PRESIDENTIAL RESPONSES TO CRISES AT PUBLIC UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES:
WHAT LEADERS DO AND HOW OTHERS PERCEIVE THEIR ACTIONS

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Rebecca J. Menghini
DEDICATION

To Uncle J,
who believed that with hard work, a good plan, a little humor, and lots of treats,
anything was possible.

And to HH,
my favorite and my best, who did everything to make this dream possible—
including make sure there were plenty of treats
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The process of writing a dissertation is a bit like embarking on a road trip to a new place. Even with a good map suggesting the trips’ route and mileage, the stretches of wide, open highway are interspersed with road construction and detours, and keeping the fuel tank full is sometimes a challenge. I owe so many people thanks for lining the road with goodwill, for turning me around after yet another wrong turn, and for making sure I arrived at this, my final destination.

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ABSTRACT

PRESIDENTIAL RESPONSES TO CRISSES AT PUBLIC UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES:
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This study examines presidential response to human-induced crises on public university campuses. The goal of the research was to understand specifically what actions and behaviors leaders in crisis take; what kinds of teams they assemble and the ways those teams function; how the leaders communicate—both to their teams and their institutional communities; and the ways their actions, behaviors and communications are understood by stakeholders of the campus.

A review of current literature on crises in higher education supports the research, and aided in the formulation of the four sets of research questions. Specifically, the compilation of research in crisis and crisis management; the role of the president in higher education; leadership and communication in crisis; and sensemaking and social cognition theory highlighted several gaps in understanding about leader behavior in crisis. The research questions, therefore, were structured to explore presidential actions and behaviors, teams and team function, intentional messaging and communication, and stakeholder perceptions in crisis.

Presidents at three large, public, research universities were the focus of the case studies. The findings emerged out of site visits to the campuses, personal interviews and
review of historical documents and media coverage. While the leaders and the crises differed at each site, several common themes surfaced and the study revealed some important revelations and implications for both the literature and leaders in practice today. For instance, the findings demonstrated the significance of active, engaged leadership in crisis, highlighted the roles teams play in helping leaders to manage and resolve crises, and exposed the ways trust—both of the sort leaders bring to crisis and the kind they afford others with whom they work—influences leader actions and stakeholder perceptions. Ultimately, the research elicited a list of guidelines that presidents—as well as those who hire, support, or work with presidents—might consider as they prepare for and encounter crisis.
# Table of Contents

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................... iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ...................................................................................... iv

ABSTRACT .............................................................................................................. vi

Chapter One: Background, Purpose and Overview .............................................. 1
  Background ........................................................................................................ 1
  Focus of the Study ............................................................................................ 4
  Purpose of the Study ......................................................................................... 6

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature ................................................................. 8
  Introduction ....................................................................................................... 8
  Crisis and Crisis Management ......................................................................... 8
    Crisis—Definitions and Causes ..................................................................... 8
    Crisis Management—Preparedness ................................................................. 10
    Crisis Management—Response and Recovery ............................................... 12
  Presidential Leadership .................................................................................... 13
    The Roles of the President ........................................................................... 13
    Decision-Making in Crisis ........................................................................... 16
    Presidential Teamwork ............................................................................... 19
  Leadership and Communication in Crisis ......................................................... 22
  Sensemaking and Social Cognition Theory ....................................................... 24
  Implications for Research ............................................................................... 27

Chapter Three: Research Methodology ............................................................... 29
  Overview and Research Questions ................................................................... 29
  Site Selection .................................................................................................... 31
  Site Access ...................................................................................................... 33
  Data Collection ................................................................................................ 35
  Coding, Validation and Reliability ................................................................... 39
  Limitations of the Study .................................................................................. 40

Chapter Four: Case Studies ................................................................................ 45
  Michigan State University .............................................................................. 45
    Crisis Overview ............................................................................................. 45
    Institutional Profile ....................................................................................... 46
    President Peter McPherson ........................................................................... 47
  Crisis in East Lansing: How a Single Case of Meningitis Inspired Action ....... 52
    Determining the Scope of the Response ....................................................... 57
    Managing the Spread of the Disease—and the Spread of Panic .................. 59
    The Road to Recovery at MSU began with Mass Vaccination ................. 62
    Crisis During the Response—and How It Was Averted .............................. 64
    Communicating the effort .......................................................................... 66
    The Return to Normalcy ............................................................................. 67
    Perceptions of Leadership and Action ......................................................... 68
Chapter One: Background, Purpose and Overview

Background

In 2007, a gunman opened fire not once, but twice—in two separate buildings at Virginia Tech, killing 32 and injuring 17. In 2011, police officers at the University of California-Davis pepper sprayed peaceful protesters, spurting allegations of ongoing use of excessive force by officers in the University of California System. At Penn State, word of long-standing child abuse and alleged administrative cover-up put the campus in the national limelight for much of 2011, and in the spring of 2012, the University of Virginia weathered a governance battle with the Board of Regents over the work and ongoing employment of institutional president Teresa Sullivan.

Nearly every day, one can read in the Chronicle of Higher Education or Inside Higher Education—and sometimes even on the pages of the popular press—about a crisis on the campus of one of America’s colleges or universities. The frequency with which these events occur, and the mounting pressure on institutional presidents to effectively guide campuses through times of turmoil, raise important questions about how leaders respond in times of crisis and how those responses and communications both address the resolution of the crisis and help the campus through challenging—if not disruptive—times.

Crises are defined as “sudden or unexpected events that disrupt the normal operations of the institution or its educational mission and threaten the well-being of personnel, property, financial resources and/or the reputation of the institution” (Zdziarski, et al., p. 28). Not surprisingly, given the breadth of this definition,
institutional crises can assume many forms. While some crises are the result of natural disasters and can wreak havoc with systems, space and personnel, others are caused by human action, illness, or error. These sorts of crises often draw more public condemnation because they are believed to be avoidable (Lerbinger, 1997). Furthermore, crises that are the result of something other than natural disasters sometimes result in multiple perspectives about how the crisis came to happen, and in some instances, create divisions among those on campus about how, ultimately, the resolution of the matter should have been managed. This is not to say that natural disasters always bring people together, but because other types of crises are often perceived to have been caused by human error, poor judgment, or malfeasance, they are prone to greater public scrutiny and tend to illicit more opinions about what leaders knew or did not know, and when, that impact public perception and feelings about the institutional response. Human-induced crises create expectations for heightened leadership.

Crises, in any form, play out in many ways on university campuses. Sometimes, the initial institutional response is guided by a pre-established crisis management plan, with which the president may or may not be involved—either in creating or executing. Such plans vary from institution to institution, but often include elements such as activating an emergency operations center to serve as the information and logistics hub, securing perimeters and moving members of the community to safety, sending out text message and email alerts, and gathering facts and updates to provide more detailed updates and institutional statements. Other types of crises, less emergent in nature, require action that can be directed by
individuals, without the structure of a plan or emergency personnel. In almost all cases of crisis though, the campus community generally looks to the president to lead the institution back to normalcy (Eddy, 2010). Institutional presidents are responsible both for leading the actionable response, and to make sense of what may, on some levels, be an unexplainable situation.

Some schools of leadership suggest that one of the most important functions of leaders is making meaning in organizations (Birnbaum, 1992; Weick 1995). Leaders exert more influence in shaping the understanding and perceptions of others—particularly during times of uncertainty and ambiguity—with their language and use of symbols and rituals than they do through more traditionally understood leadership activities of planning, decision-making and administrative actions (Birnbaum, 1992). This is because meaning-making activities allow others to interpret organizational actions and to find attractive and plausible explanations for what they are experiencing—and such explanations help them know how to think, feel, and respond (Pfeffer, 1981; Bolman & Deal, 1991).

During times of crisis on university campuses then, the actions presidents take and the decisions they make—often in the form of written communications, verbal statements, or non-verbal actions—are important to helping others assign meaning and begin to understand and make sense of the crisis circumstances themselves. In this way, institutional presidents use meaning making to frame crisis and play a key role in the community's social construction of the circumstances.

It goes without saying that the roles leaders play in moving through a crisis and toward normalcy vary, as do the actions they take and the decisions they make
in responding to and resolving the crises themselves. This is in part because the circumstances of every crisis are different, and the flow of information on which leaders must make decisions is not standardized in each case. Central to all crises, however, is the fact that the information available is almost always incomplete (Murawski, 2011), leaving leaders to respond on limited, and sometimes inaccurate data. There is evidence to suggest that some leaders engage others in sorting through data and facts, bringing together either existing teams or new sets of people to help manage crisis. There is also research which suggests some leaders are more adept at managing in uncertain situations, though there is debate about whether that is the result of intuition, experience, some combination of the two, or some other factors altogether (Lerbinger, 1986, Naglewski, 2006). It is true, though, that some leaders connect and compare the contextual factors of issues to problems or situations they have solved in the past and use those to guide their actions and behaviors (Muffet-Willett & Kruse, 2009). While the way leaders process data to inform their actions and behaviors is important, so too is how they communicate those actions, both directly and indirectly. In other words, how leaders lead in times of crisis matters. In fact, it may be that institutional leaders’ most important role in guiding campuses beyond crisis lies in how they help others create meaning and understanding in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity.

**Focus of the Study**

This study, which was conducted as a comparative case study of presidents on three public university campuses, sought to better understand how presidents manage crises on university campuses, and how, through their actions and
communications in crisis, they help institutional stakeholders create meaning in ambiguity and uncertainty. It examined three, non-natural disaster type crises at public universities. The institutions were chosen both because they afforded the opportunity to explore the phenomenon at places that share similar missions, visions, and institutional structures, and because the leaders at these types of campuses are very much in the public spotlight. Interviews with campus stakeholders both connected to and separate from the crisis response examined how leaders behaved and invoked symbols and language during crisis and, together with media reports and document analysis, demonstrated the ways in which those actions and behaviors created meaning for others. Specifically, the study focused on understanding four sets of questions:

1. How do public university presidents respond when faced with human induced crises on campus? What do they do? What actions do they take? How do they communicate to institutional stakeholders?

2. In what ways, and to what extent do leaders use teams, or others, such as boards or governance groups, in managing crisis? Who is included in those groups and what roles do they play?

3. To what extent, and in what ways, do leaders intentionally manage meaning in times of crisis?

4. In what ways do the various stakeholders of the university perceive and understand the roles, actions and communications of presidents during crisis? During times of crisis, what is the impact of this meaning making on the institution?
The institutions in the study share institutional characteristics in their relative size; public nature; teaching, research and public service missions; and the sorts of infrastructure they have to accommodate disruptions to organizational happenings. Presidents with different backgrounds and types of experience led each campus through the individual incidents, and the types of crises they endured were all very different. The study considered these facts, but focused more specifically on the ways in which leaders helped shape the resolution of the crisis and the larger campus construction—or understanding—of it.

**Purpose of the Study**

The study was conducted to improve the understanding about the role of institutional presidents in crisis response. Specifically, it examined the ways in which meaning is created and transferred through the actions and behaviors of institutional presidents during such uncertain and ambiguous times.

The results detail what happened in each of the three cases, how the presidents responded, and how others perceived or understood their actions, behaviors and communications. It is expected that these findings will be useful for several reasons. First, presidents, if they have not already, are likely to face crisis themselves, and there is value before that happens in understanding the connection between the intention of actions taken or decisions made and the interpretation of those actions by others. Likewise, institutional presidents will benefit from knowing the ways they might intentionally, through their leadership behaviors, affect or manage meaning for others. Finally, other leaders might also use the results of this study to aid in evaluating their current crisis response and communications plans to
better address the fact that they play a key role in managing the social construction of crisis events for the campus.

For these same reasons, the findings of this work will also be valuable for those administrators and personnel charged with working with and for institutional presidents in crisis response, and for those boards and stakeholders responsible for the hiring and management of leaders tasked with crisis response. Furthermore, while the intent of the research was not to create a response tool leaders might use in rote fashion when crisis strikes, the results of this work do shed light on how some practices have been more effective than others, perhaps in crisis resolution, but more particularly in creating understanding for others, which could be of value to leaders and larger campus communities alike.

Finally, we can gain a better understanding of meaning and meaning making in universities under crises. There has not been research in this area. While others have focused on meaning and meaning making in colleges and universities and as part of presidential leadership, the study contributes to the literature by also considering the added dimension of crisis.
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Introduction

What follows is a review of the various literatures associated with the phenomenon of presidential response to crisis on university campuses. The review begins with an effort to define crisis, and to help the reader understand the types and causes of the events that suddenly alter everyday life on America’s campuses. To get at the role institutional leaders play in crisis response, research on crisis management, crisis communication and on presidential roles in higher education is explored, tying together known phases of crisis management and the actions and behaviors expected of institutional leaders. The literature on sensemaking provides a framework for understanding how individuals understand and make meaning of institutional crises, and a review of social cognition theory demonstrates how that meaning is transferred to others through leader behavior and actions.

Crisis and Crisis Management

Crisis—Definitions and Causes

Crises are defined as high impact events that require immediate attention, share an element of surprise, necessitate action, and pose a threat to the organizational reputation of an institution or organization (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Muffet-Willett & Kruse, 2009). Higher education researchers Zdziarski, Dunkel and Rollo (2007), cite the presence of disruption in defining campus crisis as “an event, which is often sudden or unexpected, that disrupts the normal operations of the institution or its educational mission and threatens the well-being of personnel,
property, financial resources and/or the reputation of the institution” (Zdziarski, et al., p. 28). Several kinds of crises are noted in the literature, and they are most often characterized by their origin or cause. Lerbinger (1997) classifies crises into five categories: natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods; technological crises caused by human error or unanticipated side effects or malfunctions of equipment or processes; confrontational crises caused by groups or government opposed to the policies or behaviors of an organization or business; crises of malevolence caused by groups or individuals with criminal intentions of harming the organization; and crises of managerial failure caused by ineptitude, negligence, callousness or misconduct. Pearson and Mitroff (1993) offer a more simplistic explanation of crises as being either induced by humans or the result of natural disasters. They posit that because most people concede that organizations have little control of the occurrence of natural events, the public response to crises resulting from natural disasters is less negative than it is for those caused by human error or malfeasance (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

Human-induced crises can adversely impact the reputation of an organization—not just because of the damage they can cause internally—but also because the public generally believes they are preventable (Lerbinger, 1997). How organizational leaders respond and recover in these times often determines the public perception of the organization, and also whether those in charge retain their roles and the respect of the community (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). For those organizations that are public in their purpose, such as public colleges or universities, human-induced crises draw even greater public scrutiny than those
that occur in private organizations or entities. In fact, experience shows that the public expectations and judgments of an organization and its leaders are higher the greater the public nature of the organization (Lerbinger, 1997).

**Crisis Management—Preparedness**

While the classifications of crises by both type and origin are useful in explaining and understanding crises, it is noted that the research on crisis management does not appear to consider origin or cause. Instead, scholars recognize the crisis management sequence as having four distinct phases which apply to all circumstances: preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation (Drabek, 1986; Pearson & Mitroff).

While most campuses today have crisis response plans that include preparation activities, response and recovery protocols and mitigation tactics, institutions of higher education—and their leaders—can and should be doing more to focus on crisis preparedness, both to aid in avoiding crises and to ensure readiness when they occur (Jacobsen, 2010). Preparedness involves the ongoing practice of planning, organizing, training, equipping, exercising, evaluating and improving activities to ensure effective coordination should crisis occur (“FEMA: National Preparedness,” n.d.).

The sheer volume and complexity of people and systems on college campuses makes crisis avoidance virtually impossible (Lerbinger, 1994), but nearly all crises leave a trail of early warning signals (Mitroff, 2001). In some cases, the signals are not noticed because they are simply too small and represent only triggers to more
serious events, but sometimes they are missed because no deliberate effort is made to look for or understand their meaning (Lerbinger, 1997). The creation of crisis teams and the implementation of crisis simulations or exercises to help prepare organizations and leaders to look for warning signals and to check the stability of their internal systems and infrastructure in response are proven practices. Many campuses also designate spokespersons and as part of this planning, form crisis communications strategies as well (Lerbinger, 1997).

The role of institutional leaders in crisis preparedness is well documented. In their research on crisis planning, Pearson and Clair (1998) found that unless crisis preparedness begins at the top, the assembled teams, policies and procedure manuals might not be sufficient in preparing organizations for crisis. The authors discovered that leaders who perceive their organizations to be vulnerable and at risk will allocate resources to prepare for crisis and champion the efforts of the teams they put in place (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Research also shows that because effective damage containment mechanisms are nearly impossible to create during the heat of a crisis, leaders who actively engage with crisis preparation are often better positioned to guide their organizations out of turmoil and ensure both short-term and long-term recovery when crisis strikes (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

And several higher education experts believe that more crises will occur. Little data exists about the number of crisis events that occur on college and university campuses each year, but the headlines in the higher education press and the growth of the risk management and crisis consultancy sectors in higher education suggest crises are occurring often—and that institutional leaders
recognize the threats associated with such events (Zdziarski, et al., 2007). Douglas Robinson, Vice President for Student Services at the University of California Long Beach, after his campus weathered a bomb threat incident in 2001, noted that “Inevitably, at some point, every campus in the country will be faced with some sort of crisis or emergency (McCarthy, Margolis, Willits & Gephard, 2001, p. 16 as cited in Jacobsen, 2010). A 2007 story in the Chronicle of Higher Education supported his claim, acknowledging not just the likelihood of incidents, but also the certainty of attention that accompanies crises today (Fain, 2007). Several higher education leaders were cited as saying that college presidents can and should be prepared for the internal challenges associated with crisis, but also that they should now expect “more fast-breaking crises to land them in the glare of national news media,” (Fain, 2007). There is little doubt that the growth of the social media sector has influenced if not the number of crises on campus, the publicity they receive. News goes viral so much more quickly than it did even a decade ago, putting institutional leaders in the limelight not just during traditional news cycles, but twenty-four hours a day, and during each phase of crisis.

**Crisis Management—Response and Recovery**

Whether or not the media is first on scene, it is true that when crisis strikes, preparation efforts are generally supplanted by the need for responsive action. The second and third phases of the crisis management sequence are response and recovery (Drabek, 1986; Pearson & Mitroff). Response is described by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as the actions taken to “save lives and prevent further damage in a disaster or emergency situation,” (“FEMA: Plan,
Prepare & Mitigate,” n.d.), though it also includes efforts made by organizations to implement crisis response plans and assess functional or reputational damage. Recovery activities are defined as those actions taken “to return the community to normal” (FEMA, n.d.). This phase is marked by efforts to keep the organization and its reputation intact (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

Historical accounts demonstrate that emergency or law enforcement personnel are often the first responders in crisis events, and as such, initiate the campus crisis response (Zdziarski, et al., 2007). Institutional leaders, often engaging in the midst of the planned response, find the first step in response is to make sense of what is happening and to understand the impacts to organizational functions and systems (Seeger et al., 2005). Because institutional leaders engage in organizational assessment as part of their day-to-day activities as well, there is reason to believe that the research on presidential roles in higher education more generally could be helpful to understand how leaders see themselves, what others expect of them, and what implications those perceptions and expectations might have during times of crisis.

**Presidential Leadership**

**The Roles of the President**

What presidents do matters. However, there is debate among researchers of higher education leadership on how influential institutional presidents are in shaping the ongoing well-being of institutions. There are data to support both the argument that presidents matter to institutional improvement and the position that environmental and organizational constraints limit the effects presidential actions
have on organizational function (Cameron, 1986; Birnbaum, 1989; Cohen & March, 1974). These scholars argue that organizations are driven more by culture and context than by the actions of presidents, and that presidential leadership is largely defined by efforts to create and manage culture. Birnbaum (1992) suggests that the findings on both sides of the question of whether presidents matter merit asking a different question all together—namely under what conditions, and in what ways, can leaders make a difference? While this question also affords several answers in the literature, those who study interpretive leadership suggest that part of the answer lies in the way leaders make meaning for others through their actions and communications. They posit that institutional leaders have more influence in shaping the understanding and perceptions of others with their language and use of symbols and rituals than they do through more traditionally understood leadership activities of planning, decision-making and administrative actions (Birnbaum, 1992). This sensemaking through language and symbols allows others to interpret organizational actions and to find attractive and plausible explanations for what they are experiencing—and such explanations help people know how to think, feel, and respond (Pfeffer, 1981; Bolman & Deal, 1991).

Tierney (1983) notes that stakeholders need to feel that they comprehend what is going on in an organization, and to do so, they follow the cues of leaders, interpreting abstractions and assigning meaning to words and actions. His study, aimed at understanding the conceptual orientations presidents bring to their work, found that presidents perceive themselves as symbols of the university, and that their words and actions provide metaphorical symbols for themselves and others on
campus. These symbols, which can take the form of written communication, verbal statements, or non-verbal actions, both convey meaning and provide a sense of how the organization functions to members of the institutional community (Tierney, 1983). Birnbaum (1992) notes that these symbols also serve to develop and sustain systems of belief that restore participants’ commitment to the organization.

Tierney’s (1983) work was conducted using data gathered as part of the longitudinal Institutional Leadership Project study of 32 college presidents. Ultimately, Tierney (1983) found that symbolism both defines leadership and is defined by the institution or organization in which the leader resides. As such, institutional presidents are responsible to make meaning of events for others and often use symbolism as a tool in the meaning-making process. While his findings were based on presidential responses to three general questions on presidential leadership, work by Weick (1995) and Eddy (2010) suggests they might also apply to times of crisis, when the values and reputations of institutions are most at risk and the typical communication and decision-making patterns of organizations are interrupted or altogether altered. During times of uncertainty and ambiguity in particular, when people are either confused by too many interpretations or because they are ignorant of any at all, community members look to leaders to help make sense of events, and to connect new information with past experience (Weick, 1995; Eddy, 2010). This kind of interpretive leadership, which often, but not always has a calming effect on a community, “principally involves a process by which one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others” (Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p. 258).
Decision-Making in Crisis

While the research on crises in higher education has grown in recent years, there remains relatively little information available about how presidents make decisions in the response and recovery phases of crisis and even less about how social cognition theories or approaches are applied in a crisis. Zdziarski, Dunkel and Rollo (2007) provide a reflective look at more than two dozen cases and contend that an institution’s ability to respond is based in part on internal perception of the impact, and the degree to which the severity, location, magnitude and visibility of the crisis effect the resources available (Zdziarski et al., 2007). They conducted an analysis of the institutional responses at dozens of campus crisis events, including the residence hall fire at Seton Hall in the year 2000, the 2001 Oklahoma State University plane crash that killed ten men associated with the men’s basketball program, and Hurricane Katrina, which struck Tulane University on move-in day in 2005, positing that when the level, type and intentionality of the crisis are understood, leaders are better positioned to assess and determine the impact on the campus community and to respond accordingly (Zdziarski et al., 2007). Although the authors do not spell out how institutional leaders in general, or presidents in particular, come to understand the circumstances surrounding crisis events, they do point out the inherent challenges in guiding institutional recovery processes with partial or incomplete information.

Several researchers have looked at the decisions made in times of crisis and at the leaders who made them to better understand the phenomenon of crisis decision-making. Most of the research on crisis decision-making has been conducted
outside of higher education, but can be useful in framing the challenges many leaders face in translating their meaning making into cues that can be interpreted by the larger community. Interestingly, many of the findings of crisis decision-making research celebrate the qualities and experience of the decision-makers and place less emphasis on the constructs of the decisions themselves.

In particular, intuition and experience are two key themes of the research. While both rational thinking and intuition drive decision-making in any circumstance, researchers note that the uncertainty and volatility associated with crises impede normal processes and can make rational decision-making difficult (Rosati, 2001; Boin, McConnell & Hart, 2009 as cited in Murawski, 2011). They suggest that intuition is the result of a certain amount of tacit knowledge that leaders bring to a situation, and therefore, seasoned leaders may, during crises, have advantages over their less-experienced colleagues. Anna Neumann (1989), in a study about college presidential strategy, also found that presidents become more complex over time, enlarging their cognitive and behavioral repertoires and learning to adjust so that they may be more likely to apply the right strategy at the right time.

Likewise, skilled decision-makers often rely on deeply held patterns of learned experience, sometimes comparing the contextual factors of present events to problems or situations they have solved in the past (Muffet-Willett & Kruse, 2009). It is the combination of skills, confidence, foresight and experience, according to Klein (2008), that positions some leaders to more easily see problems, diagnose them quickly, and implement solutions swiftly and accurately.
Other researchers, however, recognize that some leaders who have both the intuition and the skills to be effective decision-makers, and who are adept at handling day-to-day issues, may not do as well in crisis situations (Lerbinger, 1986, Naglewska, 2006). Naglewska even acknowledges, “whereas some people seem to have an innate ability to make effective crisis decisions, others, equally qualified, fail” (Naglewska, 2006, p. 48). These findings could suggest an inability of the leader to efficiently process an overabundance of external cues, or to effectively link them to other networks of meaning, although it might also simply be that some leaders are not good decision-makers, particularly in times of crisis. Left unanswered in the work of Naglewska and Lerbinger are questions of whether those leaders who fail in times of crises do so because they are prioritizing accuracy over speed, because they are reluctant to take action in the absence of more or different information, or whether there are other factors that inhibit their ability to think and act rationally.

