email alerts, or by coming face-to-face with law enforcement on campus. This representative example shows the fear and uncertainty induced by a lack of communication:

They should have text messaged as soon as they found about this, you know. When they found out, I was probably at the house or in my car on my way to school and could just easily go back to the house instead of having to walk all the way through campus. I was scared. I was walking back to my car, thinking what if a guy just comes by here and started shooting or whatever, you know? Nobody is around to see me. So, it was pretty scary (P803-2).

Notably, some students attributed the late alerts to their various cell phone carriers and the networks being bogged down, but still felt that A&T should have anticipated this problem. A few also mentioned that they had tried to sign up repeatedly to receive these messages. The difference in the time when students received texts is very notable in the following example of students waiting for the lockdown to be lifted. The delay in messages increased uncertainty regarding which sources' information could be trusted

and acted on.

I did receive the Aggie Alert. Some people said they got it more delayed than others, but I guess you do have to realize that it is sent through a text message and it could hang on your carrier provider... And some people say they didn't receive it, but at the same time some people - you're allowed to opt out of it, you register for it. I don't think you should be able to opt out just in case there was a real, real emergency that was going around. I think A&T handled communication that day, not in the best of manners simply because my cell phone is linked to Aggie Alerts, and I didn't receive any type of alert. I haven't... no form of communication was made to me nor any of my colleagues or peers about the situation from the school directly. (P803-6)

So, although A&T sent out the alert to all students at the same time, not all students received the message in what they perceived to be a timely manner.

Social Media

Most students expressed that they received their news from social networks, particularly Twitter and Instagram, during the crisis. Participants were unaware that A&T had a Twitter or facebook account that it updated regularly. As such, students shared news and gossip through their social networks, as this student notes: "We were watching the news, we were on social networks; Twitter was the main social network to just kind of see what other Aggies were saying" (P803-3). Similarly, this student: "I was informed... I found out more about it on Instagram and Twitter, which are social networks" (P803-5). Students further questioned why Aggie Alerts and university emails did not direct students to sources through which they could receive more information. A&T's social media could have been such an option.

Multiple voices

Closely related, the analysis revealed the multiple sources of information for students. Most participants in this study did not rely on just one source of information. In contrast, they received information from A&T, from face-to-face encounters, from friends and families, and from traditional and social media. The information did not seem to be uniform from these sources. Whereas the police officers tended to just give a command (e.g., lockdown), the text messages stated why (gunman on campus). This longer excerpt describes a typical experience:

I have a friend that has a 9 o'clock class here and he called me around 9:20, which I thought was really unusual (...). A policeman had just come to their door and told them that they needed to evacuate the building immediately and he did not say what the issue was but he said they need to leave the building and go back to a safe place immediately and I was just like "okay, whatever. I still have accounting at 10 and they already

sent out an Aggie Alert by now because if that is the case that is what the Aggie Alert system is supposed to be set up for," (...) and then some of my sorority sisters sent out emergency messages to us saying that the general classroom building had just been evacuated and not to go into that area because there was uh alleged gunman on campus. (...) and then around 9:45 I received an Aggie alert telling us what was going on but it was not specific enough and it allowed room for a lot of questioning and confusion. (...) Then we received an email from our residents' hall saying "don't look out the window." Then on the news, um, the local news station came to campus and they were broadcasting live outside, (...) and they had a university representative speaking on all of the safety measures and notification efforts on the universities behalf that were taking place. Um, so we were watching the news, we were on social networks. (P803-3)

The social media conversation as well as the traditional media picked up a conversation about Fried Chicken Friday, which started as a joke or humor and was turned into a point of contention by the news stations, such as Fox News who reported that the "students seem more concerned about fried chicken than their safety" (MyFox8, 2013). This example captures the students' perspective: "But I feel like the thing about the caf[eteria] and Fried Chicken Friday was really over-exaggerated because they were saying like, the kids were more concerned about the lunch special, the fried chicken on Friday, than they were worried about getting to safety" (P803-20).

Friends and family were usually checking in on what happened and relied on other sources for their information. In general, there did not seem to be a clear picture of communication messages after the lockdown messages were distributed. The initial lockdown messages seemed to have been received by most participants. However, in the time after the control over the message slips and different messages emerge (e.g., Fried Chicken Friday).