Taylor, Buunk and Aspinwall (1990) explored the implications of stress on the crisis decision-making process. While their findings did not address rational thinking directly, they did discover that as stress levels increase, so too does the need for leaders to evaluate their own ideas in relation to those of others, suggesting that crisis decisions should not be made in seclusion (Taylor, Buunk & Aspinwall, 1990). Albrecht (1996) confirmed this finding, and points out that when times get stressful, we as humans revert to what we know and how we have been conditioned to respond (1996, as cited in Murawski, 2011). For some leaders, this means they are unwilling to admit that a crisis is possible or even happening, because of what that threat would mean to their sense of personal or organizational identity. For
others, a sense of feeling overwhelmed or a need for control causes them to limit access to information, precisely when it is most needed (Albrecht, 1996; Jacobsen, 2010).

**Presidential Teamwork**

A review of the literature on how institutional presidents use teams in general is useful context for considering the leadership and decision-making tendencies cited above. Bensimon and Neumann, in analyzing the scholarly work of others on teams, noted that teamwork presents several advantages for leaders who choose to engage in the effort. Teamwork can result in creative problem solving among diversely oriented minds and it can facilitate cognitive complexity, allowing institutional presidents to view their institutions in multiple ways, even if they are not prone to doing so themselves (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993). These sorts of teams are particularly useful when team leaders are learners who surround themselves with others who know more about a particular subject or topic than they do, and are prepared to have their mind changed or their ideas challenged (Cox, 1991). In addition, teams can provide peer support to presidents, easing isolation among those generally known to have no campus-based peers. Finally, teams might also serve to increase accountability, both for the members, and for the institution as a whole (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993; Cox, 1991). Bensimon and Neumann (1993) caution, however, that leaders must be careful to balance accountability that generates openness and that which stifles creative thinking, as too much of either can become a liability and limit the team’s effectiveness.
In a study of how fifteen college and university presidents made use of their teams in everyday work, Bensimon (1991) found that the leaders understood the work of their teams in three ways—as utilitarian, expressive, or cognitive. In the former type, which was often manifest as a formal group, team members were charged with helping the president maintain control of institutional function by gathering, sorting and delivering information to make decisions. It should be noted that the presidents in the study who described their teams as utilitarian expressed satisfaction with the roles members played in the task of gathering information and planning, but found little utility in the collaborative process of making decisions collectively (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993).

In contrast, in expressive teams, team members were not asked to make decisions, but were instead used to provide counsel to the president. Collectively, these types of teams functioned more socially to reinforce a sense of unity or togetherness in carrying out a process or task, with members serving more as sounding boards for feedback and perspective. These teams were often assembled based on loyalty rather than on interdependence, a result perhaps, according to Bensimon and Neumann, of some presidents’ unwillingness to open themselves up to scrutiny (1993). In other words, sometimes leaders surround themselves with people who will tell them what they want to hear rather than what they might need to hear or the ways their ideas or leadership are lacking. Expressive teams therefore risk insularity, and without intention, can end up distancing themselves from the rest of campus (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993).
Finally, groups described as cognitive teams were used to help the president view problems from multiple perspectives, and members were expected to question, challenge, and argue with one another in ways that allowed them to behave both as a creative and a corrective feedback system. These sorts of teams were seen as the most difficult to create, but the most useful to helping presidents avoid oversimplifying matters or prematurely closing matters that deserved or required more attention. The authors note that for cognitive teams to be effective, there has to be comfort among the members for disorder and uncertainty, and recognition that the most creative solutions often emerge from unstructured conversations that engage the whole. Further, they learned that presidents who used this type of team were also specific about encouraging group members to think and discuss both what they were seeing and hearing and what lay beneath that information, allowing them to serve more as information processors and sense makers than simply messengers (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993).

The findings of the 1991 study conducted by Bensimon are the result of interviews with institutional presidents and members of their leadership teams. Neither that study, nor the 1993 analysis conducted by the study author and Anna Neumann, included any direct observations of the teams in action (1993). The focus of the study was on “understanding how presidents and their team members work together; how team members perceive the quality of their working relationships; how presidents select, shape and maintain particularly effective teams; and how teams address conflict and diversity of orientation among team members” (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993, p. 34). While the authors did not explore crisis
specifically, the findings of this study are useful context for how institutional leaders might also view and use their teams in times of uncertainty or ambiguity. Together with the data on crisis decision-making in the earlier pages of this review, one might begin to understand how leaders in crisis arrive at the decision-making threshold and the challenges they might face when stepping into action.

**Leadership and Communication in Crisis**

The actions of leaders in times of crisis are often most clearly demonstrated in their efforts to communicate with others. In fact, response and recovery actions and communications are so inextricably linked that the research on the behavior of leaders in crisis reads in many places like a handbook for crisis communications. Because the public and other stakeholders tend to make judgments about crises based on their size and impact, whether they were internally or externally caused, and whether the capacity for avoidance or control existed within an organization (Coombs, 1995), crisis researchers agree that getting out in front and communicating with stakeholders is key to successfully navigating crisis (Hoffman, 2007; Mitroff, 2001).

Several crisis communications strategies are laid out in the literature. Farmer and Tvedt (2005) posit that leaders must respond quickly, tell the truth without any sugarcoating, err on the side of over-communication, talk to all of the stakeholders, and use crisis as an opportunity to demonstrate leadership. Mitroff (2001) emphasizes the importance of full disclosure in times of crisis, noting that the longer it takes for the truth to come out, the more damaging the situation becomes and the likelihood of recovery is lessened. Additionally, when drafting a public message, it is
important for leaders to acknowledge the emotional needs of the public and resist the urge to respond with numbers or statistics, which tend to suggest that the organization or its leadership has something to hide (Mitroff, 2001).

The symbolism inherent to seeing an institutional leader take charge cannot be understated in times of crisis, and therefore, who speaks on behalf of the institution or organization matters as well. Lerbinger (1987) suggests that the severity and nature of the incident should guide the choice of spokesperson during the crisis. Loretta Ucelli, former White House communications director under Bill Clinton, disagrees, “The CEO must be front and center. Visibility cannot be delegated. Leadership cannot be delegated,” (Farmer & Tvedt, 2005).

Ultimately, many of the tactics laid out in the literature seem more like common sense than strategy or scholarship. Birnbaum (1992), noting that to be effective, leaders must align their strategies with the cultures of their institutions, implies that while public statements or press statements may appear to be basic documents, matching the language and the tone to the culture of the community requires nuance and care. Tierney (1989) reinforces this point, arguing “the culture of an organization is a social construction, dependent not only on the perceptions of a leader, but also on the unique history of the organization, the individual orientations and perceptions of followers, and larger environmental influences. Everyday existence is a constant matter of interpretation among organizational participants—meaning symbols and actions must fit the culture.”
**Sensemaking and Social Cognition Theory**

The notion of sensemaking in organizations, described as a process of “placing items into frameworks, comprehending, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning” (Weick, 1995, p. 6), provides a way for meaning to be constructed through action and process. Weick (1988), who has written extensively about sensemaking, identifies seven properties helpful to explaining or understanding its utility. He presents the properties as a crude sequence, but acknowledges that each incidence of sensemaking is different, and some occasions call for simultaneous processing or the insertion of feedback loops, while other circumstances require sensemakers to altogether eliminate some steps (Weick, 1995). Individually and collectively, these elements could provide a helpful means through which to consider how institutional presidents arrive at the actions and decisions they make in crisis, and how communities engage with and draw meaning from the leadership of presidents during these times.

The first of the properties is that sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, meaning that it begins with the sensemaker, and that who people believe themselves to be shapes the meaning they make of events (Pratt, 2000). Sensemaking is also retrospective, and meaning is attached to individual moments or experiences only based on whatever occurred next (Weick, 1995). This component of sensemaking is especially important for leaders in crises, when the volume of activity requires sensemakers to synthesize meanings of several different things. To do this, they draw on their past experiences, and in these times, leaders
often feel they need more information to make sense of what they are experiencing. Further, sensemaking is social and sensemakers play a role in producing part of the environment they face (Pondy & Mitroff, 1979), meaning that individuals simultaneously shape and react to their surroundings, creating narratives that are both individual and shared. Such narratives are especially important during times of crisis, when individuals and communities want to know how to think, feel and respond (Pfeffer, 1981; Bolman & Deal, 1991). The process of sensemaking is also ongoing and continuous—such that when sensemakers remember events that made them feel similarly, they may try to use a feeling-based memory to solve a current cognitive based puzzle, mating two very different forms of evidence (Weick, 1995).

While this element of sensemaking mirrors the findings in the crisis leadership literature citing the importance of both intuition and experience in crisis response, it might also help explain why some leaders are better in crisis than others. Those leaders who recognize the feelings and emotion inherent in crises may be better suited to intentionally manage both for crisis resolution and for the emotional well-being of their communities.

Resonant with the findings of interpretive theorists, sensemaking is focused on and by extracted cues, or simple, familiar structures from which sensemakers develop a larger sense of what might be happening or occurring (Weick, 1995). These extracted cues provide points of reference for connecting ideas to broader networks of meaning and allow elements to be cognitively tied together (Weick, 1995). In campus communities, such cues serve to frame the social construction of events like crises.
Finally, sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy and “takes a relative approach to truth, predicting that people will believe what can account for sensory experience but what is also interesting, attractive, emotionally appealing, and goal relevant,” (Fiske, 1992, p. 879). This element underscores the importance of leaders recognizing the emotional perspectives of followers and crafting messages—particularly in times of crisis—accordingly. Likewise, it explains in part why no two recountings of what happened at any given time—or during any particular crisis—will ever be the same, reinforcing the notion that leaders help create a common understanding as part of being effective in their role.

Social cognition models, borne out of the phenomenological or social-constructivist traditions, examine the ways leaders shape and change process inside an organization through framing and interpretation (Kezar, 2001). Used most traditionally to study organizational change, these models also explore how individuals within an organization interpret and make sense of change (Harris, 1996). One reason social cognition models are helpful in higher education is because they apply well to the ambiguous environments at colleges and universities, where cognitive reorientation happens regularly through discussion, debate, generative learning, reframing and sensemaking (Kezar, 2001; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). By examining how change occurs, and not simply the elements of or reasons for change, these models enable individuals to alter their current realities—though the emphasis on process means that the resulting change is not always progressive (Kezar, 2001).
While neither sensemaking nor social cognition theories have been used in past studies of institutional crisis response, the literature supports the notion that institutional leaders, through their actions and behaviors, signal meaning to others. How this meaning making occurs, and to what extent leaders intentionally manage meaning through their decision-making and communication actions, is not well known. Sensemaking and social cognition theories could help answer these questions, as well as others directed at how presidential actions are received by others in the community and what sorts of impacts are realized by the meaning created by and through leaders.

Implications for Research

This synthesis of current research associated with the phenomenon of presidential response in times of institutional crisis has identified several important themes. First, institutional presidents of universities often face uncertain and ambiguous circumstances in crisis, and their actions and behaviors in response are important not just to recovery, but also to the making of meaning for others. How leaders move between the needs of the individual and the collective is not well understood, nor is it clear why some leaders are able to lead in these times more effectively than others. Second, institutional presidents see themselves—and are seen by others—as leaders, and they communicate meaning to themselves and others using symbols, metaphors and words. The significance of symbols in leadership is well established in higher education, but how they are used to create meaning in times of crisis has not previously been examined. Third, crises are classified by both type and cause in the crisis literature, suggesting the need for
different approaches in recovery and response. The crisis management literature, however, does not retain those classifications, nor does it delineate alternative approaches based on crisis type. And finally sensemaking, meaning making and social cognition theories can—with more study—provide meaningful context for understanding how institutional presidents guide institutions through crises.

This inquiry identified several areas of overlap and intersection in the research associated with how institutional leaders make sense of and guide their campuses through crisis. The themes that emerged as a result of the review also indicate that there are gaps in the understanding of this phenomenon that might benefit from further inquiry. In particular, more study of both what leaders do when faced with crisis first-hand and how meaning making and other social cognition approaches can apply in the campus crisis environment will provide meaningful contributions to the literature.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Overview and Research Questions

When crisis strikes on campus, the ways in which institutional leaders behave and communicate influences how others will respond. In fact, as presidents make sense of a new situation themselves and then communicate that understanding through words and actions to others, they begin to serve as “sense-givers” (Thayer, 1988; Eddy, 2010), ultimately providing a reference point to guide the actions and understanding of others. Because crises may strike quickly, often with little notice, and pose significant risk to institutional reputation, it is important to understand to what extent, and in what ways, leaders’ actions and behaviors impact both the crisis resolution and the making of meaning for others on campus.

This study was conducted as a comparative case study at three public universities. It explored the leadership of institutional presidents during times of non-natural disaster type crises, and the ways in which their actions and behaviors helped institutions cope, respond and adjust. By considering the actions and communications of leaders, the study also explored the ways in which meaning was created and ambiguity was lessened for other stakeholders in the respective university communities. In particular, the study addressed four sets of questions:

1. How do public university presidents respond when faced with human induced crises on campus? What do they do? What actions do they take? How do they communicate to institutional stakeholders?
2. In what ways, and to what extent do leaders use teams, or others, such as boards or governance groups, in managing crisis? Who is included in those groups and what roles do they play?

3. To what extent, and in what ways, do leaders intentionally manage meaning in times of crisis?

4. In what ways do the various stakeholders of the university perceive and understand the roles, actions and communications of presidents during crisis? During times of crisis, what is the impact of this meaning making on the institution?

The inquiry was conducted as a qualitative, multiple-site case study, and while the focus was on the actions and behaviors of institutional presidents, the unit of analysis was the campuses—or the sites of the crises. Creswell (2007) notes that in studies like this, where the context matters to our understanding of how participants in a study make decisions or confront a problem, qualitative research is appropriate. Also, because the research questions aimed to understand not just the presidential actions and behaviors, but also how those actions—and the meaning derived from them—impact the institutional crisis response and the perceptions of others in the campus community, it made sense for the unit of analysis to be extended beyond the individual presidents themselves (Yin, 2009).

The case study approach was selected because it allows for deep and thorough review of a single situation or event, and behaviors of the actors therein—in this case university presidents and other institutional stakeholders. The selection of multiple sites both afforded the opportunity to explore whether different crises at
different places present any of the same challenges, and allowed for the identification of themes both within and across the cases (Creswell, 2007). Those themes are laid out in the analysis section and are useful in helping to explain the roles presidents play both in resolving crises and in making meaning for others during their efforts at response. It is noted that the qualitative nature of this research means that the findings are not generalizable across all institutions or crises, although it was hoped, and ultimately the results conclude, that there are themes and lessons that can be useful both to presidents and other practitioners as they confront crisis at their own institutions.

**Site Selection**

For this study, three large public universities that had weathered institutional crises not of the natural disaster variety were selected to participate in a multi-case case study. These institutions, all members of the Big Ten Conference, are similar in their relative size; public nature; and teaching, research and public service missions. They were selected because they have similar organizational structures, they all had (and have) plans for crisis or disruptions to organizational happenings, and they save similar expectations for presidents and presidential leadership. Such similarities were built into the site selection to allow for more meaningful cross-comparisons.

The institutions differ culturally and in that they were each led by presidents with different backgrounds and types of experience. Further, all of the crises were human induced, although the nature of the incident differed on each campus. While all of these factors were noted in the study, and compared when seen to have
meaningful influence, the focus of the inquiry was more specifically directed at the roles presidents play in shaping the resolution of a crisis and the larger campus construction—or understanding—of it.

Public institutions were selected both because leaders of these institutions have additional constituent groups they must consider in their framing of and response to crises, and because there is some evidence that public expectations and judgments are greater at public organizations than at privately managed or operated institutions (Lerbinger, 1997).

Each campus in the study experienced a different type of crisis, though the study sought to include only crises caused by accidents or human or system error. These types of crises, unlike natural disasters or crises of malevolence, are generally believed to be preventable (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993), and therefore, pose significant risk to both organizational reputation and the credibility of the individual charged with leading the institution. The high-stakes nature of these sorts of crises was believed important to understanding the extent to which the ways institutional leaders respond to and frame a crisis are related to the ways others on the campus or the broader community perceive and understand the leaders’ actions.

Additional criteria for site selection were that the crises be significant enough in their scope that members of the broader campus community were aware of, and campus and local media reported on, their occurrence; that the study participants not be in litigation over the outcomes of the crisis, or limited in their ability to discuss the crisis openly because of previously made legal concessions; and that the president be accessible and available to speak about the crisis, even if
he or she was no longer in office at the institution being considered. Initially, only crises that occurred within the past five years were to be considered for the study, such that interview respondents were able to recall the details of the crisis and that the use of social media could be considered in the inquiry. Upon the initiation of site selection, however, it was determined that there were some crises that occurred longer ago about which there was still consistent and valuable institutional memory. Therefore, the parameters of the study were expanded to include crises dating back as far as fifteen years.

It should be noted that a study of this sort depends first and foremost on the access to leaders willing to speak openly and honestly about their experiences. Access to both the institutional leadership and to a wide number of individuals willing to participate in the study was a primary driver in selecting sites.

**Site Access**

The sites were initially proposed to be chosen based on the crises they had weathered—such that the author of the study would identify three or four crises that met the parameters outlined above and seek permission from the institutional leader to study the case. Concerns about buy-in and leaders’ willingness to provide the necessary access led instead to a process where the author invited presidents to participate in the study, and upon acceptance, asked them to name the crisis they wished to have examined.

Ultimately, the author, who currently serves as Chief of Staff to the Chancellor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, drafted a letter of inquiry to be sent by then UW-Madison Chancellor David Ward to six of the twelve Big Ten
presidents. The six were chosen because they had served in their roles for longer periods of time, they were close colleagues of Ward, and it was known that their institutions were not currently in the midst of litigation (such as Penn State University). Ward sent the message on the author’s behalf, and all six institutional leaders responded directly to the author. One was not interested, another agreed to talk with the author, but after an initial call decided it would not be possible to be open enough to make the study worthwhile, and the third, after making contact, agreed to serve as a back-up site should it be needed. Peter McPherson and Lou Anna Simon at Michigan State University, Harvey Perlman at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, and E. Gordon Gee at the Ohio State University all agreed to participate, and after consultation, each offered a different type of crisis for the inquiry. Ultimately, the three crises included in the study are the 1999 mass vaccination effort that took place at MSU in response to a single student’s hospitalization for meningococcal meningitis and septicemia, the 2011 dismissal of the University of Nebraska from the membership of the American Association of Universities, and “tattoo-gate” and the events leading up to the resignation of head football coach Jim Tressel at the Ohio State University. While not entirely intentional, these crises are somewhat representative of the types of crises institutional leaders at large public universities face—with one being student related, another touching on academic competitiveness, and one centered around athletics. Collectively, they afforded tremendous opportunity to explore the ways universities of this size face reputational risk, and the means institutional leaders
use both to mitigate and resolve crises and to create meaning for others in the process.

At each site, the president or chancellor identified a point person with whom the author was to work in identifying potential interview respondents and gaining access to institutional documents. Additional respondents, who were not part of the institutional response, were sought through contacts at UW-Madison, postings on Facebook and other social media sites, and friends of the author. It should be noted that because both the campuses and the individual cases were all public, no effort was made to hide institutional identity in the study. During the solicitation of interview respondents, however, potential interviewees were told they could participate anonymously and that generic identifiers such as “faculty member” or “former student” would be attributed to any quotes or information they provided.

**Data Collection**

**Document Review**

A review of documents was initiated in advance of the site visits to better understand the context of each crisis and the campus reaction to the response. Specifically, campus newspaper articles, university web postings, blogs and stories written by campus community members, and external media accounts were studied to gain a sense of the institutional response and the campus reaction both during the crisis and after its resolution. Access to historical posts on institutional Facebook and Twitter accounts proved more difficult to acquire than anticipated, but several news clippings citing Facebook posts and tweets by institutional
personnel were examined. Likewise, any accessible public data about communications sent to the broader community in the midst of the response was sought, and interviews were initiated with background acquired through Internet and library searches. Additionally, institutional web sites at each of the campuses were examined together with institutional reports and documents to provide the information included in the institutional profile included in the findings section of this document. A summary of the sources used in those profiles is included in Appendix A.

Additional documents, including materials used as part of the response, communications not publicly available or maintained as correspondence in the office of the President, and background documents, were requested either when interviews were set up or at the interviews themselves. In addition, the author set up visits with university archives offices and student newspaper staffs, where pertinent, during the campus visit.

Interviews

An hermeneutic review of the documents noted above served to provide local context for the institutional site visits and helped to generate a series of general themes about the response at each site. Those themes were tested in a series of interviews on each campus set up to address the research questions noted and gather additional data about the response. To determine whether the themes identified in the document review matched the perceptions of those who both led and experienced the crisis and response, between twelve and sixteen interviews were conducted at each site. The exact number of interviews was determined by the
size of the group responsible for the response, the number of people who expressed a willingness to be interviewed, the amount of time available at each site, and a determination that data saturation—the point at which no new information could be located, seen or heard—had been achieved.

Interviews were conducted both with the President or Chancellor of the University and others involved in the execution of the response, as well as with other campus stakeholders who witnessed the response, such as students, faculty, staff, and board members. While institutional contacts at each site provided names of likely interview respondents, a combination of snowball sampling and title-based inquiry helped to round out the list of people contacted for interviews. For those not involved with the response, contacts were made using personal networks, Facebook and other social media, and connections at UW-Madison who had colleagues at the selected sites.

With few exceptions, all interviews were conducted on-site and in person, during site visits made to the three campuses during the months of September and October 2013. In both the Michigan State University and Ohio State cases, some interviews were conducted by telephone after the campus site visit, either because the respondents were unavailable during the visit, or because data saturation had not yet been met. Most of the interviews took place in the offices of the respondents, but in a few cases, meetings were set up in common spaces on the campus. The interviews were semi-structured in nature; guided by the research questions, but fluid enough to allow for the emergence of new ideas and themes. An interview protocol was designed for each interview to aid in shepherding the discussion, but it
was not shared with respondents in advance of the meetings. Each interview lasted between 20 and 90 minutes.

The interview questions for the institutional leaders focused on uncovering how presidents lead during times of crisis within the culture, social and political contexts of their institutions, and the ways in which their leadership helped guide the campus through the crisis and served to create meaning for other institutional stakeholders. The initial question posed to the institutional leaders was about what happened specifically and how they led during that time. Subsequent questions explored their first reactions, who, if anyone they engaged during the response, and the ways they managed meaning through their actions and communications during the response. Efforts were made to ascertain whether presidents charted out a plan for action or whether they incrementally responded, and the protocol in each case was framed around the themes generated in the initial document review. Specific questions were also asked about what communications were generated as part of the crisis response, and in what ways leaders used press activities or communications tools for the benefit of their institutional stakeholders.

Questions directed at interviewees who were not the president were structured around the role they played as either members of the response group or as witnesses elsewhere on campus. The protocols were tailored to ascertain how the leadership of the president, including his or her words and actions, were perceived and interpreted, and the extent to which the leader’s framing was understood and reflected in action. For those involved in the crisis response, questions focused on how leaders used teams, the roles team members played, and the extent to which
respondents’ perceptions of the leaders changed as a result of their crisis leadership. For those on the outside of the response, questions were tailored more specifically to examine how the crisis was portrayed by the president, and to what extent the president’s framing of the circumstances was understood and shared by others. Like those on the inside, respondents in this group were also asked whether their perceptions of the president changed as a result of his or her leadership during this crisis.

All interviewees signed informed consent forms detailing the parameters of the research and giving them the opportunity to either disclose their name or participate anonymously. While several participants chose to use their names, the author ultimately made the decision to use generic identifiers for most participants such as “faculty member”, “board member” and “student worker.” This decision was made after being on each of the three campuses and recognizing the continued sensitivity around the matters raised in these cases. The author determined that anonymity would best protect the employees still working at these institutions.

**Coding, Validation and Reliability**

To ensure accuracy of understanding, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using an outside, confidential transcription service. Data was coded in tabular form using the HyperResearch qualitative data analysis program. The coding activity was guided primarily by the research questions, and was conducted using a code map created from the literature discussed in chapter two and themes that surfaced as result of the interviews and document review. Interview transcripts and documents were analyzed for quotes, reports of
individual actions or behaviors, and themes or concepts that showed how leaders used language and symbols to make meaning for others during the response. The absence of leaders or action was also noted, as particularly during times of uncertainty and ambiguity, meaning can be derived from, and perceptions can be influenced by, the absence of information or input. Coding was also used to track the ways in which others in the community came to understand the circumstances of the crisis and the response. The resultant process of connecting individual actions and behaviors to specific perceptions about the crisis response and its larger social construction are at the core of the findings, ultimately providing a better understanding of to what extent, and in what ways meaning is managed during presidential response and how such meaning making impacts the institution and its varied stakeholders.

**Limitations of the Study**

The size of the study and its qualitative nature mean that the findings of this research are not generalizable; every effort was made, however, to ensure the credibility and dependability of the data. Careful documentation at each phase of data collection and analysis was employed and follow-up contacts were made to confirm accuracy of quotes and themes identified in the content analysis of documents and interviews. Triangulation, described by Creswell (2007) as “corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective,” was accomplished both through multiple interviews and comparisons to findings in the document review.
Several additional factors represent limitations to the study. The author’s experiences as Chief of Staff to the Chancellor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and as Executive Director of the Alumni Association at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, bias somewhat her understanding of how crises are approached and managed at public campuses. In these roles, she has been a part of the institutional responses to crises under three different presidential leaders, and has witnessed both leaders’ efforts to make sense of crisis events and their actions and behaviors aimed at resolution. These experiences proved helpful in the inquiry process, though it is noted that concerted efforts were also made to ensure that interviews were listened to carefully and documents were reviewed purposefully, and with intention, so that the findings more closely represent what actually happened, and not what the author wanted to hear or what was most like her own experience.

Related to this point is the fact that people and their memories are biased, which means that they may have only remembered some things, or gave greater or lesser weight to others. Interviewing to the point of data saturation was one method employed to try to diminish this type of participant bias limitation, though the limitation could not fully be eliminated from the study.

One challenge associated with the documents reviewed for the study is that they were not, when they were written, intended for research purposes, but rather were part of events at the time and were to be used for other purposes. While some documents reflected simple reporting, others were intended to shift focus, guide sensemaking, or to convince people or groups of a certain reality. The author
worked to recognize the intended purpose of the documents when considering their utility and meaning to the study, though that process was admittedly very subjective.

Finally, there were inherent limitations at each of the sites. At Michigan State University for example, both the age of the crisis and the fact that the university had once before embarked on a mass vaccination effort limited interview participants' ability to recall details. The crisis examined as part of this study happened in 1999. In 1997, the university vaccinated nearly 17,000 students after one student died of meningococcal meningitis and another fell ill. The process used during that response was very similar to the one employed in 1999, and several of the key players participated in both efforts. This fact is important, particularly because several of those interviewed had difficulty distinguishing between the two events. While every effort possible was made to ensure the accuracy of the findings, there is some risk that the details recounted include some elements of the 1997 response.

In addition, several of the documents associated with the crisis were no longer available, having been discarded after the institution’s seven year record retention threshold had been met. The university archives was able to provide copies of several newspaper clippings and some university documents, but the files were not complete. Likewise, the online archives of the student newspaper, The State News, dated back only as far as 2001, so while some copies of articles were available through the institutional archives, there was no access to comments or means to gain a broader sense of the student response—a task that was already complicated by the fact that the crisis pre-dated social media sites like Facebook.
(2004) and Twitter (2006), where students might typically post their feelings or perspectives about institutional crises.

At the University of Nebraska, the limitations presented themselves in the identification of interview respondents. The university provided the author with a list of names of prospective respondents to contact, at the suggestion of Chancellor Perlman. While those on the list who had been part of the small leadership team charged with drafting the institutional response to the AAU were more than eager to participate, several faculty on the list questioned both whether this incident constituted a crisis, and whether they could be of any assistance to the study. Such dissonance about when a crisis is a crisis, and to whom, made it enormously difficult to secure interview respondents, as did the fact that much of the crisis response took place behind closed doors and not in the public domain. While ultimately, the faculty perspective is seemingly well-documented, the students of UNL are underrepresented in the data, as are non-academic staff—as those contacted either did not know of the crisis or were unwilling to discuss it, believing they knew too little.

The crisis at the Ohio State University, much like at UNL, was more recent, so institutional memories were fresher. The identification of contacts was far easier than it was either at MSU or UNL, but because the topic is still sensitive, and President Gordon Gee is still widely regarded as an institutional hero, larger numbers of respondents wanted to protect their identities or to talk off the record. Every effort possible has been made to protect informants, and to honor their
requests, although the findings documented do therefore present some holes or contradictions.

In addition, document retrieval, particularly of correspondence sent to and from the Office of the President was very difficult at this site. The institution did provide a small sampling of correspondence, but did not, despite several reminders, provide the larger stack of promised materials. The fact that the entire communications staff has been replaced since the crisis occurred made correspondence with the University Communications office difficult, and required that all requests be funneled through the Office of the President. Regular communication with that office then ended with Gordon Gee’s departure from the university in December 2013.

Finally, it should be noted that while efforts were made to triangulate the data collected as part of this study, the findings represent only the perspective of a small fraction of people who live, work, and study on these campuses. Interviews with campus stakeholders and review of documents helped tell a story at each site; there is little doubt, however, that the story could be expanded upon with more data, and with more time, to reflect the perspectives of larger numbers of people. Likewise, the perspectives of external stakeholders such as the general public and the media are not reflected in the findings, but could, if included, provide additional perspective about how presidential actions and behaviors are understood and perceived externally, and the extent to which those perceptions guide the understanding of those on campus.
Chapter Four: Case Studies

The findings of the three cases in the study follow. They are presented in alphabetical order by state, and formatted to include a short introduction of what took place on each campus, a brief institutional profile, a biographical sketch of each institutional president or chancellor, and the detailed facts of the case as ascertained through the review of documents and interviews with both those who were responsible for the crisis response and those stakeholders who witnessed it from elsewhere on campus. Analyses follow in the next chapter.

Michigan State University

Crisis Overview

In October of 1999, Adam Busuttil, then a student and member of the Michigan State University Marching Band, collapsed in his shower. After being discovered face-down, his limbs already deep purple in color, he was admitted to Sparrow hospital in East Lansing, and diagnosed with bacterial meningococcal septicemia—a diffuse blood infection caused by the organism nisseria meningiditis, the same one that causes bacterial meningitis in this age group. Both the meningitis form and the septicemia form are deadly, if not treated promptly. Since 1995, Michigan State University had suffered through three meningitis episodes of meningitis or septicemia caused by this bacterium, and in 1997, after a student died from the disease, the campus initiated a large-scale vaccination effort in response.

Upon learning of Busuttil’s diagnosis, President Peter McPherson assembled his leadership team in his conference room. They examined the epidemiology of this
strain of meningitis, sought counsel from the Centers for Disease Control and the county health departments, and began to lay out several scenarios for response. What follows is a description of how McPherson and his leadership team made the decision to mass-vaccinate 19,000 students in response to Busuttil’s diagnosis—and how others on campus understood their actions and communications on the matter. This account of the $1 million effort is the result of interviews with McPherson and others involved in the response, as well as faculty, staff and students who were on campus at the time. Documents acquired from the university archives and media accounts of the event also aided in assembling the story, which begins with a description of the campus today and an introduction to McPherson as a leader.

**Institutional Profile**

Michigan State University (MSU) was founded in 1855, and shortly thereafter, was established as a land grant institution. Today, this large, public, research university located in East Lansing, Michigan enrolls nearly 50,000 students in more than 200 undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree programs. Courses are offered at seventeen colleges on the campus, and the university collectively employs more than 11,500 faculty and staff.

The campus, set just three miles from the state capitol and fewer than 90 minutes from Detroit and Ann Arbor, attracts students from each of Michigan’s 83 counties, all 50 United States, and more than 130 countries. It has a significant physical plant as well. 532 buildings rest along the Red Cedar River, which flows through the 5,400 acre campus; 103 of those are academic buildings. Home to one of the nation’s largest single-campus residence hall systems in the country, MSU owns
27 halls and two apartment villages. More than 16,000 Michigan State students live in campus-owned housing each year.

Very much a college town, nearly two thirds of East Lansing’s population is between the ages of 15-24. The town and the campus are deeply interconnected, and together support a vibrant arts and social scene and display great enthusiasm for the University’s athletic teams. Michigan State University is a member of the Big Ten athletic conference and fields 25 teams in intercollegiate, varsity competition. It also boasts one of the largest intermural sports programs in the country.

The campus is led by an institutional president and governed by an eight-member board of trustees. Trustees at MSU as well as Wayne State and the University of Michigan are elected in general state-wide elections. Elections are staggered every two years, and members serve eight-year terms. Like other large public universities of its size, Michigan State University also has active and engaged faculty and academic staff governance.

**President Peter McPherson**

In 1999, when the crisis outlined below took place, the enrollment on the MSU campus was slightly less than it is today, as was the size of the physical plant, though each was still quite considerable. Peter McPherson was the University’s president, and Lou Anna Simon, who now serves as president, was the provost. McPherson joined the University in 1993, having previously served as the executive vice president at Bank of America. He grew up on a farm near Grand Rapids, Michigan and received his undergraduate degree from Michigan State University. Following service in the Peace Corps, McPherson earned both an MBA and a law
degree, and began what would prove to be a long career in public service. He served in the administrations of Presidents Ford and Reagan, and went on to head USAID from 1981-1987. He was later appointed Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Treasury Department before joining Bank of America. McPherson served as Michigan State University’s leader until his retirement in 2004.

McPherson’s tenure at MSU was marked by several significant accomplishments. He was celebrated in the Michigan State legislature for negotiating a deal that would keep tuition at the rate of inflation for the bulk of his tenure, and he initiated a more comprehensive study abroad program that has since become one of the largest among U.S. public universities. When McPherson arrived, the board tasked him with managing difficult budgets and growing the institutional endowments—two jobs he did remarkably well. He was not, however, known as a particularly outgoing President, but rather had a reputation for being the guy in the corner crunching numbers and forcefully declining funding requests. Described by one senior administrative leader as a “frugal Scot, you know, so far as one is allowed to engage in any kind of ethnic characterization,” McPherson was well known for keeping tight reigns on the budget. Except when it came to matters of health and safety. In those instances, one leader said, “as tight as Peter was on some things, he was unwilling to risk anyone’s life or safety. That was when cost went mostly out the window. You know, maybe had some cap he wouldn’t go beyond, but I never discovered what it was.”

Several people who served on his team described McPherson as a dedicated leader who profoundly believed that almost all problems would yield to hard work.
He was a bit of an old school leader who worked the phone at all hours of the day and night, calling on members of his team, and anyone else he believed could be of assistance. He constantly sought the advice of the campus’ experts, and was known to call faculty he didn’t know, but whom he had heard about, to ask about election results or their perceptions of events happening around the globe. His Rolodex of contacts was deep and rich, borne out of curiosity and managed by phone and in person over the years. It included not just people on his own campus, but politicians, state and local media, agency heads, and friends and colleagues from his previous work.

When McPherson encountered a matter that required the help of others, he would hold court in his conference room, bringing together members of his team, along with anyone else he deemed important, to help him think through the issues. “Peter’s goal in life was to solve problems, and he didn’t think there was any problem he couldn’t solve if he had the right people and the right data,” said one of his senior team members. Another, noting how McPherson’s idealism during these times was contagious, said, “It’s a wonderful trait for a leader; its very charming. It’s incredibly time consuming and exhausting, but it is very charming. Because it makes you believe that if you just work hard enough and think hard enough, you will indeed be able to solve these problems.”

Those closest to McPherson described him as a prudent, thoughtful man who was very educable, and who used his team to help him double-check his own thinking and identify issues he hadn’t yet considered or didn’t have time to imagine. While his team regularly included Legal Counsel Bob Noto and the Vice President for
University Relations Terry Denbow, McPherson worked most closely with Provost Lou Anna Simon and the Vice President for Finance and Operations Fred Poston, who both noted how he would call them down to his office three or four times a day for whatever issue was at hand. Collectively, they had a great deal of experience working with one another. In fact, when asked about the group dynamics, Poston said, “It is like administering with your sister. I just know how she’s going to react, and she knows how I do. And so does he. And it’s not friendship I’m talking about...it’s being comfortable operating with somebody.” The provost agreed, saying, “Fred was willing to challenge power. Peter respected Fred a lot. They weren’t old buddies. These were people that, when the smoke lifted, were people who respected one another. And one another’s expertise.”

McPherson had a bit of a reputation as a micro-manager—as someone who might give several people the same task—but the senior team, having figured him out and learned how to work with one another, often manipulated him right back. This should not be construed as a negative. Without exception, those on his team spoke about him with deep respect, noting his ability to bring together strong teams, leverage the expertise in the room, listen, and challenge conventional thinking. Such respect, while seemingly hard earned, appeared mutual; while McPherson claimed his role in managing both the institution and this crisis, he spoke of those on his team much as you might expect a coach to talk to his players—with admiration for their skills, gratitude for the different roles they played on the team, and a bit of humility over the impact he might have had in their growth.
McPherson’s team also noted his willingness to make decisions, even in difficult circumstances. “Peter was not paralyzed by indecision,” one senior member of the leadership team said, and several posited that when he made a decision, he was prepared to personally accept the consequences, should there be any. This trait was viewed as a positive, and part and parcel to his management style.

Beyond the members of his immediate leadership team, the perceptions of McPherson’s leadership style and success were a bit more varied. Most of those interviewed agreed that McPherson had had a successful tenure as President at Michigan State University, but several noted his focus on the financial well-being of the institution as perhaps limiting his ability to see or understand the human elements of the campus. One campus middle-manager expressed concern that McPherson’s focus was largely on “privatizing” the University, or outsourcing campus functions, and suggested McPherson made a lot of assumptions about how outside entities could supplant or supplement the work previously done by campus employees. McPherson’s reputation as a cigar-chewing, numbers-crunching bureaucrat was widespread, and while many conceded his success, they also noted his relative social awkwardness. One staffer said, “President McPherson did not have the best reputation amongst staff because he was very…I’m sure he was joking at times, but his jokes would be very, very misconstrued and not appropriate at all to tell. And then of course we all would say, ‘did you hear what the President said?’” Another academic staff member acknowledged that McPherson was “not known as a people guy, but he was smart enough to know that…because he surrounded himself with people who excelled in people skills.” She went on to say that he had not been
brought to MSU for his people skills, but had proven good at what he was hired to do.

There is little doubt that these perceptions of President McPherson are informed by the experience MSU staff have with their current President, Lou Anna Simon. Simon has spent her entire academic career on the MSU campus, and is widely known to be an outgoing, visible, engaged institutional citizen and leader. Several of those interviewed made comparisons between the two when describing McPherson.

**Crisis in East Lansing: How a Single Case of Meningitis Inspired Action**

On October 8, 1999, on the Friday night before the big rivalry game between Michigan State University and the University of Michigan, Adam Busuttil felt a cold coming on and went to bed early. Busuttil, a sophomore, was a member of the Michigan State University marching band, and was to perform the following day as part of the percussion section.

When Busuttil failed to show up for rehearsal, or for the game, his bandmates grew worried and sought help. Membership in the marching band was a big deal, and there was enormous peer pressure to show up on time and to be prepared. Busuttil was well-known for doing both, and his absence was concerning. Later that day, Busuttil was discovered face down, unconscious in his shower, his appendages bright purple in color. He was rushed to Sparrow Hospital in East Lansing, and shortly thereafter diagnosed with bacterial meningococcal septicemia.

Meningitis is an inflammation of the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord, and can be caused by viral, bacterial, or fungal infections. Meningitis is
more prevalent in high-density shared spaces, such as military barracks and campus residence halls, and symptoms mirror those of common influenza, making it difficult to diagnose early. Bacterial meningitis, if not treated promptly and properly, is deadly, and the death rate among those affected is nearly 25%. Another common outcome of meningococcal infection is septicemia, or blood infection. Septicemia is the more serious of the two manifestations of the bacteria, as it causes breakdown of the blood vessels and results in bleeding into the skin and organs. This form of infection, which often accompanies meningitis, is not often discussed, but is even more deadly. Busuttil was afflicted with both septicemia and bacterial meningitis, though for purposes of ease, the disease will be characterized in this paper only as meningitis.

Between the years of 1995 and 1999, there had been three known episodes of either one or two students contracting either meningitis or septicemia or both, on the MSU campus. In that same time frame, at least three students died after contracting the illness. In 1997, the campus engaged in a mass vaccination effort after one student died as a result of bacterial meningitis, and another fell ill.

In this case, it is not clear who learned first of the diagnosis, but within hours of Busuttil’s admittance at Sparrow, President McPherson had activated his senior leadership team. Beth Alexander, the University Physician, was also called into action, and worked with Busuttil’s physicians to confirm the diagnosis and to try to understand the infection’s origins. Meningitis is contagious, though presents in viral or bacterial form, and only bacterial meningitis is responsive to vaccination. At the time of the incident, vaccination was only effective against three of the five possible
strains; today, in 2014, a vaccine is being tested in the UK that protects against all five strains.

As Dr. Alexander pursued confirmation of the diagnosis, President McPherson visited Sparrow Hospital. He arrived to find Busuttil in an induced coma, and his parents standing vigil at his side. Busuttil’s condition had worsened, and his family feared the worst. President McPherson, eager to stop any chance of the disease spreading, sought permission to release Busuttil’s name publicly, making the argument that doing so would allow the University to help those who might be at risk. His family was reluctant at first, fearing for Busuttil’s well-being, but eventually conceded.

Back on campus, McPherson gathered his team, in his usual manner. Sequestered in a conference room, he, Provost Simon, General Counsel Bob Noto and Vice President for Finance and Operations Fred Poston weighed their options. They quickly realized the magnitude of what they were facing, and invited University Physician Beth Alexander and Vice President for University Relations Terry Denbow to join them. The tenor in the room was described as tense, but heartening, for all had been there before, and all knew how well McPherson managed in crisis. The members of the group assumed their usual roles on the team, which, for many, expanded beyond their titles. Denbow, for example, was the lead communications administrator in the group, but neither President McPherson nor others on the team saw him only as a mouthpiece for decisions others would make. He was used also as a strategist and a trainer, and the entire team relied on him for those contributions. Noto offered legal advice, but also served a critical role in
helping McPherson anticipate questions, hurdles, and worst-case scenarios. While Alexander was not a regular with the group, she had worked with McPherson before and was the content expert on this topic. He and the others described her as thoughtful and deliberate, and they trusted her completely.

Shortly after the group gathered, Alexander provided an update about Busuttil’s case and explained the epidemiology of the disease. The risk of there being more cases was considerable, because Busuttil was both a residence hall resident and a member of the marching band, but none had yet been reported. McPherson, concerned about the spread, sought the advice of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). While senior officials there shared McPherson’s worry, they cautioned against mass vaccination, saying it was a costly and unsustainable practice unwarranted outside the military. McPherson, however, was convinced something had to be done, and wondered aloud whether mass vaccination could both decrease the risk of spread and reduce the likelihood that students would leave campus to avoid growing ill. Neither the prospect of students dying or going home was desirable, and McPherson believed it was important that he do what he could to protect his community.

The group engaged in strong debate, considering their options. Several members argued against any plan that involved mass vaccination. Alexander pointed to the fact that the CDC, the public health officers of both the county and the state, and most of the medical community thought mass vaccination was unnecessary and urged an alternate plan. Noto questioned whether the University might be over-medicating a population unnecessarily. He also pointed out that
Reye's syndrome was a known complication of the vaccine, and brought with it risks of paralysis and death. While Noto did not personally believe the risk of Reye's syndrome or the associated liability to be sufficient reasons to avoid the option of vaccination, he argued the point to play his assumed role on the team.

McPherson heard out the arguments of the group and engaged in the debate, but ultimately felt strongly that it was important to demonstrate to the campus community that there was somebody in charge and that the campus would directly address the issue. One member described McPherson's transition from that of listener to leader in that situation, saying,

We ultimately came down, and I don't think it was a situation where anybody was stomping around the table saying, 'This is over my strong dissent' or anything. But it was a situation where you went, 'What matters?' And at the end of the day, I think Peter in particular, and I hope I'm not putting words in his mouth that he would feel uncomfortable with, but he felt very strongly that the panic risk, and the risk of the community feeling that they had to leave, and the impending disruption that would cause, and the concerns about how do you bring that back and what do you do about classes, were real risks.

Another team member, summarizing the decision to vaccinate, said, "I mean there is this sense in which vaccinations were an insurance policy against things spinning out of control. And it was an argument that MSU had done everything it could do."

Ultimately, this was one of those times when there was a premium for being active, and McPherson feared that being passive would create a panic and could cause he and his team to look weak, out of control or altogether indifferent. He made the decision to vaccinate those on campus who were deemed to be at risk—though at this point, it was unknown just how big that group really was. McPherson himself noted that the while the decision could be perceived to be about making himself or
his team look good, it was ultimately about doing what was right for MSU. He explained, saying,

Well, after the first death in 1995, as a leader, you begin to watch and worry about it. And gather information. And find out what the data is around the country. What the history was. Who had done what. You know, those were just information to pull together. But then it was clear. It was really quite clear. We knew the facts pretty well, because they could tell us what kind of meningitis this was. And after talking to the CDC, it was pretty clear to me that we had to do something. I would say this was one of the easier decisions I made...I think the harder decision is waiting. If you said, ‘let’s wait until someone else dies, let’s wait.’ I mean...how do you explain that?

Others on his team provided context for Peter’s insistence on vaccinating. One said, “Peter, I think for a variety of reasons, felt compelled to do everything possible so that we didn’t have another case on the tail of the first case. And there was a lot...given ’95, ’97 and ’99, there was a lot of sort of recent memory and anxiety that drove the ‘we’ve got to do something.’” One of his lieutenants, acknowledging how others might have been inclined to perceive Peter’s actions, was more direct, saying,

There may have been some belief that Peter was concerned about what the Trustees would think, or that he’d be concerned about his credibility as a leader. Peter recognized that he couldn’t control the meningitis, but he could control the perception that he was doing something about it. He had a sense of ‘if I don’t act, I am weak,’ and Peter was not a guy who was ever going to want to look weak.

In the end, all of those on team came to understand his reasoning, and even if they personally disagreed with the decision, were on board to enact it.

**Determining the Scope of the Response**

Once McPherson had made the decision to vaccinate, the group moved into actionable response mode, setting out to determine just who would be vaccinated
and using what guidelines or parameters. Dr. Alexander and a team of more than six physicians and nurses had initiated the arduous process of cross tabulating the student records database with files on course enrollments and residence hall occupations immediately upon learning of Busuttil’s diagnosis. They began what would prove to be two full days of poring over records identifying students who were perceived to be at risk because they had been in class with Busuttil, or lived in the same residence hall. Their intention was to build a model that could help them sort and prioritize those who needed vaccination, though as they reached out to students by telephone, it became apparent to them that the web of contact Busuttil had as a band member and residence hall resident was vast, and that panic was beginning to set in among students who were concerned that they might have contracted the infection. When McPherson learned of the panic, according to several team members, he grew concerned and the group debated the merits of changing the plan from one of vaccinating some students to one of providing the opportunity to be vaccinated to all. One response team member, describing how the group got to that point, said,

So we started, ‘You need to vaccinate the band,’ and then you say, ‘you need to vaccinate the floor,’ then ‘what do you do about his classes?’ And all of a sudden, you get yourself into a position where almost vaccinating everybody or giving everybody the opportunity to be vaccinated was a better way of controlling panic than doing a rational sort of risk model.

McPherson was quickly convinced, and at the advice of his team, made the decision to make the vaccine available to anyone on campus who wanted it, at no cost. While Poston remembers McPherson asking for cost estimates for a larger scale mass-vaccination, he said McPherson did so only after he’d made the decision.
According to Poston, McPherson believed that it was a cost the university had a responsibility, in this instance, to bear. It is noted that the Board of Trustees were not involved in making the decision, though McPherson did alert them to his decision to provide vaccinations on campus. The board did not vote on or formally approve of the action, though McPherson reports that they shared his concerns and were supportive of his actions.

**Managing the Spread of the Disease—and the Spread of Panic**

Over the next 24 hours and as classes resumed on Monday, word began to spread about Busuttil’s case. Panic set in, largely among members of the band and those in the residence hall where Busuttil lived. In the absence of different information, students and others on campus began to create their own stories about what was happening and what the risks were. Busuttil later recounted a story that had been relayed to him by a fellow bandmate, who, just after the announcement of the case, was wearing his band jacket while walking toward the music building. As he approached a large group of students, they crossed the street, saying as they did so that they didn’t want to get sick. Because this crisis happened in 1999, long before the advent of social media, the spread of the panic was far slower than it might be today, but so too were efforts to ensure accurate information got out to the MSU community.

To address the growing panic, the University initially employed several strategies, relying on MSU’s long-standing practice of having content experts do much of the informing rather than employing only campus administrative leaders. McPherson himself directed the messaging and later participated in several media
interviews, but relied on others on his team to more fully spread news about the disease and the plan. For example, an emergency meeting of the marching band was called and MSU University Physician Beth Alexander addressed the group. Director of Bands John Madden said her visit went a long way toward easing the concerns and calming the fears of the group, a tight-knit community who feared the worst for Busuttil. He said, “Oh, it calmed everybody way down...There was, you know, there was that ‘you’re all safe and we assure you and we want you to take this vaccination but you know, you probably don’t need it, but let’s be on the safe side of this’...And she was just a very calming force.” He went on to explain that she was confident and calm, and that the group implicitly trusted her. He said, “Beth Alexander was amazing in that setting. She was an educator, and she was a campus citizen. She wasn’t somebody from the, you know the Ingham County Health Department that had to come in and say here’s what you’re doing.” During the meeting, Dr. Alexander detailed the facts about bacterial meningococcal meningitis, explained how it is transmitted to others, and invited all members of the band to participate in the vaccination effort. She answered questions, warned against sharing mouthpieces and eating utensils, and encouraged hand washing and good personal hygiene habits. She also offered herself up as a contact should the students have additional concerns. Several band members said they felt relieved after that meeting.

In addition, McPherson’s team drafted and asked the student and local media to post a written set of frequently asked questions and to publicize a telephone number that students, parents, and others in the community could call for further information. The campus set up a phone bank in the student health building, and
staff from the Olin Health Center answered questions. Medical staff provided the basic medical guidance and University Relations offered media training to those working the phones. One of the managers of the team staffing the phones said, “(University Relations) did an excellent job of working with those of us who were answering questions and things like that, to help us understand what needed to go through their office, what we could respond to, sort of what to be aware of—if we got a phone call that seemed a little off to us, like what to do with that.” Staff in the phone bank reported that initially, things felt chaotic, as they worked to figure out how the process would work and what they were being asked to say. Ultimately, however, the group felt that they were well trained and provided a helpful service in a time of need. One staffer noted that McPherson had visited the phone bank during the response to thank the group for all of their volunteer work. She relayed how that gesture made them feel appreciated and, upon seeing a different side of McPherson, served to improve their perceptions about him as a leader.