Positive assessment of the physical response

Although there was disagreement amongst students on the assessment of A&T's communication, there was consensus regarding the university's physical response. Students agreed that A&T responded quickly and appropriately. The police presence and lockdown of campus were viewed as positive. Even though the threat turned out to be unsubstantiated, students were happy that A&T responded as it did. A few students suggested that the lockdown of campus, so that you could not come to campus any longer, could have been instigated faster and upheld better (a few students left buildings that were under lockdown); but overall, the response was evaluated very positively. The students felt that they were safe and A&T was doing what it had to protect them, as this student summed up:

I think that the actions they took, about what was going on, was good because they were able to protect all the students. They were taking all the actions needed to keep the students inside the buildings, checking

every building to make sure that everything was safe, and like, they kept checking over and over to see, just to make sure that nothing was really going on on-campus. They didn't leave till they were sure that campus was safe. So I felt like they were trying to protect us in every way possible. (P803-22)

Thus, even though the reported threat was concluded to be an umbrella sighting, students were glad that A&T responded as though the threat was real.

Long-term evaluation

A few students explicitly mentioned the lack of a long-term perspective in the A&T response. One mentioned the whole incident almost seemed like a drill: "I think it was more of a drill than actual scare because I think they wanted to see how the students would react if something like that were to happen" (P803-24). However, none of the students expressed a sense of closure or that A&T evaluated and improved its response. One student explains the potential for learning: "So I feel like if they get it out to us faster we will be more prepared and then we will have a better chance of surviving if something really is happening. So yeah, if we could just take notes on things, I think that the next time, hopefully there is never a next time, we will be more prepared" (P803-4). Although some students expressed that this is a good situation to learn from, this idea emerged from the other interviews through its absence. Most students did not mention any additional communication about the incident from A&T after the lockdown was lifted, even in the days that followed, as this example portrays: "it was over with because nobody was talking about it. Like after that day you really didn't hear much about it anymore" (P803-24). From some interviews, a sense of uncertainty about the whole incident remains, as this example suggests: "I don't know, because of the uncertainty of the police and the efforts that they were having and then watching the news and they weren't giving us any more updates." (P803-3).

The Media

The week after the gunman threat, the "buzz" on campus was about the media portrayal of the event. Student discussion of the media expressed that they were offended by the media portrayal. Thus, during the interview, students were given an opportunity to share their experience through the prompt, "How would you describe the media's portrayal of the event?"

Inappropriate interpretation of a coping mechanism

Some students joked through social media about the fear of missing Fried Chicken Friday during the lockdown. Fried Chicken Friday is a major campus social event each week, which has been a significant campus tradition for years. It is also the students' last opportunity to be fed on their meal plan until Monday morning and "a lot of students on campus pay for meal plans..." (P803-14). Students explained that jokes were made on social media in an attempt to relieve stress or "just a way to like lighten up the

mood,” (P803-14) but the media reported this as the students being more concerned about fried chicken than their safety, as this sarcastic student quote shows: “Obviously it was kind of funny to hear a black school and the kids were more interested in their chicken than they are a gunman” (P803-9).

While some students admitted that perhaps making light of the situation in the moment was inappropriate, they were offended that the media portrayed them as truly putting fried chicken above their lives. Notably, a few students also questioned whether the media would have given such focus to fried chicken at a school in which students were not predominantly black, as this example demonstrates: “They were trying to say that we were more worried about fried chicken than we were about safety and a whole lot of students were expressing their feeling like, ‘Why they saying this, you know, is it because we are an HBCU or what?’” (P803-16).

Unrepresentative sample

Most participants were dismayed by the students interviewed for the news. Participants felt as though the most ineloquent speakers were chosen. These students did not represent A&T and what the university stands for as this student example exemplifies: “I don’t know about news. I am not going to say any of those things were accurate or not accurate, but some of it was kind of... maybe upsetting. Kind of disrespectful I think, the way that we were portrayed us as students and a university” (P803-14). In short, the participants felt that this made A&T students look poorly educated. Concern was expressed that A&T’s reputation was affected more by the interviewing skills of students stopped by reporters on the sidewalk than A&T’s actual response to the crisis.

Assumptions of awareness

The media regularly filmed students walking around campus during the lockdown and criticized them for not taking the threat more seriously. The students felt that this was inappropriate criticism given the communication delay, leaving many students unaware of the threat. This student summarized the discontent that emerged in many interviews:

The media did an awful job. (...) One of the things that was constantly said by the news media was that student didn’t care that there was a gunman on campus because they were walking around campus. Well that goes back to the notification system. One of the things about our Aggie Alert system is that you can opt out. So if you choose not to receive Aggie Alert, I am not sure how you would have known what was going on. (P803-3)

As such, participants felt it was inappropriate to represent students as being uncaring of the threat when they may have legitimately been unaware of the threat at the time they were interviewed by the media.