All of the communications efforts were crafted to meet the campus’ goal of being completely forthcoming and transparent, and to honor the commitment the team had made to one another to share everything they could legally share at any given point. Denbow characterized his own media philosophy, which McPherson had adopted more generally, and used in this case, as:

Every question you ask me has one of three answers. One, I know the answer to that question and it is ‘x’. Two, I know the answer to that question, but I am not allowed to share it with you for the following reasons; or three, I do not know the answer to that question but I will try to find out for you.
The Road to Recovery at MSU began with Mass Vaccination

Fewer than three days after the senior team learned of Busuttil’s diagnosis, the first vaccinations began. The campus set up the vaccination site in the Intramural (IM) Sports building; this venue was chosen in part because this facility had at one time housed the student registration process, so the functional process of moving large numbers of students through the space was known. Additionally, the plans and spacing documents for such movement were still accessible, and several of the personnel who had assisted with registration during those years it was used were still on campus. About how the group settled on this vaccination site and plan, Simon said,

So it’s sort of the old – probably in your psychology course, you talked about sort of dealing with crisis and one of the worst things is sort of functional fixedness, where you only see the tools you have in the form in which you understood them to work, in their predominant fashion. So part of this lesson was we were able to just to get beyond functional fixedness and, you know, and then keep adapting.

The team calculated the number of providers needed to proffer the vaccine, and made estimations of the number of students who might choose to be vaccinated based on the CDC guidelines and their experience having vaccinated a large group in 1997. While they did not know for sure how many students would choose to be vaccines, they planned for thousands. Dr. Alexander worked with the medical school, the county health organization, and the community clinics to find doctors and nurses to assist in the provision of the vaccine, and the senior leadership team made public calls to campus faculty and staff to assist with line management, prep, and logistics. The response was incredible, and several hundred volunteers
prepared the facility, managed the lines, and began the process of vaccinating students. It was explained by several people that such willingness among faculty and staff to help was part of the institutional culture at Michigan State, and that even in less tumultuous times, the people of MSU shared an inclination toward teamwork, as evidenced by the fact that they did so much with so little, regularly sought out and got to know others on campus, and worked collaboratively on so many projects. Several people described this culture as inherent, though noted that institutional leadership had modeled such behaviors for decades or more. The provost, explaining the impact of the volunteers on this crisis response, said,

I think the real source of the absence of complaint was that the teamwork that pulled this enormously difficult task off, I mean, enormously difficult task off, in a way that looked relatively smooth to the people. I mean, there were lines and there’s all that stuff, but it ended up, you know, because of the work of lots of people, the people who kept the gyms clean so we could do this, the people who remembered how to set up the registration process, finding the old tables, finding the signs somewhere. You know, they really literally dug out all that stuff. I mean, those people all pulled together, and in that sense, they just sort of figured that out. We made adjustments at the end, but they really pulled together across lots and lots of units – registrar, physical plant, the health teams, health colleges, you know, ROTC, everybody just pulled together...this place has that capacity. So in this crisis, you know...what you have is something about this place that lets it pull together these disparate sets of people and get them focused.

Members of the marching band were first to get vaccinated. Residence hall residents were invited to participate next, and then all students and campus community members were treated. The lines were long, and while the system was efficient, the process was not altogether fast. The vaccine the campus had been given was not pre-dosed, but rather required that the nurses and doctors draw the medication into a syringe from a larger bottle—and then conduct a quality
assurance measure built into the procedure, which further extended the time it took to proffer a single dose.

The attitude among those in line was largely positive, however. Several students expressed gratitude for the university’s actions, explaining that they were scared, but felt confident McPherson and his team had made the right choice in protecting others from getting sick. They relayed that while they felt healthy, getting vaccinated was the safe thing to do. One student said her mom, who had seen the messaging about the effort on TV, insisted she come. She said that while her mom lived more than an hour away, she knew the vaccine was free and that there was no reason not to get the shot.

One senior staff member, remembering the event, said such comments were common. Describing his first day working the lines, he said, “I mean, I must have swabbed about 10,000 arms as we went through this stuff, but the volunteers would all…it was just assembly lines…and some of the kids were petrified of shots. But if you were swabbing, half of what you were doing is talking a kid into not chickening out and getting this done. You know, everybody forgets, they’re 18- to 20-year-olds, and they don’t have a lot of experience.”

Crisis During the Response—and How It Was Averted

At some point early on, it became apparent that the infrastructure was insufficient, and that MSU did not have enough vaccine to meet the demand. The commercial vendor of the vaccine did not have any more available, and told President McPherson that the only other domestic supplier was the U.S. military, as they routinely vaccinate armed forces personnel. McPherson said, “So we called the
military, but you know...calling the Department of Defense (DOD) is like talking to...it is just so huge and things just don’t move that fast.” Recognizing that the DOD was not likely to respond to his needs directly, McPherson called Carl Levin, the U.S Senator from Michigan, who also happened to be the chair of the defense authorization committee. McPherson had forged a deep relationship with Levin over time, building on the professional contact they had each year when they visited in Washington about the mutual interests of the university and the state of Michigan. He considered Levin a colleague and a friend, and hoped he would be able to help, or, at the very least, know where to find help.

McPherson explained the situation to Levin, and within hours, more vaccine was en route to MSU. “I said Carl, we need it by tonight. And Carl got on the phone and delivered it,” McPherson said. As a result of that call and others he’d made to several faculty on campus with ties to the National Guard, more vaccine showed up on campus—and so too did a shipment of vaccine guns and several personnel from the Great Lakes Naval Station. The guns were instrumental to improving the flow of recipients through the vaccine lines, cutting the time it took to administer the vaccine by more than half, and the military personnel both provided respite to the staff who had been working long hours and served to grow the number of stations from which the campus could proffer the vaccine.

Beyond offering his assistance in making calls, however, McPherson let his staff own the logistical process. Despite his reputation as somewhat of a micro-manager, he generally stayed out of the weeds and recognized that his real strength was in leading the enterprise. He allowed the team the freedom to make
adjustments in real time, and worked hard to ensure they had the resources they needed to complete the task at hand.

When it was all said and done, just over 19,000 students and university personnel were inoculated at a cost of roughly one million dollars to the campus. President McPherson and several senior staff members from the leadership team were seen helping swab students’ arms, managing the traffic flow, and reassuring the community throughout the response. His visibility was noted, both on campus and in the media. John Madden, Director of the University Bands, said about seeing McPherson walk the vaccination site and move boxes in the IM building, “All of a sudden, there is a sympathetic, interactive, more human, more visible approachable figure in this big machine of an institution that revealed itself in a different kind of way.” McPherson did not once raise the issue of cost as a concern, either in public, or among his team. Several respondents noted how this event—and matters of health and safety in general—were the only things in McPherson’s tenure that did not generate a larger discussion about money.

**Communicating the effort**

McPherson credited Vice Chancellor for University Relations Terry Denbow and his team with managing the transmission of information about the response, noting that he checked in regularly with Denbow to understand whether there were pressing concerns and to confirm the accuracy of the messaging. While the campus utilized both email and the internet to communicate with the community, neither were well-embedded at the time, and the University Relations team relied more heavily on newsletters and local media to inform students and others on campus
about the risks associated with this particular strain of meningococcal meningitis and where they might seek more information or get vaccinated. The President did several live media interviews himself, but as they had done early on, the university relied largely on physicians and medical experts to aid in the messaging about the importance of vaccination. This tactic was intentional, as university officials believed that their expertise provided they needed their expertise to appear credible and to earn the trust of the community if the vaccination effort was to be successful. About Beth Alexander speaking to the media in particular, Terry Denbow said,

She was credible because she had knowledge, and knowledge is what it is all about.” He went on to say, ““Sometimes, the President isn’t the expert. Now, if its policy and leadership issues, I want him or her out there. But if it’s explaining the difference between an A and B strain, a viral or bacterial case, I want Beth Alexander.

By and large, this strategic tactic worked. Several interview respondents noted that the local East Lansing media was their primary source of information, but suggested they felt most confidence in the direct commentary from MSU personnel who were interviewed or quoted. Several students who got vaccinated said they trusted the information coming out of the campus as well, and said they relied primarily on local television, the institutional email and the stories in MSU’s student newspaper, The State News. All ran several stories about meningitis and the mass vaccination effort, and each cited campus physicians and medical experts.

**The Return to Normalcy**

By all accounts, the effort was a success. No more cases were identified, and Adam Busuttil, the student whose illness triggered the response, slowly responded
to treatment at Sparrow Hospital. His recovery was buoyed, he said, by regular visits from Director of Bands John Madden and other members of the marching band. The group created a binder of emails from band members that his family would read to him as he lay in the hospital. Further, Terry Denbow and other members of the MSU team helped ensure he and his family were protected from the media, even going so far as to negotiate separate access into and out of the hospital. As a result of the infection, Busuttil lost parts of several fingers and toes, but by late fall, was back on campus. He traveled with the marching band to the Citrus Bowl in Florida and played as part of the halftime entertainment. He later became an advocate for meningitis awareness and vaccination more broadly, engaging both with the campus and the Meningitis Foundation of America. He also participated in a PBS Nova special on the topic of meningitis. Today, he is a music teacher outside of Detroit, and still believes the University handled the matter about as well as it could have.

**Perceptions of Leadership and Action**

Others on campus agreed that the university had handled the situation well. Beyond those students cited in the student newspapers as being grateful and scared, members of the marching band expressed a real appreciation for all the attention they’d been given and the efforts McPherson’s team made to ensure that they were kept informed. Students and staff alike remarked about the university’s efforts to be transparent, with one student noting, “They got the most information, the best information they could out as fast as possible for people.” A longtime faculty member on campus explained that such efforts were typical of this administration,
in part because of open laws requiring them to be transparent about everything. He said that McPherson and his team recognized the risks inherent in delaying the dissemination of information, and “I think because of leadership, there was an intentional effort of trying to be viewed as ‘we’re transparent on the things that we do. We’re not trying to withhold information; we want to make information more public.’”

Several faculty and staff, noting that the costs associated with this response were substantial, expressed relief and satisfaction with the actions and messaging that confirmed that the health and well-being of the campus community was paramount—and that McPherson, known for his frugalness, did not cut corners on matters of safety. They posited that his willingness to spend those resources for the well-being of the community suggested a recognition that people preceded all else on the hierarchy of assets at MSU. While McPherson had initiated several other programs during his tenure that could arguably suggest the same understanding, respondents implied that his actions in crisis exposed his true colors, and his institutional commitment, in new ways. One respondent, who believed that in general, McPherson was too focused on the bottom line, conceded that he had handled this situation remarkably well and had finally proven, with real action, that some things are more important than money. Expressing some relief, he remarked, “It sometimes takes a crisis to see what the university’s call to arms is.”

McPherson’s senior team pointed to the president’s leadership as a major factor in their ability to quickly understand the context of the circumstances, assess the risks and opportunities presented by the crisis, and set a course of action that
could be implemented in fewer than 48 hours. He had convened a team which he knew well, and with members who both knew each other and how to work with one another. They recognized their individual roles, and respected the fact that McPherson was the ultimate decision maker. While without exception, members of the group credited McPherson with the successful implementation of this response, several remarked that the work and the understanding of the team should not be discredited. About this topic, the provost said,

We were very fortunate to have people who had, at a minimum, bifocals, in that they were able to see the short-term details and then move back to the longer term, and then back and forth, if not trifocals in terms of how this turned out. And sometimes, when you put people around the table, they just sort of represent their narrow view and aren’t prepared to see the bigger picture, and they cannot sort of flip back and forth between larger, institutional strategies and tactics like where you put the table.

Further, the group reiterated that one of McPherson’s biggest contributions to this crisis—and any other he faced—was his willingness to make a decision. He was not inclined to risk seeming passive or to send signals to his team or the campus that he was not on top of and in control of the situation, and this allowed the university to avoid mass panic. The team pointed to McPherson’s capacity to step back and allow them all space to do their jobs when the implementation began, and to recognize that he could best contribute by further working the contacts he had that would bring resources to the effort. Terry Denbow noted that part of the reason the messaging got distributed as quickly and efficiently as it did was because of McPherson’s contacts with campus and local media personnel. He explained that relationships forged with these outlets over time enabled the University to be intentional with its messaging in a more straightforward manner when crisis struck,
in a way that would not have been possible had they not previously established trust with one another.

Likewise, McPherson, while not unwilling to take credit personally, concedes that the effort benefited substantially from significant contributions of people like Senator Levin and the head of the local National Guard battalion. He directly attributed the Senator’s willingness to help to the longstanding relationship they had built in quieter times. Like others from both his team and elsewhere on campus, he also pointed to the organizational culture of the institution and the general willingness of people at MSU to help. The faculty and staff contributions of time and resources in this event were significant, and McPherson recognized how differently the effort could have looked had he not been able to count on their help. Reflecting on their contributions, he smiled broadly, saying, “They are a special group; it is a special place.”

**Avoiding Another Crisis—Efforts at Mitigation**

Having borne the enormous human and financial costs associated with mass vaccination not just this time, but also in 1997, the campus leadership recognized after this crisis that the mass vaccination strategy was not a sustainable one. Meningitis is not fully preventable, and the demographics and housing options of a college campus like Michigan State increased the likelihood of its return. Therefore, with Adam Busuttil’s help, Beth Alexander and her team instituted a larger campaign for vaccination awareness, helping students and their families understand the role vaccines play in disease prevention, not just for meningitis, but also for other contagions such as varicella (chickenpox) and measles/mumps/rubella
(MMR). They created videos and information pieces, which ultimately led to a database system into which students had to report their vaccine history or status. The system did not require that students be vaccinated, but rather only that they report, and to ensure compliance, the University limited access to enrollment tools until the reporting was completed.

Later, that database was integrated with the general student record database, the student housing database, and the course scheduling system, allowing Dr. Alexander and her team to identify, in the event of any such infection, those students at risk in a matter of hours. The system, which could produce reports with just a few key strokes, eliminated the need for nurses, physicians and other highly trained (and paid) administrators to comb the records by hand over what would often be several days. About the change, Alexander said, “So we changed the direction of policy from reactive, panic, and very expensive mass vaccination to prevention and education. I’m really proud of that as one of the things this institution did.” And it appears to have worked. Michigan State realized additional cases of meningococcal meningitis in the years following this incident, but now, the healthcare needs of the students there get taken care of more quickly and no one would classify these events as crises. Further, as more MSU students are arriving on campus with the vaccine or getting it upon arrival, the number of cases has dramatically dropped. “While the national prevalence of the disease in this age population has stayed about the same, our incidence, our prevalence, because of what we did, has gone significantly down,” said Alexander.
In addition, the University made efforts to improve the training of emergency room personnel at the local hospitals, ultimately to decrease the numbers of misdiagnoses, and instituted some written guidelines about who was to do what in the event of another outbreak or incident—which likely contributed to the decreased prevalence as well.
The University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Crisis Overview

In the fall of 2010, the Association of American Universities (AAU) informed Harvey Perlman, Chancellor of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln of a pending review concerning the institution’s continued membership in the organization. AAU is an invitation-only organization of the nation’s most prominent 64 research universities. The organization’s website boasts “Membership in AAU is based on the high quality of programs of academic research and scholarship and undergraduate, graduate, and professional education in a number of fields, as well as general recognition that a university is outstanding by reason of the excellence of its research and education programs.”

Gaining membership is an elusive goal for presidents of many research universities outside this select group, in part because of the requirements. Also, very few universities leave the group after being invited to join. In fact, in the last several decades, fewer than five institutions have walked away from this exclusive club. Further, the association’s leadership seems intent on keeping the size of the membership relatively constant, so the competition to belong is stiff. Along with membership comes the prestige associated with being affiliated with universities such as Stanford, Harvard, Wisconsin, Michigan State and Michigan. UNL had been a member of the AAU since 1909, and had weathered a similar inquiry about its qualifications in the late 1990’s. What follows is a description of how Perlman and his leadership team responded to the review and how others on campus understood their actions and communications about the matter. This account of Nebraska’s
ultimate exit from the AAU is the result of interviews with Perlman and others involved in the response as well as faculty and staff members on campus who learned of the matter only after it was nearly complete. Documents and correspondence acquired from the campus and the media also aided in assembling the story, which begins with descriptions of the campus today, Perlman as a leader, and the institutional culture of the campus.

**Institutional Profile**

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) was chartered as Nebraska’s only land grant university in 1869, and today is a large, public, comprehensive research university enrolling just over 25,000 students annually in undergraduate, graduate and professional degree programs. Courses are offered in eight different colleges of the university, and on two campuses located in the heart of the state’s capitol city.

Nearly three quarters of UNL students are from the state of Nebraska, but the campus also draws students from the remaining 49 states and 114 foreign countries. Forty percent of UNL students live in on-campus housing located on the city and east campuses. Both campuses have significant physical plants, and collectively span nearly 2,900 acres. In January of 2010, the campus also acquired 250 acres of property on the north end of town that has been designated for an $800 million Innovation Campus—a campus designed to attract private-sector research partners. The much-touted project garnered $25 million in the governor’s 2011 budget for initial construction and will, when completed, house primarily agricultural biotechnology and other life science research.
In June of 2010, the presidents and chancellors of the Big Ten voted to welcome the University of Nebraska-Lincoln into the Big Ten Conference and by extension, they were invited to join the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), an academically-focused consortium of universities in the Big Ten athletic conference and the University of Chicago. As part of the former, the Nebraska Cornhuskers field 21 teams in NCAA intercollegiate varsity competition and membership in the latter affords the students, faculty and staff at UNL the benefits of research collaborations and partnerships with other Big Ten schools and Chicago.

The UNL campus is the flagship campus of the four-campus University of Nebraska System. The bulk of Nebraska’s medical research takes place at the Medical Center campus in Omaha, while the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the University of Nebraska at Kearney provide undergraduate and graduate training in other fields. All campuses are governed by a single board of regents, and led by separate institutional chancellors. J.B. Milliken serves as the president of The University of Nebraska System.

**President Harvey Perlman**

Harvey Perlman has spent the majority of his academic career—as both student and professional—on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus. A Nebraska native, Perlman was raised in York, NE and received both his undergraduate and law degrees from UNL. Having previously served briefly as a teaching fellow at the University of Chicago Law School, he joined the law faculty at Nebraska in 1967, and remained there until 1974, when he departed for Virginia. In 1983, Perlman returned to Nebraska, this time to accept the deanship of the
Nebraska College of Law, a position he then held for a decade and a half. In July of 2000, he was named interim Chancellor of the University, and the following July, his appointment was made permanent. He is now in the 13th year at the helm of the UNL campus.

By all accounts, Perlman is believed to be a strong leader and staunch advocate for the campus and its faculty. Both those closest to him and those in the trenches describe him as a bold leader, and one who is known to take action when he sees injustice. He is viewed as a strong communicator who explains rationally his actions and behaviors, and while many perceive him to have a healthy dose of self-assuredness, he benefits from widespread faculty support for his effective, if not headstrong, leadership.

Among those who work most closely with him, there is profound respect for both his intellect and his style. Perlman utilizes members of his senior leadership team on all types of matters, and leans heavily on his Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Ellen Weissinger and Vice Chancellor for Research and Economic Development Prem Paul. Bill Nunez, who serves as Perlman’s Chief of Staff also has an appointment in academic planning and analysis, and Vice Chancellor for Agriculture and Natural Resources Ronnie Green, who joined the staff in July of 2010, has become a trusted advisor. Weissinger described her relationship with Perlman as somewhat atypical, noting that they very rarely hold formal meetings, but rather correspond regularly by telephone and email and pop into one another’s offices. She advised that this isn’t necessarily a model to be emulated, but is the
result of two introverts leading an institution. She also described her complete confidence and regard for Perlman’s leadership, saying,

I would follow Harvey (Perlman) into a burning building first and foremost because I would assume that if he went there, it was a good idea. But, on the off chance that it wasn’t. I would want to be there with him to help.

Others on the team share Weissinger’s admiration of Perlman, and expressed great satisfaction in working with and for him. They described the meetings Perlman leads as collaborative and informal, and each articulated deep respect for their colleagues both as people and as content experts.

About Perlman’s style, Weissinger, said, “He always is, intellectually, the smartest person in the room, no matter who is in the room. It is one of the things I like so much about him. He effectively, with us, has no ego at all.” She and others characterized him as a good listener, but suggested he is at his core a strategist, and a remarkably good one at that. One faculty leader said,

He’s a lawyer by training. He thinks things through and asks, ‘what’s the best way to present my case? What’s the best way for me to…? There are two sides to every story, but what story are we going to attempt and what am I going to put in front of the jury or the campus or what am I going to emphasize?’

She noted that while she doesn’t always agree with his arguments, he is very successful in getting what he wants, and everyone admires his tenacity, particularly because his intentions seem very honest and pure. “He has complete confidence in his point of view, always,” said another senior leadership team member. According to Weissinger, he’s been successful in part because he lacks an entire swath of emotions. She said,
I don’t think I’ve ever seen him… I’ve almost never seen him get pissed off with any of us or tell me he’s pissed off at somebody else. He just doesn’t have those emotions. If I’m awake 20 hours a day, I feel those things 22 hours a day, and I don’t think he feels them at all. It’s very interesting.

Others described this trait of Perlman’s as one of Teflon coating internally and externally, and acknowledged that while such a description could be perceived as a negative, it has largely served him and the campus remarkably well.

For example, early in Perlman’s tenure as Chancellor, he proposed vertical cuts to manage a particularly difficult budget year. The cuts, given their depth, required that several tenured faculty members be reassigned, a fact that drew considerable ire from parts of the campus. Perlman, having carefully read the AAUP guidelines, suggested that this proposal, made for educational purposes, met the requirements the AAUP guidance document laid out. One faculty member disagreed and called for a vote of no confidence. The faculty procedures at UNL required that the full senate vote on the matter at a later meeting. The next meeting of the senate, however, was not scheduled to take place until the following September, due to the summer hiatus. Perlman, eager to put the matter to rest, told the group that he was simply doing what he thought best for the campus, and if they disagreed, he would gladly go back to the faculty and they could select a new leader. The senate held an online vote before the break; Perlman won the vote by a margin of 93% and retained the appointment.

Several respondents remarked about how matter-of-fact he was about his role during this incident, and in many others since. Incidentally, the campus weathered the budget cut and all but one of the faculty members in question were
reassigned to other parts of campus. More importantly, however, both Perlman and others point to this instance as defining of his leadership style—such that he does what he thinks best for the campus and will fight harder than anyone else for its well-being. Not overtly stated, but implied in this message is the idea that the faculty and staff of the campus should trust his instincts and ideas about what is best for Nebraska. And for the most part, they have, and by most accounts, it has worked, though both the administration and members of the faculty acknowledge that there have been rough spots.

The faculty senate is not a particularly strong governance body, described by some as toothless and not populated by the strongest or most credible faculty members. Administrative leadership at UNL says the senate does not always exercise the leadership that they could or push back enough, but also acknowledges that sometimes the fight is futile. One senior faculty member said,

I think that first of all, this is a very centralized place in the sense of power. The faculty senate doesn't have a lot of power. Now, there could be lots of reasons for that. One is that it's because it's not seen as a powerful body. You don't get the people in it who would be powerful. You get the people in it who have too much time on their hands. And a lot of people would say that that's the reason. Other people would say, well, we have a very, very strong chancellor and you don't cross the line...I mean, that's just how it's being run that way and that's the way it is. And so they kind of fight, but it's kind of pointless.

Rough spots aside, faculty members, both on the Senate and not, speak favorably of Perlman's success in leading the institution over the past decade, and concede that it is easy to criticize actions in hindsight. While they say he might benefit from consulting the faculty more often and earlier in the process of some matters, they also acknowledge that there are times, with this instance being no
different, that it is unclear what role faculty could or should play. This argument, it seems, is not unique to Nebraska, and one that Perlman appears to have, by and large, negated through his successes. One faculty member said,

I think that if I were to look at Chancellor Perlman in his tenure as a Chancellor, I can’t think of anyone ever who has had the university’s entirety, who we are as a faculty, who we are as educators, and who we are as a university and the reputation of the university as a whole...I can’t imagine anybody who was more driven to that entire thing. And well, I think he’s done great things since he’s been here.

Such praise for Perlman’s work is widespread and extends deep into the campus structure. A junior faculty member noted that Perlman and the rest of administration are very approachable, and expressed great confidence in their leadership, while another, more senior faculty member who also served on the faculty senate, describing the strides the campus has made in research production under Perlman’s leadership, saying, “I think he’s a strong proponent of the university,” and “I think we’re very fortunate to have him as chancellor.”

**The Makings of a Crisis—an AAU Membership Review**

On November 2, 2010, Larry Faulkner, president of the University of Texas and chair of the AAU membership review committee, sent a letter to Chancellor Perlman alerting him to the fact that the membership committee had recommended that the University of Nebraska undergo a formal review of its continued membership in the AAU. The letter proposed a two-part review to include both a portfolio submission from Nebraska describing the institutional mission and trajectory as it related to the AAU mission, and a recommendation from the review committee to the executive committee prior to the AAU Membership meeting. The
former was to be completed by February 15, 2011 while the latter was to take place prior to April 10, 2011. A similar letter was sent to Nancy Cantor, chancellor at Syracuse University, as Syracuse too was subject to review.

Perlman said he was not surprised to receive the letter, recognizing both the AAU focus on collapsing the size of its membership and Nebraska’s relative ranking among those in the organization. He was disappointed, particularly because Nebraska had just been invited to join the Big Ten Conference, and by extension, the Council on Institutional Cooperation. Every other Big Ten school is a member of the AAU, and Perlman knew that Nebraska’s membership status in the AAU had been considered when they were invited to join the Big Ten. Having to explain themselves so quickly after their admission would be difficult, but Perlman was confident in Nebraska’s case and the process for review laid out in the letter. He explained,

I think our initial reaction was we wished we didn’t have to go through this. It’s obviously not a good thing. And I think our faculty, honestly, for many years viewed the AAU as a claim to fame, when in fact, the merits didn’t deserve it. And I’ll be quite honest with you; I don’t think they should have received it much in the 80’s and 90’s. And if I had been on the AAU board in the middle 90’s, I probably would have already booted us too. But, we were making progress. I thought we had a good reputation. We had some areas where we were clearly leaders. The trajectory was up. And the AAU rules said that while the metrics were to be taken into account, that they were also supposed to be looking at trajectory and do a holistic view of the university, and I felt relatively comfortable with that.

It should be noted that in the late 1990s, prior to Perlman assuming the chancellorship, AAU leaders had sounded a warning for Nebraska, expressing concern for their status in the organization. Pearlman’s predecessors initiated efforts to improve research performance, and both personal accounts and
documents suggest Perlman deliberately and systematically worked to augment those efforts upon his arrival.

**Crisis Response**

In a letter dated November 8, 2010, Perlman acknowledged receipt of Faulkner’s request, and expressed his mixed feelings about the review. Perlman pointed out that being dropped from membership would likely be more devastating than being denied the opportunity to join if they were to try for the first time today and expressed fear for what such an action would do to the progress that the University had experienced over the past decade. He also said he understood why Nebraska was selected for review and explained that he was eager to demonstrate UNL’s accomplishments and illustrate how it’s trajectory aligned with the mission of AAU. He promised to submit a portfolio for review by the February 15 deadline.

About the same time, Perlman pulled together a meeting of his leadership team and informed them of the review. Several members of the team remember a brief discussion about whether to simply withdraw themselves from consideration, but suggest it was made clear from the beginning that the chancellor believed they had a case to make and that Nebraska should and would fight to retain their membership. Perlman himself does not recall giving the group space to consider anything other than a fight, and said that he believed so strongly in the upward trajectory that had just gained them admittance into the Big 10 that there really seemed no choice but to submit a portfolio as requested. Describing his thought process at the time, he said,
And we had just come into the Big 10. That was a big deal. Everybody was an AAU member, so to withdraw made no sense to me. And I couldn’t figure out how I could communicate to our faculty that somehow I voluntarily withdrew in the face of the progress that we had made during the course of those years. It was just an untenable position. Well, I don’t think I could have survived it for one, but that wasn’t a big deal. But, I didn’t think so. Secondly, I didn’t think there was any kind of benefit to that because our faculty was going to create hell if I woke up one day and said, ‘Hey, guess what? I dropped our AAU membership.’ And there wasn’t anything to gain…it wasn’t going to be a public controversy one way or the other, so my instinct then was to fight.

Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Weissinger explained that the group got to that point almost as quickly,

We all felt that regardless of the outcome, we were more likely to retain the positive regard of the world around us if we fought, and by so doing, advance knowledge about our trajectory. We saw an upside regardless of the outcome. We just couldn’t find, internally or externally, any advantage in just walking away. But mostly, I think we couldn’t live with ourselves if we didn’t fight.

And so the fight began. The team decided early on that because the review was to be confidential, so too would be their work in preparing a response. Staff from the institutional research office and the research units were added to the group and Perlman charged the team to start putting together documents that would be used either in part or in full by the review committee of the AAU. Perlman mapped out a proposed strategy and encouraged the group to build a case that highlighted the institution’s successes and important niche in public higher education. There was not ever, according to several members of the team, discussion of including faculty in the collection of data. Of the process, one team member said,

Essentially, Harvey (Perlman) told us to put together a story to make our case…and to ask what are we finding, when does it happen? What limitations
are there in this information? If you were to look at it in different slices and dices, what story does it tell?

They set about their work systematically, using the guidelines presented in the November 2, 2010 letter as a guide, and working to build comparisons with other land grant institutions and others in the Big Ten to make their case. Documents show that data was parsed in several different ways, and there was much debate about how to deal with the fact that the AAU metrics do not consider USDA research or recognize the research performed at the Medical Center in Omaha, because that campus, while part of the Nebraska System, is not governed by the same institutional chancellor. There was back and forth on whether to argue the merits of the metrics of the AAU, and how to point out how these guidelines put some institutions, particularly those with land grant missions, at a distinct disadvantage as compared to peers who are able to focus more exclusively on fundable research, most often in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields. In those early stages of data gathering, Perlman was not deeply involved, but did respond to findings sent to him. He was critical to evaluating whether the findings were helpful to Nebraska’s cause or not, and would often send the team back to the data, encouraging them to further explore something they had found or to compare some numbers to others in Nebraska’s peer group. The team, eager to make the best case possible, was nimble and responsive, and because it was small, some say, avoided bureaucratic malaise. One member said they all acknowledged the pressure, but they were all fully on board with the fight, and were keen to
demonstrate with data that the Big Ten presidents had been right to admit them and that the AAU should work hard to retain them.

**Reaching Out—Communication With the Big Ten and the AAU**

During this time, Perlman sought the advice and counsel of fellow Big Ten leaders as well, believing he owed them the courtesy after they had so recently invited Nebraska to join their conference—and seemingly did so in part because of Nebraska’s membership in the AAU. He advised them of the pending review at a meeting of the Big Ten presidents in early December, and followed up with an email on December 6, 2010. In that message, he noted that both Nebraska and Syracuse were under review and had been asked to submit materials by February 15th of the following year. Perlman wrote,

> Nebraska suffers in the AAU ranking because AAU excludes agricultural research and industrial sponsored research from its metrics and yet counts agriculture faculty relative to ‘normalizing’ for size. This methodology serves to disadvantage all land grant institutions. Nebraska is also disadvantaged because our medical school is administered as a separate campus and thus its research and faculty are not included. I won’t claim Nebraska is yet where I want it to be in research but I think we have a good story to tell and we intend to tell it.

The email went on to talk about Nebraska’s rate of growth over the last decade in federal, non-agriculture related research and how he believed that the association with the rest of the campuses in the Big Ten would only further escalate that trajectory. Perlman also noted, however, that the politics of the AAU somewhat tempered his confidence, and in offering the names of those on the review committee, quietly invited the recipient list to advocate on his and Nebraska’s
behalf. Biddy Martin, then Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a fellow Big Ten executive, was among those listed on the Review Committee.

Perlman received words of encouragement from several leaders in the Big Ten, but was also chastised in a message from the AAU for reaching out during what was to be a confidential process. This latter message, sent from AAU President Robert Berdahl, went to all of the Big Ten Presidents as well as the AAU membership review committee. Perlman defended his actions in a December 8, 2010 letter directed at Berdahl. In it, he wrote,

> As you know Nebraska was recently accepted for membership in the Big Ten Conference, a conference that takes great pride in its universal AAU membership. For me not to inform the Presidents and Chancellors of the Big Ten that their newest member’s status in the AAU was in jeopardy would be, I believe, a breach of my obligation to them. I do not think, in this unusual situation, that you could expect me not to be forthcoming with them.

Perlman’s letter to Berdahl went on to clarify that broader conversations in the AAU and among a few non-AAU member institutions about both the existence and targets of the review had not been kept confidential, nor had the names of review committee members Perlman distributed, as they had been published in the meeting materials for all members in April. He further laid out his plans to both tell the Nebraska story and address how the current AAU methodology impacts public institutions like Nebraska in general, and land grants in particular. Perlman apologized for any perceptions of inappropriate actions and closed by explaining once again his fiduciary obligation to both his campus and those others in the Big Ten “who have so recently expressed confidence in our academic trajectory.” By his own admission, Perlman did no other “politicking” at this point, believing the
process was sound and that he and Nebraska were being given a fair chance to
defend their record.

Quiet work on the materials that would later be submitted to the AAU
continued. Data were gathered, checked, and considered from multiple perspectives.
A few members of the group noted the challenges that came with trying to get
Nebraska’s data to line up with the AAU metrics, and how doing so required them to
think differently about presentation and the story they were telling, as part of
building a case that would explain why the AAU metrics were wrong. In retrospect,
they said this exercise was valuable, though it did occasionally prove difficult, and
stung even worse after their dismissal. Further, because Syracuse had elected not to
fight the AAU review and chose instead to leave the organization on its own,
Nebraska would be going at the exercise, the first of its kind in the history of the
AAU, on its own. Chancellor Perlman’s involvement continued to be strategic, and he
remained the architect of the intellectual case. The rest of the team saw themselves
as staff, though conceded they felt listened to and very much integral to the process.

On February 4, 2011, Perlman sent a letter to Berdahl at AAU confirming that
he would shortly submit a report to the AAU review committee as requested. In the
letter, Perlman asked about the process moving forward and requested, should the
matter be put to the full membership for a vote, the chance to appear personally
before that body to make his case and answer any questions that might arise.

On February 8, 2011, Perlman received a response from Berdahl thanking Nebraska
for the cooperative attitude they had demonstrated to date and outlining the steps
the review committee would follow. The letter articulated that once the review
committee had completed its work, it would submit its recommendation to the executive committee of AAU. A recommendation in favor of continuation would end the matter with no public comment, and would mean that Nebraska’s membership could not be considered for review for at least five more years. A recommendation in favor of discontinuation would trigger a discussion with review committee chair Larry Faulkner on Sunday, April 10. The letter noted that, if the recommendation was for discontinuation, “Presumably, the executive committee will recommend bringing the matter to a vote of the membership.” At that point, the process detailed in the letter stated thatPerlman could decide whether to withdraw Nebraska from the AAU or contest the recommendation. Selection of the latter option would trigger time being set aside during the regular business meeting in April where Nebraska could make its case, and the membership could vote. The letter said,

After the discussion of the issue during the business meeting, a written ballot will be distributed to the entire membership, including those members not in attendance at the meeting. When all of the ballots have been received, we will notify you of the outcome. Discontinuation requires a vote of two-thirds of the membership.

This letter did not outline a deadline date to be used should the matter require a vote of the full membership.

**Making the Case for Nebraska to Remain an AAU member**

The following day, Nebraska submitted a forty-three page portfolio to members of the AAU review committee, together with a cover letter from Perlman. The cover memo articulated Perlman’s confidence that if the review committee applied the membership principles laid out by the AAU membership committee, it
would easily confirm UNL to be retained. Noting that the report was lengthy,

Perlman explained the efforts he and his team made to,

    demonstrate that the University is committed to the AAU mission and has
    acted on that mission; that it has programs and faculty that have competed
    successfully against and have collaborated with those of the leading national
    research universities; and that the research trajectory of UNL is among the
    steepest of all AAU members.

    He concluded the submission with an invitation to the committee to visit
Nebraska so that they could see the vibrancy and the momentum of the University
themselves.

    Perlman sent a copy of the finished product to Big Ten presidents and
chancellors on February 14, 2011. In the letter he submitted with the report, he
requested that the recipients keep the report confidential. For this group, he
included an unmasked ranking of institutions using the AAU metrics as a means to
show that three other Big Ten institutions could be at risk. He asked recipients to
consider the arguments made in an appendix to the report for why these metrics
could be detrimental to land grant institutions. Perlman and members of his
leadership team recall being pleased with the report they produced and feeling
confident that if the review committee really considered their trajectory,
particularly as it related to their mission and geography and circumstances, the
matter would not make it to the full membership. It should be noted that the
leadership did not at this point share the materials with anyone further on their
own campus.

    Several Big Ten leaders believed the report to be compelling and sent
messages to Perlman saying as much. Graham Spanier from Penn State University
and Ohio State’s Gordon Gee offered to help in any way possible, as did Bob
Bruininks from Minnesota. As Perlman crafted his remarks for the March 26, 2011
teleconference with the review committee, he corresponded with both Gee and
Spanier, seeking feedback on his arguments and counsel on where to push hardest.
Both men were supportive, and urged him to stay confident.

The call itself was difficult not because of how he made the case but how it
was received. He said, “It was the first time I worried about the outcome because I’d
say the call was rather…perfunctory. And then right away, they sent out a letter
saying that we would be dismissed from membership.”

The Case Unravels

Perlman got a call on April 6, 2011 alerting him to the fact that the review
committee had voted unanimously to disassociate Nebraska from membership. He
did not yet have the letter, but admitted to being surprised and angry at the news.
He also knew then that the vote meant his Big Ten colleague from Wisconsin had
voted against them. He let his internal team know the news, and sent word to his
friend Graham Spanier at Penn State right away. Spanier wrote back a few hours
later saying, “I am stunned and disappointed. I will vote against this and will begin
lobbying immediately where I think it will help. I believe Gordon Gee and Lou Anna
Simon could be useful allies in the debate.” He advised Perlman to reach out to the
others by phone and pledged to “raise hell” at the 1:00 pm meeting the following
Sunday. Perlman also shared the news with J.B. Milliken, President of the University
of Nebraska System. Milliken sent a return message saying, “I think you made the
best case you could have; don’t know what else you could have done. I think we
always agreed this was more politics than substance and that has been confirmed so far.” Milliken also pledged to help lobby others as needed.

The following day, the review committee sent a letter to the executive committee of AAU detailing the process they had used and summarizing its evaluation of the arguments from Nebraska. The committee outlined four points as the basis for its conclusions. First, it acknowledged the growth in federally funded research over the past decade, but noted that Nebraska’s total research funding was still relatively modest as compared to other AAU peers. Second, they dismissed the argument that research and graduate education taking place at the Medical Center of Omaha should be included. Third, the committee recognized the facilities and infrastructure improvements made at Nebraska, but determined that the value of such improvements was qualitative and could be made by any school. And finally, the committee determined that because geographic diversity is not included in the AAU membership principles, it was not a compelling reason to retain Nebraska.

The report submitted by the review committee to the executive committee incensed Perlman. He believed it failed to comply with the AAU membership principles that had been provided to Nebraska as the basis for review and that the committee had either ignored or not understood the arguments made in Nebraska’s documents. He drafted a three-page memo to the AAU Executive Committee on April 8, 2011 saying as much and arguing that the committee had failed to follow its own two-stage process. The memo explained that UNL had not, as the committee suggested, argued that the indicators were inappropriate, but rather that the committee had a responsibility to consider the indicators in light of the institution’s
mission. He further explained his team’s methodology and expressed dismay at the committee’s conclusion that Nebraska was seeking inclusion of the Medical College of Omaha data. He was trying to make the argument that the AAU was obligated to take the more holistic view and as such should have considered either that UNL did not have a medical school, or that they would not be at the bottom of the metrics if their medical school research was included. His frustration with the process showing, Perlman wrote, “I cannot help but conclude that this has been a flawed process and cannot stand the standard of fairness and transparency we owe to each other.”

Perlman shared this draft memo first with Gee, Spanier and Lou Anna Simon, of Ohio State, Penn State and Michigan State respectively. Perlman considered these three to be advisors on this matter and he sought from them advice on whether he should share the document with the Executive Committee when he appeared before them on Sunday. All three wrote back with strong support for Perlman and his argument, each again agreeing to argue against the conclusions of the membership committee.

Documents and interviews suggest that after Perlman shared the news with his senior team, he largely assumed control of the process himself, politicking where he was able, and drafting this response and the remarks to go with his presentation to the full membership largely on his own. He sent several messages to other AAU member presidents before traveling to Washington, and talked to several institutional chancellors and presidents when he arrived, telling them both why Nebraska deserved to be included and why the AAU metrics were flawed.
Perlman appeared before the membership committee on Sunday. Later that evening, a member of the committee invited Perlman to meet him at the hotel bar and told him there that the membership committee had voted unanimously against keeping Nebraska in the AAU. Perlman would be invited to make his case to the full membership on Tuesday following the membership review committee report to the group. The decision required two-thirds of the votes to pass. “By this time, I’m reasonably certain that there are strong forces against the University of Nebraska, and I guess I was angry,” Perlman told the Chronicle of Higher Education. He skipped dinner with the group that evening, opting instead to dine alone. He was not, therefore, around or awake when the group returned to the hotel later that evening to find ballots slipped beneath their doors, together with the full report he and his colleagues had created touting Nebraska’s accomplishments. AAU staff had the materials distributed while the members were away, and because of the confidentiality of the review, remarkably few presidents knew of the challenge to Nebraska’s membership status before this time. Perlman recalls the surprise many of his friends in the AAU had at learning of the vote in this way. He said he did engage in some lobbying during those next days, but “as you would expect, everybody said, “I’m there for you.”” At this stage, he said, “I’m counting friends. It’s a little complicated to have to count friends, but I was counting friends”

On Tuesday afternoon, April 11, 2011, Perlman made a 20-minute presentation before the full membership of the AAU. “I thought it went as well as could be expected. Again, I’m not the one to judge that, obviously, because I wanted it…” Several of his peers told him he had made a strong case and that they were on
his side. He was hopeful, but disheartened, and chose again to skip the evening outing with the full group. He admitted to feeling physically and emotionally spent, but believed he had fought as hard as he could. In a message to his team back in Lincoln, he wrote,

I made our case and it was well received. We had many friends, mostly the publics, and going in we thought we had 18 to 19 votes out of the 21 we need. After I was dismissed the privates weighed in strong and Graham (Spanier) thought we might have lost a vote or two. Voting doesn’t end until next Monday but the leadership is against us and they are exploiting every advantage. I am not optimistic. We should start to think about how we will let our faculty know if we lose.

He noted that he did not think a negative decision would hurt their position in the Big Ten, despite the fact that two members were likely to vote against them, and concluded the message with an apology, saying “Sorry, but I think we made the best case we could.” The decision would now rest with others.

Ballots had been provided to all AAU members in attendance at the meeting, and were mailed the following day to any members who did not attend. Those at the meeting were asked by AAU leaders to cast their votes prior to leaving town and it was stated that all ballots were due by April 18, 2011.

There was some confusion about the efficacy of that date, as Perlman received a message from a colleague at Kansas stating that she had received a message as late as the 21st of April soliciting a vote on the Nebraska membership matter. He immediately sent a message to Berdahl, asking for clarification and noting concern about whether the process was being conducted in the manner described to the membership. That was on Friday, April 22, 2011. That same afternoon, Berdahl wrote back saying that they had requested that ballots be
postmarked by the 18th, and had thus anticipated that they would have them all by the 21st. When staff at the AAU realized that several presidents and chancellors had not yet voted at that time,

we sent them emails asking them either to return a marked ballot by overnight mail—again, in order to maintain the anonymous voting process—or indicate that they did not intend to vote. We have established no hard deadline after which we would disqualify votes; Jerry Cohon (then president at Carnegie Mellon University) shares our view that it is important to receive a formal response from every AAU member.

The letter went on to say they were waiting on the votes of two leaders who were out of the country and that they’d call Perlman with the results as soon as they’d been tallied.

The next day, Saturday, April 23, Perlman responded to Berdahl, expressing outrage that the announcement of the deadline at the meeting was not intended to be a deadline at all, and noting that he had checked with several others who shared his understanding of the process. Noting that they, and not he, had set the rules, he wrote,

This is one more instance where the process as defined and implemented has created the impression in my mind, and the mind of others, that the leadership is determined to achieve a particular result regardless of the rules. When the details of this process become public, it will hardly serve the reputation or credibility of the AAU. I have tried hard throughout this episode to be respectful of the organization, its members, and the processes that were provided. I am sorry but I cannot now think that Nebraska has been fairly treated.

**Communicating the Defeat**

On Tuesday, April 26, 2011, Perlman learned that the membership had voted 44-18 against Nebraska, bringing UNL’s 102-year membership in the AAU to an end.
AAU would make a formal announcement to its membership that Friday, giving Perlman two days to tell his campus.

Perlman reached out first to his team, President Milliken, and members of the faculty senate. Weissinger recalls receiving an email from Perlman saying only that they had been defeated and suggesting that the group would need to think about how to communicate the news to faculty. Her disappointment quickly turned to anger she said, and she had to work hard to check her own feelings as they worked on a communication strategy. On this point, she explained,

We tossed about ideas that, in retrospect, were bad ideas and got no traction. A lot of them were mine because I was just so mad. That phase, where we were trying to figure out how to frame it was really intense. I don’t remember ever a discussion about how to deflect responsibility from ourselves. That was really never a component. In fact, there may have been strings that were about how do we own this so the faculty doesn’t feel like they own it. How do we make this an administrative blunder and not a comment on the quality of our faculty and their work?

She detailed intense conversations about the internal framing or how the matter would be presented to the campus community, and explained her focus on that given her inward-looking role as Senior Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs. She explained though, that the group also considered the external message, and ultimately decided that initially the campus would say very little themselves, but would not hide from it either. “That was where the lawyer in Harvey came out,” Weissinger said,

I remember when he said, ‘Well, we just get somebody to FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) us. We start assembling some documents right now, and we just wait for somebody to demand that we give it to them. And we intentionally construct our external argument that way.’ And I loved that.
A message to all faculty and staff on campus was sent on April 29, 2011 informing them of the news. In it, Perlman outlined the ways in which the AAU ranking methodology disadvantaged Nebraska, and detailed the fight he had undertaken to retain their membership. He explained the process, and the basis of Nebraska’s argument, concluding, “In the end, while we received strong support from almost all of our Big Ten colleagues, all of our former Big 12 colleagues, and other public research universities, it was not sufficient.” Perlman hinted that there were other flaws with the process, but declined to go into them in this correspondence, noting instead that this development would not in any way impact their momentum or diminish the accomplishments they had made as a campus. The final line of the email was upbeat and forward looking, saying,

As University of Nebraska President James B. Milliken often says, we strive to be the best public university in the country as measured by the impact we have on our people and our state, and through them, the world. On that ranking, I think we are in the top tier.

This message was also forwarded, together with copies of the materials submitted to the AAU, to his Big Ten colleagues, to members of the Board of Regents, and to some key alumni of the university.

In addition, Perlman held meetings with the deans and senior leadership, as well as with the executive committee of the faculty senate to share the news. In the case of the faculty senate, committee members remember him providing the full detail of what had transpired in the preceding months, and providing them with copies of the correspondence from the AAU and the materials that Nebraska had submitted as part of the review. He took the time to answer their questions, and
responded to the concerns of one or two members of the group who believed, upon learning of the review, that faculty should have played a larger role in the response. Noting the confidential nature of the process, Perlman explained that he had largely handled the matter with his peers in the AAU, and that it was primarily an exercise in data gathering in accordance with the metrics provided by the AAU. Members told me they discussed the matter once before the larger message went out and again with Perlman’s chief of staff at a later meeting, and in both instances felt the leadership was being honest and direct, and ultimately had acted with their best interests in mind.

Not surprisingly, the story was picked up nationally, both as a result of Perlman’s messaging and the announcement of the final vote to the full membership that was distributed on Friday, April 29. Every major regional and national newspaper featured a story on the matter, and several radio and television stations picked up the news as well. Perlman and Nebraska shared documents, but chose in large part to decline interviews, with a few exceptions; On May 2, both the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education* ran accounts detailing the efforts by the AAU to become smaller and featuring quotes from Perlman. Both stories told of Syracuse’s decision to walk away and chronicled the fight Nebraska had undertaken in an effort to retain their messages. While these stories were not written by Nebraska personnel, they did refer directly to the correspondence provided by UNL through FOIA request and served to shift the focus away from Nebraska and onto AAU, ultimately exposing the ugly underbelly of the confidential process and an
organization that seemed more like a club than a professional membership organization.

**Perceptions of Leadership and Action**

Initial reactions on campus were mixed. Some faculty and staff admitted that when they first heard the news, they thought Nebraska had been removed from an athletic organization of some sort and had to look up the AAU. They recognized quickly that while they had not known previously that the University had belonged to the organization, they should feel shame for having been asked to leave. Others who knew of the organization and its meaning saw this as a devastating loss and feared what it might mean for the university. Several faculty members worried that the news would affect their membership in the Big Ten, and would ultimately reflect upon their own research and teaching, particularly their ability to secure competitive external support for research. After the campus-wide email went out, but before the stories in the *Chronicle* and *Inside Higher Education* came out, there was a lengthy email exchange between Perlman and members of his leadership team expressing differing opinions about how much more to say publicly. Perlman believed more explanation was likely necessary, but pushed back on the idea of a public event. He encouraged the group to wait it out and see what the next week brought. Weissinger replied, saying,

Let’s see what folks are thinking next week. But we can’t let this linger as a morale problem within our faculty. I worry that it diminishes the incredible bounce they got from the CIC (Big Ten) news. I’m hearing a little bit of “maybe we don’t belong.” We may need to find ways to overtly signal that this is just a ridiculous blip and we’re just fine.