The Role of Reputation

All interviewed students were happy and proud to be an Aggie, or “love being an Aggie; it’s just such great Aggie Pride here in Greensboro NC. (P803-4)” They enjoyed their student experience, the learning environment, and the people. Many described that A&T, “it’s kind of family oriented” (P803-5). The gunman incident did not seem to impact the overall image of the school much. The media portrayal of the incident in contrast impacted the students’ view of their school. The negative portrayal seemed to actually strengthen the school’s reputation. It connected the students, even if disappointed with the A&T response, closer to the university in an “us” vs. “the incorrect and (maybe) prejudiced TV channels.”

The discussion of fried chicken signifies this juxtaposition. An element of school pride and a ritual that creates the family-like feeling students appreciate about A&T was portrayed as a superficial and irresponsible discussion topic. Part of school identity was almost ridiculed on national TV, leading to a strong defense on the part of the students. If one member of the A&T family is presented in a bad light, all students are. This in turn leads to a strengthened reputation.

DISCUSSION

Getting a stakeholder perspective on crisis communication has provided novel insights and supported prior crisis communication findings. The emerged themes lend weight to prior crisis communication research and also allow an insight into the complexities in a crisis situation.

In congruence with most crisis communication literature, the source and speed of information impacted the evaluation of the organization’s communication response. Those students who did not receive timely information about the gunman ended up putting themselves in harm’s way by coming to campus or felt threatened because they could not take appropriate actions (e.g., lockdown). These students evaluated the response very critically. Noticeable too, is that other voices (e.g., friends or media) filled the communication gap, leaving room for error, rumors and misinformation. The multiple sources stakeholders can come in contact with during crisis became quite noticeable. This led to some of the questionable reactions, such as leaving a building before the lockdown was officially lifted or walking on campus. It also allowed room for humor or inappropriate messages, specifically the fried chicken story. With a lack of urgency due to time delay and times of limited communication, there was time to craft and distribute crisis-unrelated and potentially harmful messages. The media ended up picking up messages that were “allowed” to grow in the communication gaps left by A&T.

CERC states that the impacted organization should always be first, be right, and be credible in a crisis communication situation (Reynolds & Seeger, 2014). The student interviews clearly revealed gaps in all three areas. Many students did not receive the first message from A&T but through other channels, such as friends or the media. Furthermore, the accuracy of the allegations was shown to be incorrect. However, A&T

communicated what they knew when they knew it during the time of danger. They did not however provide sufficient information for all students to take appropriate actions, nor did they conclude what actually happened. The latter seems to have lessened their credibility by presenting the school as having overreacted to a false alarm. This again allowed other voices to emerge presenting their interpretation of the event (e.g., the media).

CERC and crisis best practice literature uniformly recommend speaking with one voice during crisis. This includes having one spokesperson but also that the messages through each channel should be the same. As the analysis revealed, the social media messages did not align with the texts or the news media after the initial lockdown messages had been distributed. The students had different experiences and referenced different sources for these messages. Confusion and uncertainty seemed to arise due to this multiplicity of messages from various sources. Snoeijers, Poels, and Nicolay (2014) provide additional nuances. In their experiment, messages from the university dean were better received than from the generic university social media accounts, lending support to prior research suggesting one spokesperson for crisis communication.

In addition, CERC provides guidelines on social media during crisis. In today's media environment it is essential to also manage online communication. Almost all students in this sample received some or all of their information about the situation through social media, notably Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. These seemed more reliable and faster than A&T's website, email, and texting. Clearly the university would have benefited from explicitly making students aware of its social media use. Simply giving the social media urls and/or hashtags in the Aggie Alerts would have given students more direction for receiving timely information directly from the university. This would have assisted A&T in being first to communicate important, potentially life-saving messages to key stakeholders. Romano (2013) found that universities, though social media is largely included in crisis plans, are hesitant to use it effectively. Additionally, in his study of seven public universities none utilized Instagram. Snoeijers et al. (2014) further found that emotional messages on both Twitter and Facebook were more effective than instruction messages. Both studies underscore one of the findings in this study: universities need to embrace and practice social media communication for times of potential crisis.

The assessment of the physical response was very positive. To further build on this goodwill it would have been helpful for A&T to communicate how they will improve or change their response to similar events in the future. Especially in conjunction with the somewhat critical reaction to the communication efforts, the university may have missed the opportunity for renewal (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007) and further preparedness after this event. As one student mentioned, this could have almost been a drill because there was no actual shooter. Communicating to the students how the situation concluded and how it would be handled in the future can further create more goodwill, enhance the organization's reputation further, and decrease any potential negative evaluations of the response. Although some students did not perceive that the university

engaged in renewal, the handling of the crisis overall was seen very positively by most publics. A&T came across as a strong leader and responded well, in most students' assessments. This positive evaluation may have also been one factor in the increased numbers of highly qualified applicants in the latest cycle of applications (Matheson, 2014). This positive trend after a successful management of a crisis was found in Guskey's (2013) case study about the Duquesne University shootings when positive handling of the crisis led to an increase of student enrollment by two percent. Duquesne University was evaluated as a strong leader in a crisis that was not its fault. The university inspired trust and respect in prospective students. Kelsay (2007) made similar observations, suggesting that negative crisis management negatively impacted university enrollment. The long-term impact of how A&T managed its crisis and the literature suggest that engaging in positive and quick crisis response can enhance universities' images, further their enrollment, and keep students safe.