Arguing for visible leadership, she continued,
When a dog pack is faced with an ambiguous situation, they look (literally) to the leader to determine their individual reactions. I think that people do the same. If we just ignore it, the faculty who are embarrassed or worried will stew in that. That makes me think we need to frame the faculty’s response for them. My frame would be, this is silly, screw them, get back to what we were doing.

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside HigherEd* stories went a long way in tempering the disappointment and changing the outlook among faculty from one of shame and embarrassment about their own institution to one of anger and resentment toward the AAU. One long-standing faculty member, explaining his feelings after learning the full story, said,

I didn’t like the way he (Perlman) was treated. I didn’t like the way he went through this like a pariah. You know he ended up having dinner by himself, ended up having to calm the people in the corridors that didn’t know what was going on? I didn’t like that. What a stuck-up organization. I don’t want to be a member.

Other faculty noted that Perlman had done everything he could have, and that the AAU metrics were stacked against institutions like theirs. They explained that while there was some sting associated with being kicked out, they had never really realized any benefits of being in, and would move on.

It is important to note the subtle nuance in language here. Faculty were not saying that AAU membership did not matter and assuming Weissinger’s attitude of “who cares?” They did care, and their initial feelings and shame and embarrassment were real—and actually in line with the fact that up until this point the campus had boasted about its membership on its website and in its publications. But they acknowledged that Perlman and his team had fought the AAU on their behalf, and they applauded him for that. One faculty member said, “I liked fighting it. I like
rational explanations. If the medical school had been included we’d look a lot better.

So, I like the way he’s a pugnacious person in many ways,” while another said, “I believe he fought as hard as he could to not make it happen, and for that I am grateful.”

Two years out, those feelings of shame and embarrassment are all but gone, as is the anger. Faculty and administrators really have come to ask, “who cares?”

One prominent researcher, asking just that, said, “When you review your research and publications, do they see well, where are you from? Are you from an AAU university or are you from a non-AAU university? It’s ridiculous. People don’t even know what AAU is.” Another, noting that the AAU membership never helped the university get grants, said, “that’s faculty contributions or faculty knowledge. It’s faculty that get you grants. That’s how it works. It has nothing to do with the AAU.”

And even Perlman himself concedes that what was at one time a crisis is no longer. Explaining that the university now saves more than $100,000 annually in membership and travel fees, he said,

I can’t think of anything that we’ve lost, but the embarrassment. And I thought that any embarrassment out of this ought to be focused on AAU, not on us because I thought that we followed their rules. Their procedure was an outrage. And I don’t know…I think I made progress on that and I think certainly The Chronicle agreed.

The perceptions of those outside of campus mirrored in large part those of the faculty and staff, though the learning curve among alumni and the community was a bit steeper. They recognized that negative reports about Nebraska in the news meant something, but they didn’t know enough about AAU to know how to respond or what to make of the reports. Likewise, members of the Board of Regents and the
Nebraska legislature expressed alarm, but did not interfere. In the case of the Regents, Perlman said, “I’m sure they were concerned, because it’s embarrassing for the university, but I didn’t get any push back from them.” The lack of political reaction was due in part to policymakers in Nebraska understanding that the AAU metrics didn’t allow agricultural research to be counted,” according to Perlman “and that put everybody on our side in this issue.”
Crisis Overview

On December 7, 2010, administrators at Ohio State University (OSU) received a letter from the U.S. Department of Justice informing them about football memorabilia that had been seized during a federal investigation. In the weeks that followed, the university investigated the matter, interviewing football coach Jim Tressel and six then-student athletes. The investigation determined that football players had traded or sold institutionally issued awards, apparel and equipment for cash or tattoos to a local tattoo parlor owner. The institution submitted a self-report to the NCAA immediately, and sought reinstatement of the athletes prior to the 2011 BCS Allstate Sugar Bowl, which was to be played on January 8, 2011. The NCAA reinstatement staff conducted an expedited investigation and reinstated the athletes in time for the game with conditions that they repay the losses and sit out the first five games of the following season. The bowl game was played as planned and Ohio State University defeated University of Arkansas at Fayetteville by a score of 31-26.

Shortly after the bowl game, the university discovered emails, seemingly through an evaluation of records pulled for an unrelated Freedom of Information Act request, indicating that Coach Jim Tressel had received information about the violations detailed in the December self-report as early as April, 2010, a fact this well-regarded coach had until now denied. What follows is a description of how President Gordon Gee came to learn of the emails, and how he and others on his team responded to the matter. This account of what began as a relatively small athletics department issue details how the matter became a much larger
institutional crisis that threatened the reputation of the university and ultimately led to the resignation of Jim Tressel. The findings are the result of interviews with Gordon Gee and others involved in the response, as well as faculty, staff and students who watched the crisis unfold on campus. Documents and correspondence acquired from the campus and the media also aided in assembling the story, which begins with a description of the campus today and an introduction to former President E. Gordon Gee.

**Institutional Profile**

The Ohio State University (OSU) was founded as Ohio Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1870—Ohio’s ninth university and it’s first land-grant institution. It assumed its current name in 1878, after the curriculum was broadened to be more comprehensive. In 2007 it became the state’s flagship university as part of the newly created University System of Ohio. Today, OSU is the third largest university campus in the United States, with nearly 57,000 students enrolled in undergraduate, graduate and professional degree programs on the Columbus campus. Courses are offered in sixteen different schools or colleges of the university, and the university offers more than 175 majors and nearly 500 academic specialties.

Just more than three quarters of OSU students are from the state of Ohio, but the campus also draws students from the remaining 49 states and 75 foreign countries. Ohio State operates 31 on-campus residence halls and is in the midst of completing a residential building project that will allow for all first and second year students to live on-campus. The campus operates on just more than 1,700 acres to
the north of the city’s downtown, and the bulk of the 451 building physical plant
surrounds a green quad and geographical hub called The Oval. The Oval is widely
viewed by students and alumni to represent the heart of the campus.

The Ohio State University was the first institution in Ohio to be invited to join
the American Association of Universities, and is also a member of both the Big Ten
Conference and the Committee on Institutional Cooperation. More than 1,000 Ohio
State University student athletes participate in NCAA intercollegiate varsity
competition as part of 36 separate teams and they compete as Buckeyes, a name
derived from the state’s tree. OSU teams are both competitive and successful,
realizing dozens of championships, accolades on the field and off, and the financial
and traveling support of an impressive fan base. The OSU Athletic Department
revenues exceed $128 million annually.

The Ohio State University is governed by a board of nineteen trustees who
are responsible for oversight of academic programs, budgets and general
administration, and employment of the university’s 23,000 faculty and staff. The
governor makes seventeen of the nineteen appointments, and two of the seventeen
must be student appointments. Student members serve two-year terms and are not
voting members of the board. All other gubernatorial appointments are for nine-
year terms. The remaining appointments are made by members of the board and
are generally extended to prominent alumni or political leaders deemed to be
important or helpful to the University.
President E. Gordon Gee

E. Gordon Gee served as institutional president of the Ohio State University twice, first between September 1990 and January 1998, and again from October 2007 to June 30, 2013. He has since been named the president at West Virginia University, the same institution at which he assumed his first college presidency in 1981. Gee has served as a higher education chief executive seven times, at five different universities, since he was 37 years old. During his second tenure at Ohio State University, Gee was the highest paid public university leader in the country.

By all accounts, Gee is believed to be a strong leader who took his responsibility for the institutional well-being of the Ohio State University and the people within very seriously. He was remarkably well-liked on campus, particularly among students, who found his accessibility refreshing and inspiring. Gee worked tirelessly, and seemingly balanced the competing needs of the university remarkably well—taking meetings from 7:00am until 7:00pm each day in thirty minute increments, and then regularly hosting events in his home in the evening. He was deeply invested in personal relationships and was known for showing up at 21st birthday parties on the weekends, and for walking the tailgate lots after football games to shake hands and pose for photos—many of which would later become Facebook profile pictures. Those who worked closest to him as well as those who conceded to meeting him only a few times commented on his ability to make one feel as if you were the center of his world. They cited Gee’s incredible ability to remember names and faces, and pointed to that skill, together with his dry, wry sense of humor, as part of his charm. He is a bow-tie wearing, self-deprecating
intellectual who worked best among the people, and he leveraged his staff to help ensure he was able to do so. He enjoyed rock-star status, and was said to be one of Ohio’s beloved characters. His signature style was so well-recognized that the university even began to use the bow-tie as an institutional marker.

Those who were part of his inner team described Gee as open, candid, and willing to show his warts. They explained that he encouraged debate and expected team members to provide feedback, though was sometimes selective in how he used or responded to it. They described him as having exceedingly high expectations for himself and for others, and that he made it clear when he believed things were not going well. While some may have found this sort of leadership intimidating, respondents suggested that Gee brought out the best in those around him and that they all felt compelled to do and be better in his presence. In return, he was fiercely loyal to his own people, almost to a fault. Some members suggested his loyalty to those he cared about most was both one of his strongest attributes and his Achilles heel, as it sometimes, as in this case, presented blind spots for him.

Likewise, Gee’s wry jokes, to which he often turned when things grew tense or when he felt unprepared, provided levity in meetings or programs, and served in many cases to further endear him to people. A senior campus administrator said, “you know, he’s got that personality where he’s got to be funny, you know. And we all have something.” Another noted, “That’s why people loved him. He was so real. He wasn’t stuffy.” But sometimes his jokes were ill-timed, and served just the opposite effect. Once, at a tailgate event, referring to the Buckeye necklace he was wearing, he said into the microphone, “Hey, do you like the balls around my neck?”
Most in the crowd laughed, but a member of the alumni association staff recalls thinking, “you’re the university president of one of the largest institutions in the country. You shouldn’t be making comments like that. Likewise, once, when describing the difficulty of the Big Ten football schedule, he said publicly,

Well, I don’t know enough about the X’s and O’s of college football. I do know, having been both a Southeastern Conference president and a Big Ten president, that it’s like murderer’s row every week for these schools. We do not play the Little Sisters of the Poor. We play very fine schools on any given day.

He later apologized to the Little Sisters of the Poor and made a contribution to their order. But the quips, often referred to as “Gee’s gaffes,” continued. Last December, at a meeting of the athletic council, Gee was caught on tape talking about Notre Dame, Catholics in general, the Longhorn Network, Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany, Arkansas football coach Bret Bielema, the University of Louisville, the University of Kentucky and the schools of the SEC. Sadly, his comic relief was more offensive than funny, and he managed to insult every group or person named. Shortly thereafter, Gee announced his resignation from Ohio State University. Some say he simply decided it was time, others say the board of trustees instituted a remediation plan after this incident, the last of many, that Gee simply was not willing to work within. Both might be true, or neither, but the fact remains that his departure from Ohio State has forced the campus to admit that no one person can define who they are or what they stand for.

Gee was open about his self-described “foot-in-mouth disease,” but was unapologetic. He said, “I think one of the great challenges in the university presidency right now is the fact that people increasingly are getting these jobs
because they have offended the fewest number of people for the longest period of time.” He noted that this mentality automatically puts leaders on the defense, and moves them into positions of low-risk or no-risk, which is precisely the opposite of where they need to be. Gee acknowledged that his willingness to say what he believed ultimately got him into trouble, but noted that it also helped him to succeed. He said his biggest failures came when he failed to follow his intuition, or to be true to himself, and argued that “there are three keys to success for a university president: have a very thick skin; have a great sense of humor and be able to laugh at yourself; and have nerves like sewer pipes.”

While one could argue whether Gee is a good comedian or not, most agree that he was an effective president for OSU. Board members, students, athletic department staff, members of his leadership team, and alumni alike all praised his leadership, his vision, and his commitment to improving the Ohio State reputation. They praised him for thinking about the various constituents of the university when making decisions, and for including others in the governance and running of the university. Board members described an amicable relationship built on regular communication and trust, and suggested they were actively involved with, rather than informed about, decisions and actions on campus. Gee sent a bi-weekly correspondence to the board, as did then Provost Joseph Alutto, so each board member received a weekly update from the campus. Further, Gee spoke to most board members by telephone at least once a week, so most believed the relationship to be active and healthy. One member, describing the board’s working relationship with the president said,
The relationship with the board during Gordon Gee’s tenure has been very collegial and very positive, and I think generally the board understood the role of a board versus a chief executive, so it worked very well. They looked overall at general policy and let the president of the university run the university in terms of decision-making.

Likewise, Gee met with faculty and staff leadership regularly, and was known to reach out by telephone to governance groups in advance of large announcements. Student affairs staff said Gee sought out special opportunities to engage with students, and pushed them to be creative and innovative in their offerings. On one occasion, to capitalize on Gee’s fondness of art, they put together an event at a campus museum featuring student art. Rather than invite only the artists, however, they extended invitations to any students on campus whose names were, or included the word, Art. That meant several students named Bart and Martha and Arthur had the opportunity to meet and interact with the President. At another event, students whose names began with “Ma” and “Pe” were invited to a mani-pedi party with Gee. While the student affairs staff said they sometimes resented having to create special engagements for these interactions, they said that Gee’s expectations caused them to work more effectively and to be more creative, and they were grateful to have so much interaction with the institutional leader.

Without exception, respondents described Gee as strong and insightful, and all conceded he left enormous shoes for a successor to fill. “He had an amazing capacity to lead without micro-managing, and to bring out the best in people,” said one of his closest advisors. Another, thinking about who might replace him said, “the next guy might wear a bow tie, but I’d bet money, he’ll be no Gordon Gee.”
Crisis in Columbus—Tattoo-Gate Takes Down a coach

In mid-September, 2010, then football coach Jim Tressel filled out a routine NCAA compliance form certifying that he had no knowledge of any violations among he or members of the Ohio State football team. He signed the form, despite the fact that in April 2010, he had received several emails from a local Columbus criminal attorney—who also happened to be a former football player—suggesting that several current football players had received free tattoos from a local tattoo artist who was under federal investigation. In an April 16, 2010 email, the lawyer told Tressel that nine Big Ten Championship rings, fifteen pairs of cleats, several jerseys and one national championship ring had been offered for cash or trade by players. Subsequent emails advised Tressel to handle the matter and reminded him that this information was confidential. Records show that Tressel responded to the attorney, saying, “I hear you!! It is unbelievable!! Thanks for your help...keep me posted as to what I need to do if anything. I will keep pounding these kids hoping they grow up...jt”

In December of that same year, the Ohio State University received a letter from the U.S. Department of Justice informing them that several items of OSU football memorabilia had been seized as part of a federal investigation. The letter prompted the University to initiate an internal investigation that included interviews with six then-football players, coach Jim Tressel, and several other people on campus. Tressel himself met with athletic director Gene Smith, senior assistant general counsel for athletics Julie Van Atta, and members of the institution’s compliance staff. At no time during the interviews did Tressel suggest
he had prior knowledge of the infractions. He feigned surprise at the news, and later said publicly that this was the first he had heard of the athletes’ involvement with the tattoo parlor owner. He supported the institution’s findings that this was a relatively isolated incident of young men committing infractions in pursuit of tattoos and cash—in some cases to provide food both for themselves and their families. The university submitted a self-report to the NCAA stating as much, and asked for an urgent reinstatement decision from the NCAA so that the players might play in the upcoming January Sugar Bowl appearance. On campus, the news was surprising, but was did not appear damaging. One employee said, “I remember thinking that it was probably a pretty common occurrence at any institution and that we just happened to be caught.” Another said, “So when this popped up and we heard there were linkages between players accepting benefits and these NCAA violations I guess I wasn’t terribly surprised,” while a student on campus remembers thinking Ohio State was being targeted because of its success on the field. She reflected that knowing how clean Jim Tressel was and how his program was run, there was no doubt in her mind that this was anything more than a “witch hunt.”

The NCAA conducted an investigation and agreed to allow the players to play in the January 4, 2011 bowl game, with the understanding that the athletes would reimburse the university and sit out the first five games of the following season. Tressel and AD Gene Smith held a news conference announcing the sanctions, where Tressel said the players must have known what they were doing was a violation of NCAA rules: “We all have a little sensor within us, ‘Well, I’m not sure if I should be
doing this.’” It is noted that both President Gee and members of the OSU Board of Trustees had been informed, understood these claims to be true and supported the actions of coach Tressel and athletic director Gene Smith. Gee recalls having spoken with Tressel before this announcement.

While damaging, when the sanctions were announced, officials at the Ohio State University believed the matter was all but closed. The university appealed the NCAA decision for five of the six athletes, and went on to defeat the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville in the 2011 BCS Allstate Sugar Bowl by a score of 31-26.

Another Layer to the Story—Hidden in the Email

The crisis had only just begun, however. On January 13, 2011, university officials discovered, as part of an unrelated open records request, the emails detailing Tressel’s correspondence in April with the Columbus attorney. The findings initiated a series of interviews, and when presented with the messages, Tressel conceded that he had known about the players’ activities. President Gee was in China when the emails were discovered, and it was decided by AD Gene Smith and others on Gee’s leadership team that they would gather whatever information they could in the short term and alert him upon his return. Gee recalls first learning of the matter when he checked in from the airport lounge in Chicago, while waiting for his return flight to Columbus. Jeff Kaplan, his senior vice president for administration and planning told him what they had discovered, and Gee recalls asking tiredly whether there was anything there that he should worry about. Kaplan told him they would speak upon his return, and he hung up.
When he got to the office the following day, according to Gee, Joseph Alutto, the then provost who since Gee’s departure has served as acting president, came in and said, "Well, you need to fire Tressel." Gee recalled the conversation, saying,

I remember he was very black and white. And I’m not. I said, ‘Well, this is an iconic coach. Wait just a second; let’s just get real here. We could all end up pumping gas in Vernal, Utah, if we tried doing that.’

Gee sought more information and agreed to meet with Tressel right away; a commitment he kept. Tressel went to Gee’s home that Sunday. The two talked for three hours, and during the visit, Tressel told Gee that he had known, but believed he could not tell anyone because it might interfere with the federal investigation cited in the messages. He believed he was under attorney-client privilege despite the fact that the attorney who had told him did not work for the university or represent Tressel. Gee described the meeting as intense, and said Tressel was apologetic and sincere. He shed tears, and insisted that his error was inadvertent. He told Gee he had signed the form saying he did not know because he thought to do otherwise would jeopardize the federal government’s case against the tattoo parlor owner. He believed in the rules, he told Gee, and he followed them. Gee found Tressel’s story to be credible, but by his own admission, did not ask many follow-up questions about what Tressel had done with the information when he had learned it, why he had not come forward, at least to AD Smith when the revelations were made in December, and whether there was more to this matter. He took Tressel at his word, and agreed to stand by him.

It is worth noting that few people knew of the emails at this point, and while Gee and AD Smith believed they were addressing the matter, they had not yet
discussed a media plan, should the story break. Instead, the campus leadership was focused on informing the NCAA and furthering its investigation of the facts. On February 8, Tressel admitted to NCAA officials that he had knowingly committed a violation, and Gee said,

There was nothing in addition that we found to contradict what Jim had told us, and so the facts held together pretty clearly, so I made a determination, along with the athletic director that we were going to support Jim.

Gee and his staff then called a meeting to inform several key members of the Board of Trustees. While there were several people from the campus leadership in the room, the meeting was brief, and attendees were told of the existence of the emails. Gee advised that he and Gene Smith were handling the matter, and that OSU was cooperating with the NCAA. There was little discussion about who knew what, when, and how exactly the matter was being handled. One attendee at the meeting suggested that the way the information was presented hardly demonstrated an understanding of the gravity of the situation, nor did it provide others in attendance with enough information to recognize the urgency themselves.

**The Matter Goes Public Before the University Was Ready**

But there was little chance to ask questions. A few days later, a reporter with Yahoo! Sports published a story indicating that Tressel had known about the player behavior as early as April of that year. Campus administrators scrambled, having not yet considered how they might respond publicly. They issued the campus self-report to the NCAA on March 8, 2010 and called a news conference that same day to announce that Tressel would be suspended for two games and fined $250,000 for his lack of action in the matter. By all accounts, the press conference was a disaster.
Both President Gee and AD Smith acknowledged that they were not ready, but felt the need to be responsive and transparent. Jim Tressel more or less moderated the event, and according to several people, neither he nor Gordon Gee followed the script. Tressel, typically a man of decidedly few words, talked a lot and rambled on, but never actually apologized. He was visibly uncomfortable, though accepted the punishment willingly. Gee and Smith lavished great praise on Tressel, citing his expansive “body of work” and discounting this one transgression. After the announcement of the penalty to Tressel, the group took questions, a move they all regret. Gee, when asked whether he had considered firing Tressel, quipped candidly, “No, are you kidding? Let me just be very clear. I’m just hopeful the coach doesn’t fire me.” An athletic department staff member said the room just fell silent when Gee made the joke, and at that point they knew every reporter in the room had a story, and that this matter was far from over.

And what a story it was. Gee’s face was featured all over ESPN and the story ran in every local and national newspaper. The media were quick to suggest that the University was not taking the violations seriously enough, and pointed to Gee’s gaffe as evidence. Many on campus shrugged off the content of the comment, suggesting that it was Gee’s nature to bring levity to stressful situations—but they recognized the significance of soundbites on the national stage. About seeing Gee on SportsCenter, one student affairs employee said, “That’s just not good. You don’t want a university president being the face of the kinds of outlets that should be running different kinds of stories.” Likewise, a graduate student and student union employee said,
At first, I just kind of shook my head and moved on. But then, when you hear it on the national talk radio, the sports shows, and even see it in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, you begin to think, you know, maybe I need to be thinking a little more critically about some of these comments that we’ve all just kind of gotten used to here.

The significance of the larger situation was abundantly clear, but people struggled to align their perceptions of Jim Tressel with the accusations. One advancement official said,

I was at the office when I learned and I kept thinking, this can’t be right. This is a man who stands on a pedestal as it relates to values and morals. He writes books. You know, he always wears the little wristband asking ‘What Would Jesus Do?’ I kept thinking, this doesn’t sound right.

A student, noting that he owned both of Tressel’s books and looked to him as a mentor of sorts, said, “when this happens, it’s just like you start to question a lot of things.” Such reflections were common on campus, particularly because Tressel had built his reputation around doing the right thing, about performing within the rules, and acting and leading with honor and integrity. At the press conference, said one longtime campus employee, “there seemed to be a kind of unraveling of the man Jim Tressel,” and people began to question whether he was who he said he was. Another young staffer said,

I think we always thought that we had a guy who was above all of that and was winning in spite of a modern college football that was maybe more challenging to win in and had people playing around the rules instead of following them. So we thought we had this guy who was following the rules and was an upstanding guy. I think once that broke, I think the fear was, is he not who we thought he was?

And the fact that he never did apologize did not help. “Saying, ‘I’m sorry, I fouled up,’ buys you something, but he did not say that. It was one of those talking
around things…’if others perceived what I did to be wrong…’ The whole thing was a man apology,” said one alumnus, and she found it hard to swallow.

Likewise, people on campus expressed mixed feelings about Gee’s public support of Tressel. Some found it troubling that Gee would be so forthright in his support before the NCAA completed its investigation, suggesting he would have been wiser to put some distance between Tressel and the university early on. Some interpreted his support as a positive, speculating that Gee and Smith knew all there was to know, and had already come to some agreement with the NCAA about the severity of the case. Other respondents noted that such support was emblematic of Gee’s leadership, and the trust he placed in those who worked for him. A faculty member said that such support could be interpreted as “a positive, instructive, inspiring narrative. I think he did exactly what I would want him to do for me—that is, in the face of enormous pressure he did just the opposite of what you’d expect.”

Of his own response, Gee said,

For some reason or another, I just believed that Jim was kind of like a Boy Scout, and I just believed that this is what it was and that we had found out what we needed to find out and that we needed to be supportive. I don’t defend what I did. I just simply think that in the heat of those kinds of conversations, one doesn’t know quite where to draw that bright line in terms of caution.

No matter whether they supported Gee or questioned his motives, or whether they trusted Tressel or were skeptical, most on campus realized immediately after the press conference that this story was no longer just about tattoos and football players. Describing that shift, one former student said, “The
press conference just did it. I mean the quote just did it. It went from a national sports story to a national everything story, just like that.”

**Circling the Wagons for Crisis Management**

Acknowledging the press conference was in fact a turning point, Gee said, “The press conference was a disaster.” He explained the heat he took after it occurred, and wincing as he remembered the fury of the calls and letters, largely from outside the university, he continued,

Part of it was my quick-witted quip, but also Jim seemed very muddled, and the lack of clarity and the lack of assertion I think made it even more difficult. And I knew. So up to that point, I felt maybe it was manageable. But at that point, I knew we had a major crisis, so I went into crisis mode.

Whether it is true that Gee believed he needed to engage a broader group of people in managing this challenge or whether the Board of Trustees decided they needed to be more engaged for the sake of protecting the Ohio State University brand is unclear, but the response was that Gee assembled a crisis response team that included the university attorney, his senior vice president for administration and planning, the director of athletics, the faculty athletics representative, several members of the board of trustees, and members of the compliance staff, among others. A member of the board of trustees who sat on the committee said about the board members’ role,

I think Gordon wanted to handle the situation. He felt he was the right person to handle the situation, felt he was the president and did not want to turn over authority to manage this to the board, which frankly, I’m not thinking he should have done that. I think he was the best person to handle it. He’s the president.
He went on to say that he believed the group was well structured and functioned remarkably well. He praised Gee for including members of the board’s audit and compliance committee on the team, a group that viewed themselves as guardians of the university’s reputation.

The crisis response team met almost daily initially, and then several times each week in the intervening weeks. They hired outside investigators to ensure all of the facts were known. They stopped talking to the press and hired a communications firm to assist with their messaging. They sought the help of longtime adviser to their Board, Harvard professor and governance expert Dick Chait, and consulted with Big Ten and NCAA officials to ensure total transparency.

About the team, one member said, “I loved the team that the president put together that ultimately helped guide us from that point forward. I think the significant majority of what we did from that point forward was pretty doggone good.”

Another, agreeing that the right group had been assembled, described the way the team worked, saying, “He (Gee) demanded complete discretion. He took the lead, even when he saw that it was going to play out in the most painful of ways—for him personally and for the institution.”

Initially, the team’s discussions were guided by trying to understand where the matter began and ended, and who was involved—and no one was immune from study. The faculty athletics representative described the shift from the unbridled loyalty to Jim Tressel that had been displayed at the press conference to a more tempered focus on letting the facts drive the decision-making. He went on to explain how difficult that sometimes was, saying,
For anybody who knew Jim Tressel and spent time with him, it was natural to give him the benefit of the doubt. He commanded it. He deserved it. I believe this is a good man who made a bad mistake and then repeated it. But he’s a good, if not great, man in terms of his actions and deeds and philosophies.

This sentiment was shared by many in the group, and the dissonance between who they knew Jim Tressel to be and what the facts suggested was painful, but all recognized the reputational liability such a cover-up, if true, presented for the University. When discussing whether Tressel had been knowingly dishonest, one member said the group agreed,

If, in fact that's what the facts bear out, he’s likely not to be our coach. And if we come to that decision, if there is anyone else on that staff who knew about it, they're gone too. And if Gene (Smith) knew about it, he's going too. And if Gordon knew about it, Gordon goes too. If board members knew about it, they're going too. Whatever the punishment would be, if it was dismissal, anyone who knew was going down with him. So we had to try to figure out what the facts were so we could tell who knew and who didn’t know.

Gee shared this opinion and urged his team to determine the facts. It is noted that while he was still actively involved at this point, the work shifted to the members of the team and the investigators, and he assumed a more supervisory than leadership role at this stage, perhaps in part because the claims he had made about not knowing needed to be substantiated.

The investigation was very invasive, and very difficult. Both the third-party investigators and the NCAA found the Ohio State personnel to be very cooperative, suggesting early on that no others knew of the infractions at an earlier date, but days turned into weeks. The NCAA failed to provide any end date or expected date of conclusion for their inquiry, and several members of the team began to grow weary about the intentions of the organization. The University also began to suffer
the effects of remaining silent, for absent any real information, the press began to speculate about what the investigation might find. And suddenly, said a student affairs staffer on campus, the tidbits being reported became facts. “People found one bit of information and then that was it. That was what we were going to use. This made for lots of misinformation, and the big keepers of the brand not being able to share the right story.” That same employee went on to describe the media coverage during that time, saying,

They blamed someone new every day. On Monday, the blame’s on Tressel. On Tuesday, the blame is on Gee, and on Wednesday, on Smith. And then on Thursday, it’s the football players’ fault, while Friday, the blame is on compliance and the NCAA. Everyday, the media had a new story and a new person to blame. It was really bad for Ohio State.

A student at the time, who now works on campus, explained that the relative lack of information from the campus during this time was confusing, saying,

I think from a student perspective, it’s confusing to see the different layers of ethics, to hear interpretations from the media, hear what your friends are saying, and not have a clear statement on university policy or where we stand on these things.

The work of the committee continued, however, and where the university stood became clear on May 30, 2011. On that date, Gene Smith announced that Jim Tressel had resigned as football coach. One committee member said, “we tried to move efficiently without being in a hurry. We tried not to rush to judgment and to stay thoughtful, without letting it drag on.” It turns out though, additional information surfaced in the investigation, and it “became apparent that he knew more than he had let us know, and that was when we decided...we had to fire him. We were just taking on too much water and this stuff was just problematic.” All
agreed with the outcome, though Gee made the ultimate decision. One of the

principals in the room said,

So yeah, when that hit, it became...it was clarity in the chaos. It was clarity at
the base, and it was unanimous. And that decision on how to do that was
better than how we handled the press conference decision, so...because we
had that group in place by then. It was clear.

Gee conceded that the move was a difficult one for him. He considered

Tressel a friend, and still does. About the event itself, he said,

So then of course we dismissed him and that in and of itself was a great loss. I
think we did it fine, but there's no winning in any of these kinds of things. He
was a very popular coach, beloved by Ohioans. The university is equally
beloved. So the kind of torn loyalties and what had to transpire were hard.

He believed the best way around the expected backlash was to present a

plan, so when Gene Smith announced Tressel’s resignation, he also announced that

assistant coach Luke Fickell would assume leadership of the team in the short term,

and that the administration would put together a strategy to get a head football

couch named by the end of the season. “It was my strong belief, which proved to be
correct, that once we could get someone named, then we could turn the

conversation to new instead of old,” said Gee.

Beyond Gene Smith’s video announcement of Tressel’s resignation, there was

no further messaging from the campus. There was no press conference, and there

were no email messages sent to the campus community. Instead, Gee said,

What I really attempted to do was more...rather than sending out notes or
letters or whatever, which can sound both defensive and be misinterpreted, I
did what I’ve always done. Which is walk around and talk. I am the guy who
will talk to anyone or any group at any time. So I certainly did that with the
university. I talked with our student associations and a variety of other
groups, explaining what we were trying to do as an institution. So mine was
really sort of a campaign more than a war of memos.
Further, neither he nor AD Smith answered any questions with much detail before the campus volunteered to vacate the 2010 season and take two years of probation in early July. Ultimately, at the conclusion of the NCAA investigation, OSU was banned from post-season play for one year, required to forfeit its revenue share of the Big Ten Conference revenue shares from the previous year, and forced to vacate its records from the 2010 and 2011 seasons. Further, the school lost nine scholarships and was to be on probation for three years. University officials, eager to put them matter behind them, decided against fighting the sanctions.

Not surprisingly, the reaction to Tressel’s resignation was mixed, both on campus and off. Many believed him to be a scapegoat and that there was more to the story. Some believed that Gene Smith had to have known and should have been released long before Tressel. Others noted the scandals at Youngstown State, Tressel’s former employer, and said they knew all along that “trouble followed him.” But mostly, the campus community struggled to make sense of how a man they knew to be good and honest could make such a foolish decision, and then cover it up, as the facts suggested he had. They were angry about the behavior, but felt that while infractions deserve consequences, there had to be more to the story for the campus to release a man who had done so much for Ohio State. One athletic department employee said, “I don’t think Tressel should have had to step down, but I understand, and it was such a big thing that he did kind of have to step down just to make everything go away.” Another, more senior leader on campus recalls hearing people coming to his defense, saying things like, “well, that act speaks well
of how he’s a players-first sort of coach, and I’d still want my son to play for Jim Tressel ‘cause look at the way he tried to protect his players.” At the first game after his release, the student section wore sweater vests—Tressel’s signature look—in the stands as a sign of solidarity with the coach. Few of those students seemed to recognize they were supporting and honoring dishonesty. By all accounts, Gee was decidedly quiet on the topic publicly, and when asked, talked only about the future.

To this day, many on campus still struggle to make sense of the whole situation. Some avid fans asked why, when a faculty member was found to be falsifying research data at around the same time, he was allowed to stay, while Tressel was let go. Others were more philosophical in their inquiries, asking what exactly it was that caused Gee and Smith, who had initially stood so closely by Tressel, to change their minds. Was there more in the documents, or did he confess to something more? Both Gee and Smith have answered that question, saying only that the evidence was clear, and that the reputational risks to Ohio State were too great. At the advice of the communications consultants and members of the Board of Trustees who served on the crisis response team, the documents recovered were posted on the OSU website, as were the transcripts of the NCAA interviews, but questions remain, mostly because people on campus held Tressel in such high regard.

It is not surprising that the alumni response and that of the general public was equally strong. The university received hundreds of emails and letters both during the investigation and after the announcement of Tressel’s resignation. Some accused Gee personally of creating the problem, while others blamed the enterprise,
arguing, "you and presidents of other large universities have created a monster you cannot control." Some of the letters pointed out “every human who has ever walked the earth has made mistakes,” and claimed the forced resignation was unnecessary. Others praised the action, suggesting the leadership had made the right move. Several were critical of athletic director Smith, and the authors maintained that he should have been fired, or at least held accountable. And not surprisingly, more than a handful of notes threatened, or even promised, the withholding of donations until the move was reversed. One of Gee’s senior leadership team members said, “The public was all over this, from fire him immediately, shoot him, to this was nothing, he was protecting his players, do not do anything to him. There was no consensus.”

Gee requested that all units send any correspondence to the central communications office and they responded to most every letter using short, standard responses, some drafted by Gee himself, until they stopped coming. Gee assumed responsibility for replying to several of the letters on his own and spoke to several interested constituents by phone. All told, the university communications staff estimates that they collectively sent responses to several hundred emails and letters.

**Perceptions of Leadership and Action**

Perceptions of Gee’s leadership during this crisis varied, but most on campus ultimately believed he had handled the matter well. Several members of the staff acknowledged the rocky start with the press conference, but noted Gee and his teams’ desire to get the facts straight and to continually reassess. One staff member conceded that he had come, over time, to expect that sort of thoughtful plodding
from Gee, saying, “I think he handled it as situations were changing, and that’s
typical,” while another noted,

I think most of us respect leaders who continue to evaluate a situation. I don’t
know if any of us want a leader who will, with limited information, make
broad sweeping decisions that could have implications on people or the
university. So I think he handled that well, and I think the stages reflect that
he was looking at it on an ongoing basis and as things came to light.

One member of the crisis response team noted that before Gee assembled
them,

He John Wayne’d it and basically said, ‘I can handle this myself, and in that
respect I think he bungled things a lot. I think he and the university looked
very poor in their crisis response and their management of this crisis, not
because they were trying to hide anything, not because they were trying to
be devious, just in the way they were managing the communication.

He went on to say that when Gee expanded the group and worked with the
team, his outlook changed dramatically, and he described it as one of the most
functional responses of which he’d ever been a part. Another member agreed,
saying,

In terms of how presidents handle crises, I guess some internalize and prefer
to deal with it themselves. Others look to push it away, to gain distance from
it. He ultimately did neither of those. He did exactly what you’d want a leader
to do, which is lead.

Several on campus acknowledged the environmental challenges associated
with leading a large public university through crisis such as this one and how those
things sometimes make it difficult to evaluate presidential actions. One student
affairs employee, pointing to the impact of social media, said,

It used to be that they would sort of say, ‘oh well, we’re going to try to beat
the 6:00pm news cycle on this.’ Now there is no 6:00pm news cycle. You’re
reading your Twitter feed, and ESPN and Sports Illustrated and the New York
Times are reporting on a minute-by-minute basis. There is sometimes no time to stop and think about how you’re going to plan.

A senior leadership team member acknowledged the competing interests presidents face, saying,

I think when you’re looking at reputational risk, you’re looking at your own well-being, you’re looking at the well-being of the body of work of these folks. But you also have to respond to all of these individual constituents. It’s sort of an interesting challenge that presidents face.

While most on campus believed the management of the matter was well-handled, there was concern expressed over the limited information put out by the campus, and the failure to communicate more directly to internal stakeholders, either when the matter first arose, or when it was resolved. Students, faculty and staff alike noted the absence of messaging directed internally and one student affairs administrator in particular noted, “There was never any discussion of how do we talk to our community or our students or colleagues more broadly.” Several pointed to this failure in communication as part of the reason for why perceptions about the incident are so varied, while others noted it as a missed opportunity to have a bigger discussion about ethics and rules; lessons any university campus arguably should be raising and addressing.

**Looking back—E. Gordon Gee considers his own leadership**

Gee, pointing out that he has endured several crises in his 33 years of presidencies, said this was one of the more difficult ones. He still feels badly that he had to say goodbye to a friend. He regrets that he did not ask the next questions when he first talked to Tressel—of what he knew when, and whether he had now disclosed everything he knew. And he wishes, sometimes, that he had not made that
quip at the press conference. But, “in the end, you’re trying to call balls and strikes
the best way that you can see them.” Gee said that he took a lot of heat, both early on
and after the announcement, and conceded that at first, he “didn’t think about, even
though I understand this intellectually, I probably had no idea about the brand, the
power of the brand of Ohio state, both public and private, and negative and
positive.” But he also noted that there is not a playbook for these types of situations.

You don't all of a sudden say, ‘oh, well, the tipping point occurred.’ You just
know it when you see it...I think by touch and feel. You just have to listen
to...you have to be environmentally conscious and you have to be organically
plugged in.

He recognized that point after the press conference, and by bringing the right
people to the table, put the protection of the OSU reputation at the forefront and
began making decisions based on facts. And while he worked to recognize all of the
stakeholders of OSU when making decisions, he is the first to acknowledge that a
leader cannot please everyone. And that is why, he says,

You have to have nerves like sewer pipes. Because in the end, you have more
information than anyone else does. So when you make a decision you’re
making it with all the information. Those who criticize are generally those
who don't have all the information—and it is easy for them to point fingers
because they don't have the responsibility or the information.

And after complaining about bloggers and the “kinds of things that happen
now in which there is immediate gratification of nonsense,” Gee said that once
Urban Meyer was named coach, “it was as if the spigot had turned off. We moved
forward.” Indeed they have; this 2013-2014 season, the Buckeyes went 12-1 under
Chapter Five: Analysis

Introduction

These three cases provide insights into how presidents at these institutions behaved in crisis, and how others on campus perceived the actions and behaviors of their leaders during and after the crises. In this chapter, the cases are analyzed—both individually and collectively—to identify the important themes of each case, as well as the key commonalities and salient differences across the sites.

In the first part of the chapter, each case is explored more deeply, and key actions or behaviors are examined both to determine how they served to aid in the response, and to understand the ways in which they created meaning for others on the campus. In the latter portion of the chapter, the leaders’ actions and behaviors are compared side-by-side, allowing for a deeper understanding of whether the themes identified in the individual cases hold true across the sites, and affording more careful consideration of what meaning can or should be attributed to certain types of actions or behaviors. Likewise, the cross-case analysis exposes the differences that exist among the cases and the areas where more study might be needed.

The analysis is framed to respond to the research questions in both sections, though in the in-case analysis, the themes are presented more in list fashion than as direct responses and are organized by institutional case. In the later cross-case analysis section, the commonalities and differences are examined beneath individual headers denoting the question set. The research questions, as noted previously, are:
1. How do public university presidents respond when faced with human
induced crises on campus? What do they do? What actions do they take? How
do they communicate to institutional stakeholders?

2. In what ways, and to what extent do leaders use teams, or others, such as
boards or governance groups, in managing crisis? Who is included in those
groups and what roles do they play?

3. To what extent, and in what ways, do leaders intentionally manage meaning
in times of crisis?

4. In what ways do the various stakeholders of the university perceive and
understand the roles, actions and communications of presidents during
crisis? During times of crisis, what is the impact of this meaning making on
the institution?

Michigan State University

The Michigan State University case focused on the ways President Peter
McPherson responded to a single student contracting bacterial meningococcal
meningitis and septicemia, and the efforts he made to protect the health and safety
of the campus community from further outbreak and infection. The key elements of
this case focus on what McPherson did upon learning of the student's illness; the
ways he gathered information and made decisions; how he communicated with his
own leadership team, the campus more broadly, and stakeholders outside the
university; and the ways McPherson’s efforts were understood and perceived by members of the campus community.

**Active and Engaged Leadership**

Central to the response in this case was McPherson’s inclination to take charge and demonstrate to his team and the greater campus community that he understood both the magnitude of the problem and his responsibility to lead. This mindset shaped his own actions as well as that of those he interacted with directly and indirectly. He demonstrated this understanding from the beginning of the crisis by convening his senior team to initiate a response and going personally to visit with the family of the infected student. In both instances, McPherson assumed a position of authority and responsibility, and actively engaged in driving the response. Further, McPherson made the decision to mass-vaccinate despite advice otherwise, both from members of his team and the Centers for Disease Control. This action in particular demonstrates McPherson’s commitment to being seen as a strong leader who took no chances in matters of health and safety, and one who recognized and responded responsibly to threats to the well-being and reputation of the MSU community. He could have chosen to do nothing, or to advise a simplistic response such as a more vigorous hand washing campaign, as advised by the local medical and public health officials. Instead, McPherson recognized that such inaction would, at the minimum, harbor panic on campus and result in students leaving campus en masse, or worse yet, further infections or deaths within the community. To a lesser extent, McPherson’s move to action without consulting his
Board of Trustees is further evidence of his inclination to act and recognition that he personally was tasked with leading the campus out of this crisis.

**Team Leadership**

A second key dimension of this case was how McPherson interacted with his senior leadership team. Three themes emerged; McPherson utilized his team as a steering group both to gather and provide important information to aid decision-making, and to serve as a meaningful sounding board to him. In addition, several members of this group coordinated key elements of the response, such as media communications and event logistics.

Initially, members of the team were gathered in part to help McPherson complete his understanding of the circumstances himself. University Physician Beth Alexander was asked to describe the particular strain of meningitis and the epidemiology of the disease. She and members of her staff were invited to explain the efficacy of vaccinations, while Fred Poston, the Vice President for Finance and Administration and Provost Lou Anna Simon were tasked with gathering information about the size and status of the housing enterprise, the MSU Marching Band, functional spaces on campus, and the potential costs associated with various responses. As McPherson became more convinced of the need to take larger scale action, he utilized the team more to challenge his own perspectives than to seek support or find agreement. Beth Alexander argued that mass-vaccination was unnecessary, and Bob Noto, the university’s legal counsel, raised concerns about the risks of Reye’s syndrome. Members of the team, having long worked with one
another and with McPherson, were used to being used in this way. Noto, in particular, argued a position he did not personally embrace, but which he understood to part be his role on McPherson’s team. The result of the team members’ experience with Mcpherson and with one another was a keen recognition and adoption of those important roles and a lively discussion, as well as an understanding that after they had made their arguments, McPherson would make the ultimate decision about the course of action he and the university would take. Members of the group knew that their role then was to support the decision, and assume responsibility for actualizing the response.

McPherson’s use of team members in coordinating key elements of the response is important, particularly because he was known as somewhat of a micromanager in less tumultuous times. Once the decision had been made to mass vaccinate, McPherson participated in a few media opportunities himself, but largely left the messaging and media management to Vice President for University Relations Terry Denbow. Likewise, he relied on Alexander, Simon and Poston to set up the logistics of the response, and while he stayed engaged, he allowed them the freedom to make decisions and adjustments along the way. McPherson was visible at the vaccination site and on campus during the response, but did not generally get into the “weeds” of the decision-making as the vaccination effort played out. The result of his being able to rely on others to coordinate the logistics meant that McPherson was available to make calls and leverage his personal network when vaccine reserves were short and the lines for inoculation were moving too slowly.
Capitalizing on Contacts

McPherson’s leveraging of key established relationships was another important dimension of this case. He had, over time, established relationships with members of the campus community, the media, the military and Michigan’s federal delegation that proved particularly helpful to this crisis response. In particular, McPherson met with the student newspaper staff each semester, affording him credibility and recognition when he needed their assistance in getting information about the response out to the student community. Likewise, the relationship he had established with Senator Levin prior to the crisis made it possible for MSU to gain access to more vaccine when the CDC stockpile was depleted in the first of several days of vaccinations, and it was McPherson’s contacts that ultimately led to the delivery of vaccine guns and personnel from the Great Lakes Naval Station. The success of the vaccination effort can be attributed in large part to the way McPherson was able to anticipate pitfalls in the response and leverage his personal contacts to successfully avoid them.

Leveraging Campus Resources

Another important dimension of this case is the extent to which McPherson and others on his team capitalized on the physical and human resources of the MSU campus. This dimension was illustrated in three important ways. First, the team used known physical spaces and historic practices to guide their response. They relied on tested practices and procedures rather than having to craft them during crises. Then, they took advantage of the institutional culture of helpfulness in
executing the response. Finally, they themselves played active, visible roles during the effort.

The group determined right away that they could use the Intramural Building space to administer the vaccine to students, utilizing the set-up and line-management system that had previously worked for student registration in that space. Likewise, campus leaders and staff leveraged the experience they had gained when mass-vaccinating two years prior, in 1997. In addition, calls for volunteers to aid in the response yielded large numbers of people, decreasing the university’s reliance on outside help. The result of these decisions to work with who and what they had at their disposal and to move beyond functional-fixedness was both critical to their success in deploying the response and significant in providing some elements of familiarity and security in a time of great uncertainty.

Further, university leaders were visibly present during the response. University Physician Beth Alexander spoke to the MSU Marching Band members, Fred Poston helped allay fears and swab arms in the vaccination lines, and among other things, President McPherson checked-in on the call center staff and was seen carrying boxes at the response site. Their active, visible engagement both supported the institutional culture of helpfulness and collaboration and served to put campus stakeholders at ease, ultimately aiding in their understanding of the crisis.

**Message Management**

Finally, the campus fully controlled the messaging about the crisis and the resultant vaccination. This dimension of the response is due in part to the fact that
the crisis happened in 1999, prior to the advent of social media and before the internet was used for the transmission of real-time information and news. Importantly, however, the university also relied on multiple messengers in communicating the crisis and the resultant response.

First, while email and the internet were utilized in this crisis, they served largely as mechanisms to push out static information, and the campus relied instead on television, radio and print media to distribute information about the infected student, Adam Busuttil, and the larger campus response. Strong existing relationships with the media outlets, well-constructed fact sheets and frequently asked question lists allowed for efficient transmittal of information from the campus to the larger campus and external communities. In addition, the university assembled a call center to manage incoming inquiries and provide more specific information to those seeking it. The result of these efforts was largely uniform messaging and little outside speculation or perpetuation of panic.

In addition, the university leveraged University Physician Beth Alexander’s expertise in explaining the strains and epidemiology of the disease, and positioned several other key experts as spokespersons during the vaccine deployment. While President McPherson met with the family and spoke briefly to the media to explain the institutional response, he upheld his longstanding practice of relying on the experts to carry the institutional message. His relative absence from the media was not perceived as a problem, however. Instead, the consistency of his behavior in crisis as well as the credibility of the experts caused stakeholders to feel confident in the institutional response and contributed to their positive perceptions of
McPherson’s leadership. In particular, members of the campus community said that they believed McPherson and his team used the media effectively to communicate the information they needed, and that they found the sources to be credible and trustworthy.

**Summary**

These five key dimensions of the case illustrate the ways in which McPherson was able to, in a matter of days, efficiently carry out a mass-vaccination effort for nearly 19,000 students and protect both his own reputation and that of Michigan State University. Collectively, these dimensions point to the ways his actions and behaviors in crisis served to create meaning for members of the campus community, and provide the basis for a larger cross-case comparison, which follows later in the chapter.

**University of Nebraska**

The University of Nebraska case focused on the ways Chancellor Harvey Perlman responded to the initiation of a membership review by the Association of American Universities (AAU), an organization to which the University had belonged since 1909. The analysis of this case centers around what Perlman did upon learning of the review; the teams he gathered and the decisions he made; how he communicated with those teams, the campus more broadly, and stakeholders outside the university; and the ways his efforts were understood and perceived by members of the campus community.
Active and Engaged Leadership

Central to Perlman’s leadership in this matter was the fact that he perceived the matter as a crisis, and one that required his action. While it later became clear that many faculty on the UNL campus did not know what AAU was or what membership in the organization meant, the university's longstanding role in the organization had been a big driver in its recent acceptance into the Big Ten Conference. Perlman recognized the credential AAU membership provided to the university, and worried about what getting kicked out would do to the morale and productivity of the campus. He viewed dismissal as a threat to the growing reputation of the university, and believed it was his responsibility to fight the review.

Likewise, Perlman felt strongly about the upward trajectory of the institution's research enterprise, the growth of the university and its infrastructure, and the general institutional intensity that had followed the invitation to join the Big Ten. While he conceded that at some level he believed he needed to act to protect his own credibility as a leader, he very clearly articulated that a failure to fight would have amounted to the perception that he had given up on his faculty. Perlman’s dogged commitment to the fight resulted in personal pain and humility and the university's ultimate dismissal from the AAU—but also served to garner Perlman tremendous gratitude and respect from the faculty on whose behalf he battled.

Reliance on Others—Internally and Externally

An important dimension of the case was Chancellor Perlman’s use of teams in this response. UNL’s leader engaged teams in two very different and important
ways. First, Perlman utilized a small team to help him assemble the institutional documents he would later use to make the case for Nebraska’s continued membership. Described by those close to him as a self-assured, bold leader, Perlman laid out the vision for the group, but used the team more to functionally produce the data needed to support the argument he had in mind than to gather feedback or seek alternate approaches. Perlman was very much the driver of the institutional response, and perhaps because of the confidential nature of the inquiry, believed he could and should manage it largely independently.

Perlman also relied on a more ad-hoc, advisory team of fellow Big Ten presidents as he assembled his response documents. He shared with this group his arguments and copies of his documents, as well as drafts of correspondence he intended to send to AAU leadership. This team, comprised entirely of peers who shared his perspective on the potential ouster, served to bolster his confidence, and largely affirmed the content and tone of his actions and communications. Perlman’s use of this team in this way served to dampen some of the isolation inherent to the way he chose to manage the process on his own campus. Further, members of this group became important advocates as the vote neared, and the formation of this team allowed Perlman to deepen his relationships with his newfound colleagues. While Nebraska’s dismissal from the Big Ten was apparently never on the table, there is little doubt that the connections Perlman made with these peers helped ease any concerns he or they may have harbored about such action.