In line with core assumptions of SCCT, the case here supports that the crisis type impacts organizational reputation (Coombs, 2010). Here, A&T faced a victim crisis, in which an organization has minimal responsibility because the cause is external (e.g., natural disasters, workplace violence), which places the least amount of responsibility on the organization and therefore poses less threat. In addition, a positive reputation protects in case of crisis, reducing the attribution of organizational blame (e.g., Coombs, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2007). A&T may have built a stronger reputation with students for future crisis through an adequate response and especially due to the portrayal in the media. Had the university also used the opportunity to communicate learning, renewal, and future preparedness it could have further enhanced its reputation.

The analysis revealed another extremely important and understudied area within crisis communication research: the impact of emotions on crisis communication. As this study shows, when students did not perceive A&T's communication response to be in line with what crisis communication theories recommend (e.g., one spokesperson being first and being right on all media channels) negative emotions or attribution-independent (anxiety, apprehension, and fear) and external-attribution-dependent (disgust, contempt, and anger) emotions are more common. This study supports Jin et al.'s (2014) model of emotional attribution in university crisis. Although the authors did not include school shootings as a possible crisis scenario, this study adds depth and support that the model holds true in real-life crisis situations. However, one nuance that this study provides is that the external-attribution-dependent emotions also emerge in respect to the media and their role in the crisis. Emotions in crisis might therefore not only be important in respect to the organization in crisis but also other players and stakeholders can impact emotions.

Was it a crisis? This question remains at the end of the research process. Circling back to the beginning of this paper, a crisis is a risk manifest or a violation of stakeholder expectations that can severely impact organizational functioning. School shootings are a severe crisis for universities. Luckily, in this case the alleged gunman was only carrying an umbrella. The school went into crisis mode for a few hours and responded

accordingly. Can this situation then be viewed as a crisis? Coombs and Holladay (2012) proposed the concept of a paracrisis as a situation that is similar to a crisis. The authors however limit the paracrisis definition by stating that a paracrisis is “a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior” (p. 409). This incident was neither an irresponsible or unethical behavior from A&T. As the concept of paracrisis is a novel one, the authors of this paper propose broadening the definition of paracrisis to include situations that mimic a crisis due to a perceived crisis threat and illicit an initial organizational crisis response, which ends up to be unwarranted.

CONCLUSION

Structured interviews do not allow for much freedom to explore additional themes. Also, little background information about the students was captured. Both were necessary for quick IRB approval so that the researchers could gain access shortly after the threat. Although research findings are not generalizable, the patterns were very strong and support much prior crisis communication research. In addition, the research revealed nuances of crisis response. The importance of social media for crisis communication has been discussed in much recent literature. This study further supports this trend. It also adds a facet to the speed with which messages are shared between many different stakeholders. It is much more difficult for an organization to remain in control of the messages during crisis.

The study also revealed that it is more important than before for organizations to manage all communication channels very quickly and effectively. To protect students during an actual shooting, messages cannot be delayed, no matter the reason. Only by being the first voice and providing consistent and continuous updates about the situation can trust and credibility be maintained. Both are essential for stakeholders to follow the recommendations to protect from harm. Although the university continually used its Aggie Alert system and social media to disseminate information to the students, many of the messages were lost to the students who needed them as they were unaware of the social media updates. This allowed for multiple voices to share varied versions of the news to stakeholders.

Capturing the voices of directly impacted stakeholders provides a strong and unique insight into the crisis response of an organization. It offers insights about communication channels, emotions, and expectations, but also leniencies built on positive reputation. Future crisis research should strive to capture stakeholder voices and further explore the diverse nature of (para)crisis.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. Please tell me about yourself.
2. Please describe your experience on April 12, 2013 when you heard that there was a gunman on A&T's campus.
 - a. Where were you?
 - b. How did you receive the news?
 - c. How did you feel upon receiving the news?
3. How would you describe A&T's response to the alleged gunman?
 - a. The communication?
 - b. The physical reaction?
4. How would you describe the media's portrayal of the event?
5. Is there anything else about the experience that you would like to share?