In addition, Perlman engaged in some strategic politicking with colleagues and other institutional leaders as the vote neared. Perlman admitted that he
resented the fact that he had to do so at all, and found the effort rather unpleasant, but understood it a necessary part of the fight. While those he engaged were not a team, most were colleagues he had known a long time, and many he considered to be friends. Perlman’s efforts to sway votes in his favor, both with this group and the Big Ten presidents he gathered to help, mark a third important dimension of this case—that of his reliance on relationships he had forged in less difficult times. While the result of those connections did not ultimately change the vote in Nebraska’s favor, the reliance on these leaders helped Perlman navigate the difficult circumstances, and proved useful in gaining a sense of where the numbers stood going into the final stages of the process.

**Message Management**

Importantly, however, while Perlman entered this crisis with strong faculty support and took on the fight for AAU membership on behalf of the faculty of UNL, he did not engage them in the same way, or at all really. Conversely, he told the faculty about the matter only after the process was complete and dismissal had been confirmed, and in so doing, was able to be completely intentional about his messaging to them. His strategic efforts to manage the messaging about the dismissal constitute the fourth key dimension of this case. This dimension is illustrated in several important ways. First, by waiting until the final vote was taken to inform his faculty of the dismissal, Perlman set up the narrative such that his perspective was the only one they heard, and one that could only be understood historically. His messaging to the campus simply presented the crisis as having happened, and did not leave room for the consideration of alternative approaches or
strategies to mitigate the dismissal. In addition, the language he used in the messages he sent to campus was heartfelt and raw, and suggested to faculty and others that he had done everything he could have to avoid dismissal, but had not been successful. The result of these strategies was a largely shared understanding of the sequence of events, and little questioning of Perlman’s tactics or his loyalty to the institution.

Perlman was also remarkably deliberate in both his communication with AAU leadership and in building a written record of the process. While he interacted with committee members and others at the organization by telephone, he followed-up each call with an email or written letter. Those letters and emails, as well as those he exchanged with members of his Big Ten team, the University of Nebraska System president, and others, later became part of a written log that was distributed to external reporters and others seeking information on the case. Perlman had recognized early on that there would be Freedom of Information Act inquiries about the vote no matter the outcome, so he simply planned accordingly. His deliberate efforts to capture what had happened resulted in several high-profile media stories about the dismissal, and served to enable Perlman to tell his side of the story without having to comment directly to the media at all—or to disparage the AAU in any way. Faculty perceptions of the response and the crisis were very much impacted by the media coverage that resulted from these distributed documents. In fact, even some of those who were Perlman’s harshest critics more generally and who admitted to not knowing of the membership before were sympathetic after reading the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside HigherEd* stories. They felt
angry at AAU leadership that Perlman would have been treated so poorly, and wondered aloud why the university would want to belong to such a group.

Finally, Perlman’s initial message to the campus about losing the fight ended with aspirational language about looking forward and celebrating all that UNL would continue to accomplish. He reiterated that messaging in each of his campus appearances in the following months, in his next two state of the university addresses and with smaller audiences such as the faculty senate and alumni groups. He answered emails and calls on the matter with optimistic language suggesting that while the AAU battle was lost, the upward trajectory of Nebraska would continue, and two years after the dismissal, faculty and others on campus were still echoing that sentiment. In fact, none of those interviewed for this study even understood the matter to be a crisis, but rather viewed it as a disappointing event that had been appropriately managed by the administrative leadership. Perlman’s control of the messaging in those first, difficult days, proved significant to how those on campus understood the crisis itself and how Nebraska would move beyond it.

**Summary**

These three key dimensions of the case begin to illustrate the ways in which Chancellor Perlman’s actions and behaviors in navigating the membership review process of the Association of American Universities created meaning for others in the UNL community and helped the campus weather the difficult outcome. These dimensions will be explored further in the cross-case analysis later in this chapter.
The Ohio State University

The Ohio State University case focused on the ways President Gordon Gee responded to news that football coach Jim Tressel knew about NCAA violations among members of his team and allowed them to continue to play. The analysis of this case considers what Gee did upon first learning of the matter and as the case progressed; the ways he gathered information and made decisions; how he managed the initial press conference and later messaging opportunities, as well as communications with his own administrative teams and the internal campus community; and the ways his efforts were understood and perceived by members of the university community.

Misguided Leadership

President Gee, when he learned that Jim Tressel had known about the impermissible activities of his players and had allowed them to play, met with the coach and listened to his explanation. Gee, by his own admission, did not ask many questions during the meeting, and instead made a judgment to stand by the coach based on past experience and loyalty built over time. Central to this case is Gee’s initial sense that he could and should handle the situation himself. He believed that the issue was somewhat trivial, and was not a crisis—so did not warrant a larger crisis team or response. This dimension of the case was demonstrated in several important ways. First, when he met with Tressel, he failed to get to the bottom of the story right away, letting his personal loyalty to the coach cloud his ability to even recognize the possibility of misbehavior or malfeasance. Then, he assembled a group of people who shared his loyalty to Tressel, and together with the football coach
himself, they created a plan to publicly announce the matter in a press conference. Gee did not recognize the inherent problems associated with letting the accused run the press conference, nor did he think it was important to engage a broader group or to practice beforehand. At the press conference, Gee publicly stated his support for Tressel, citing his impressive body of work. Later, when the tenor of the press conference grew tense, and he was asked whether Tressel would lose his job over the transgression, Gee responded with a lighthearted quip, saying, “No, are you kidding? Let me just be very clear. I’m just hopeful the coach doesn’t fire me.” At that moment, it was apparent that Gee had no control over the situation and was in over his head. In fact, Gee’s overconfidence and initial belief that the matter was not a big deal ultimately caused him to behave in ways that served to turn it into a full-fledged crisis.

A Tale of Two Teams

A second key dimension of this case was Gee’s use of teams in managing the matter. The first team Gee convened to address the situation was collegial in nature, and the members shared the expectation that this problem could be made to go away quickly. They provided Gee with the support to make decisions and take action based on his personal—and their shared—loyalty for Tressel. The make-up of this group contributed to Gee’s failure to ask more questions and his inability to recognize the inherent reputational risks to the university, in large part because none of the members believed or could even imagine that the story could go further or be worse. This team planned and executed the press conference, and ultimately contributed to Gee’s overconfidence and under preparedness at the event.
The second team Gee convened was bigger and more diverse, and like the group McPherson convened at MSU, members acted more incrementally to seek information and understand the implications of the facts before taking action or making statements. While Gee used the team largely to implement the investigation phase of the response and less to independently make decisions, he relied on the diversity of its membership to help him understand and recognize differing perspectives about facts of the case. Further, in contrast to the first team Gee had convened, this group was charged with providing Gee with data and findings off which he could base his decisions. The broad-based membership, which even included members of OSU’s Board of Trustees, and its clear charge to determine the facts of the case resulted in campus-wide support of both Gee and the committee, and a sense that the matter was truly being handled.

**The Significance of Trust**

Trust was a recurring theme in this case, both as it relates to the trust the Ohio State community had in President Gee before and throughout the crisis response, and to the ways that the perceptions of, and support for, head football coach Jim Tressel changed over time. The OSU community believed in Gordon Gee before the crisis happened, recognizing his strengths as a leader and his commitment to upholding the reputation of the institution. Despite a difficult start and an embarrassing gaffe, the internal community remained largely supportive of Gee’s efforts to get the facts and make the decision that was best for the university. Even those who disagreed with the final outcome conceded that Gee’s leadership during the crisis was strong, and that they inherently trusted him as a leader. This
fact is important and points to the significance of leaders recognizing and capitalizing on the institutional culture, and gaining the trust of stakeholders in less turbulent times, such that they might have credibility in crisis.

**Message (Mis)Management**

Another important dimension of this case was the messaging offered by both Gee and the university. Several important elements of messaging emerged in the findings, each illustrating different facets of Gee’s leadership. As noted, Gee’s gaffe at the initial press conference served to elevate both the media attention to the matter and the severity of the reputational risk to the university. His attempt at levity, normally well received on campus and among friends, was widely understood in the press to be an indication of OSU’s failure to take seriously the NCAA violations and their obligation to uphold the rules—and impression that was furthered by Tressel’s failure during the press conference to actually apologize.

When the story spread and Gee realized the severity of the problem, he retreated from the media and advised his newly assembled team to do the same. Likewise, little information about the team’s work was distributed or shared by the institution—either in the media or on its own website. While perhaps understandable, this strategy was problematic, as it resulted in widespread speculation by the external media and the proliferation of misinformation and rumors. On campus, absent any new or real information from Gee or the university, members of the community began to believe what they were reading in the external media. They expressed frustration with the negative focus of the media, but explained that it was difficult for them to defend their school and its football coach
when they no longer saw institutional leaders doing the same. Ultimately, this strategy caused the university to lose all control of the story for several months, and served to confuse the campus community, suggesting that some amount of institutional messaging is important to campus stakeholders. The nature of the 24 hour news cycle is such that institutions can very rarely be out in front of stories like this one, but the fact that stakeholders were seeking campus information indicates that they recognized the university itself as a trusted source of information.

Finally, after Jim Tressel’s resignation, athletic director Gene Smith made the public announcement and Gordon Gee discussed the topic only in small group meetings and in walk-around meetings on campus. This was a deliberate communication effort, and one that Gee believed would be most effective and ensure the least misinformation. While some on campus complained about the lack of mass messaging and the failure of leadership to connect the lessons of this crisis to the student experience more broadly, there was agreement that Gene Smith was the right person to communicate this news to the campus and greater community. Further, the community felt satisfied with Gee’s level of disclosure after Tressel’s resignation.

This element of the messaging is important because it demonstrates the utility, and in this case the effectiveness, of using multiple messengers in crisis. The circumstances of this case make this finding somewhat difficult to attribute, however, for it could be that Gee’s credibility and trust within the OSU community before the crisis impacted members’ willingness to accept his downplaying of the event after it happened and his relative background role in the media. It could also
be the case that the community accepted his secondary role because they feared the impact of another public gaffe. While it is difficult to know whether either of these things affected respondents’ feelings about Gene Smith’s more public role at the end, it is true that the perceptions of Gee’s leadership were unaffected either by his management of this crisis or the role he played in communicating about it.

**Leading with Intention**

Two additional dimensions of this case surfaced as significantly contributing to the community’s understanding of the circumstances. First, Gee and Smith’s strategic emphasis on next steps, when detailing the Tressel resignation, illustrated the institutional intention to move forward. Gee felt it important to name an interim coach and to work aggressively to hire a new head coach by the end of the approaching season. He believed that the hurt and pain associated with Tressel’s departure would dissipate when a new coach was identified, a belief that proved to be true. Urban Meyer’s hiring, and the team’s success the following year all but ended the chatter about Jim Tressel and what his departure meant for OSU football and the university more broadly.

**When Perceptions and Reality Do Not Line Up**

Related to that point is the fact that Jim Tressel, like Gee, was regarded as a campus icon and was widely perceived to be a man of great honor and integrity. He had written several books on ethical leadership and was understood to be a man who worked within the rules. When this crisis surfaced, it was very difficult for those inside the OSU community to make sense of how this man they thought they knew so well could have committed the actions he was accused of, and at first, many
were convinced it was all a set-up—perhaps in part because of Gee’s relative dismissal of the matter. As the evidence became more clear, however, perceptions about Tressel began to shift and the nearly unbridled trust he had once known began to fall apart. The dissonance people in the community feel about Tressel is still palpable today, with some believing he is an inherently good man who made a poor decision, while others say this case lends credence to the argument that he has always been an untrustworthy leader who leveraged a fake persona to cover his transgressions. Gee still considers the coach a friend, and stands by his decision to defend Tressel in those first days. He says Tressel’s body of work is one to be respected and that the man ought still be trusted and admired. But it is apparent that this crisis took a toll on Gee, that it pained him to have to fire Tressel, and that he recognized in this matter just how fleeting institutional support can be. Perhaps more than any leader in the study, Gee recognized both the importance of, and the difficulty inherent to, maintaining trust.

**Summary**

These six dimensions provide a means to explore the ways President Gordon Gee managed and responded to the crisis at the Ohio State University. Collectively, they demonstrate the complexity inherent to crises on university campuses, and the ways that individual actions and behaviors can impact both the outcomes of a response and the way others in the community perceive the matter.
Conclusion

Each of these cases presented a leader’s response to a different type of crisis borne out of circumstances other than natural disasters. The cases varied in some important dimensions such as the how quickly leaders needed to act, if the crisis emerged fully formed (such as at Nebraska) or played out over an extended period of time (OSU), and the extent to which the universities were able to control and manage the messaging, both to their own communities and externally. Despite these differences, some important similarities also emerged. The cross-case analysis, which follows, explores salient findings across the three cases, examining the similarities and differences, in an effort to answer the research questions.

Cross-case analysis

This section examines 1.) what the leaders in this study did and how they behaved in crisis; 2.) the types of teams they assembled, and the ways in which they utilized those teams; 3.) to what extent, if at all, they intentionally managed the messaging or the response surrounding the crisis; and 4.) how those on campus who live and work outside of the executive suite perceived the actions, behaviors, and leadership of their president during crisis. Similarities and differences across the cases are explored to identify key themes and takeaways.
Presidential Actions

When is a Crisis a Crisis?

Several key themes emerged in the cases about how leaders responded to crisis. First, the point at which the leaders understood these matters to be crises differed in each of the cases—in part because of the nature of the incidents. At both Michigan State University and the University of Nebraska, the presidents recognized immediately the reputational threat to their institutions and took actions to build a response upon learning even just the first details of the situations. They each said that intuition and experience caused them to act, though they were able to explain only the ways that the latter caused them to recognize risk more easily. McPherson pointed to previous meningitis outbreaks at MSU as one of the reasons for his immediate action, while Perlman described the significance AAU membership had played in UNL’s recent admission to the Big Ten Conference as an important driver in his response. Both men noted that their life experiences also helped them recognize the threats inherent in these situations.

Conversely, at OSU, President Gee did not immediately see the matter as a crisis, but did recognize how an NCAA violation might draw scrutiny—particularly at an institution like OSU where athletics is so deeply tied into the university ethos and culture. He felt obligated be transparent, and to personally take action in responding to the allegations, so mobilized a team and began to formulate a plan for a press conference. While Gee was only able to recognize the matter as a crisis after the press conference, the fact that he and the other leaders in the study were both able to see and understand the reputational risks inherent to each of these problems
ultimately established cause for action. This element is significant because it points to both the importance of leaders’ experience and intuition in both recognizing reputational risk and identifying crises.

**Active and Engaged Leadership**

Second, in each of the three cases, the presidents believed that it was important to assume an active leadership role, and to take charge of the situation right away. Driven by the perception that their active leadership was essential to protect the reputation of the institution—and to some extent their own—each of the presidents initiated actions that demonstrated their understanding of the risks the matters posed to their respective universities. Their first actions took several forms. At MSU, McPherson gathered his team and went immediately to meet with the family of the infected student to gauge the severity of the situation. At Nebraska, even before convening his senior leadership team, Perlman began mapping out the components of the institutional argument and thinking about the types of data the group might need to produce. He then responded to the AAU, informing the leadership there that the University would fight the dismissal. Gee, at the Ohio State University, gathered information about the violations from Tressel and members of the Athletic Department staff, and convened the group who would later decide to do the press conference. The leaders’ actions in all three cases, and in particular at Nebraska and MSU, resulted in the initiation of the formal crisis response which would ultimately be used to guide the campuses back to normalcy. At OSU, Gee’s initial actions served to make matters worse before they got better, largely because he overly trusted Jim Tressel and failed to anticipate or consider any scenario in
which the facts could be other than what he knew at that time. His handling of the press conference will be explored in more depth below, as will the efforts he and others later made to resolve the matter, but that case and the others demonstrate both the significance of leaders’ early engagement and the ways in which the actions of leaders themselves can influence the trajectory of the crisis. While leaders are looked to by stakeholders to lead, and specifically to lead the campus out of crisis, they also become, by virtue of their engagement in crisis, part of the narrative of these matters.

**Reputational Protection**

Wrapped up in the presidents’ need to take active leadership was a desire to protect their own reputations and credibility as leaders, particularly for McPherson and Perlman. Each sought to ensure that he retained the ability to effectively lead not just in this crisis, but beyond these events and into the future as well. While each insisted that his actions were driven first and foremost by what he believed was the most prudent course of action for the university at that time, both leaders acknowledged the extent to which their personal identities were entangled in their behaviors. Had, for example, McPherson taken the advice of the CDC and his campus health officers and advised only a hand washing campaign, and if another student had gotten sick, or worse yet died, as a result of his relative inaction, his credibility as a leader would have been diminished. Likewise, had students panicked and left campus, McPherson would have had to concede to his board and others that he knew of the seriousness of the risk and had options, but chose not to act. At Nebraska, if Perlman had chosen, as the President at Syracuse University did, to
walk away from the AAU inquiry, simply conceding that Nebraska did not belong, he felt he would have been saying to the faculty that he did not believe in or recognize the great work they were doing and the growth they had demonstrated in the areas and metrics that AAU measured.

While Gee talked less about his personal credibility being a reason for taking action, he conceded that his early behaviors served to suggest to others, at least externally, that he did not understand the severity of the situation. The criticism he endured as a result of his initial actions at the press conference took a toll on him personally and also resulted in greater involvement of his board in the next phases of the response. Collectively, these findings are important to explaining the ways leaders approach crisis and demonstrate that while crisis resolution is the primary driver in response, it is not the only reason for presidential action, and that matters of trust affect their responses as well. Further, missteps in action have consequences both personally and professionally for these leaders.

**Constants in Presidential Action**

Finally, as the crises played out, all three leaders convened crisis response teams; each identified himself as the decision-maker; and all assumed a key role in the institutional messaging about the crisis and the response. These themes are explored more deeply in the sections below, as they also represent individual research questions or parts thereof, but their collective presence in the three cases suggests that leaders’ behaviors are similar, no matter the nature of the crisis. This finding is important both because it highlights the shared methodologies and approaches of leaders and the extent to which, when actualized or practiced, those
approaches can create very different outcomes. Further, these actions collectively served to create language and symbols from which campus stakeholders could begin to make meaning and understand the crises themselves.

**Leaders and Their Teams**

In each of the three cases, presidents engaged teams to help them mount an institutional response, and all three leaders discussed the importance of these groups both to their own leadership and to the ultimate resolution of this crisis. Four dimensions of the formal teams in the study surfaced in comparing the cases. First, leaders compose teams differently and rely on team members to play various roles. Second, the leadership of presidents determines team member engagement, and to some extent, team utility. Third, leaders can have teams and retain their status as the key decision-makers. And finally, the study revealed that leaders use several informal groups or contacts to navigate crisis, highlighting the utility and importance of a broad professional network.

**Team Composition and Roles**

Specifically, the make-up of the teams and the roles members played as participants were important. At both MSU and Nebraska, and in the case of the second team formed at OSU after the press conference, teams included both senior staff members and functional or technical experts. The technical experts provided presidents and their key advisors data points to better understand the grandeur and the risks associated with the crisis, as well as information that would drive the ultimate response. Senior staff played complementary roles to those provided by the technical experts on each of these teams. At MSU, members of McPherson’s
leadership team, long accustomed to working with him and with one another, offered perspective and advice, and served as a sounding board for the president, even embracing positions they did not personally share as a means of helping McPherson anticipate the pitfalls and challenges of his preferred approach. Dr. Alexander helped him and the rest of the team understand the nature of the crisis, and was later delegated to assist with communications as well. At Nebraska the senior team members were invited to step outside of their traditional roles and offer advice or insight to the case, but only within the parameters afforded by Perlman. Nebraska’s leader said he valued his team’s contributions more because he trusted them as his senior-most advisors than because of any particular perspective or insights they offered. He also explained, however, that he did not allow the group to suggest alternative resolutions to the crisis and that unlike McPherson, did not rely on the group to serve as a sounding board to any significant extent.

The second team assembled at OSU also included members of the senior team, in part because Gee trusted the group, and because they had technical expertise important to the investigation. Specifically, both his legal counsel and the day-to-day contact to the Athletic department from his office were important to the data gathering and analysis the group was charged with conducting. Whether the roles the senior members played as part of this team were traditional for them or not was less clear, though the functional nature of the team did mean that they were relied upon less for advice and more for action. Gee, in assembling the group, made clear that their task was to get all of the facts, and that if anything surfaced suggesting anyone at all knew of the allegations of improper behavior among
athletes, then he or she would be let go immediately. The work of the group, therefore, had significant reach, but like at Nebraska, the scope of their charge was ultimately rather small.

So, while the composition of these groups and the roles the members played differed across the sites, the mix of technical expertise with that of trusted leadership among the senior staff was a constant, and resulted in several key findings. First, while leaders can rely on their senior leadership team for advice and counsel, and sometimes information and data, other technical experts are often needed to provide information and expertise important to decision-making. Second, senior staff often have the ability to provide functional expertise and, by virtue of their broad-based knowledge and experience with one another and a leader, can step out of their functional roles to offer broader guidance and perspective to the issues. And finally, no matter the skills or expertise of the group, the roles team members play are determined, in large part, by the leaders themselves.

**Leaders Determine Team Function**

Related to the idea that leaders determine the roles team members play in crisis is the fact that leaders define the function and utility of their teams. In each case in this study, the presidents defined for the groups what he was seeking from them. In the case of Nebraska, Perlman’s language in the emails to the group actively sought support and invited edits that might further the message, but did not solicit in any way, a competing or alternate course of action. Likewise, Gee engaged the first group fully trusting coach Jim Tressel, and believing the group needed simply to come up with a plan that would demonstrate this inquiry to be a non-issue.
Ultimately, members were not encouraged to challenge him or to consider what might happen if there were more to the story. In these ways, the findings suggest that the parameters and expectations set by the leader determine the function and utility of the team.

**Leaders as Decision-Makers**

In addition, while the leaders in this study tapped several different kinds of people to serve on their teams and used them both to help them think through hard, challenging circumstances and serve functional roles in guiding the universities out of crisis, the presidents made it clear that they themselves were making the important decisions. For example, McPherson made it clear to new members of the group, like University Physician Beth Alexander, that he invited feedback and debate even on fundamental issues such as vaccinating healthy students and how to best deliver the medication, but that he would make the final decision on the course of action. Alexander remembers that he insisted on full disclosure and total openness in the group, so when she expressed reservations about the merits of mass vaccination and why she felt for public health reasons it was not necessary, he listened, but ultimately decided that even at significant financial expense, it was important for him and the University to look like they were in control, and to engage actively to protect the long-term reputation of the institution.

Likewise, Perlman, both in the way he initially charged his on-campus team and in his messaging to the external team, made it clear that he was the decision-maker at UNL. Unlike McPherson, however, who sincerely sought the perspectives of his team to inform his decisions, Perlman readily admitted that when he told his
leadership team about the inquiry, he did so having pre-determined that the university would fight the dismissal. He also had pre-determined the major components of what their argument would be and invited the group's involvement only to provide assistance in making it.

Finally, at Ohio State, in the first phase of the crisis, Gee convened the athletic director, the football coach and others and determined a course of action that ultimately led to the press conference. By his own admission, Gee let his decision-making early in the crisis response be clouded by unbridled trust in and personal loyalty to Tressel—a loyalty others on the team shared—and therefore his decision to stand by and defend the coach was pre-determined before the group ever gathered. Later, when Gee recognized the grandeur of the problem, he assembled a broader group that had functional diversity and a broad charge to determine the facts of the case. Despite the presence of several board members on the group, Gee continued to assert his leadership over the group, and like at MSU and Nebraska, it was never in question who would make the final decision about Tressel's fate. While Gee differed from Perlman in that he did not engage this second team with an end result in mind, functionally he used his team in a similar fashion—that is, he sought from them data he could use in building a case or making a decision. Yet Gee did not encourage and hear multiple perspectives before making a decision like McPherson had either. Instead, he believed the matter to be more black and white than gray, and wanted only facts on which he could base a decision. Ultimately though, he, like the others, was able to both leverage the work of a team and affirm his role as lead decision-maker.
The Power of a Network

In addition to formal teams, leaders relied on others in crisis to help them gather information, connect to resources, and advocate on the university’s behalf. While these resources are inherently more ad hoc, their value in crisis is significant, and underscores the importance of establishing, in calmer times, a broad network of contacts and resources upon which leaders’ can draw.

In this study, McPherson at Michigan State perhaps made the most extensive use of his network, tapping Senator Levin in Washington, DC as well as the National Guard and contacts at the local media, butPerlman at Nebraska relied on his network of AAU peer presidents as well. Perlman leveraged his contacts with leaders as the vote neared to both serve as advocates, and as informants about how the matter was progressing. Those relationships proved helpful to Perlman’s efforts at the time, as well as when the story went public and the media sought commentary from other institutional leaders.

In contrast, at OSU, where Gee had the luxury of an extensive network of contacts forged over not one, but two tenures as president, he opted not to use it initially. Had Gee done more to use his networks—perhaps by offering an exclusive story to a trusted local media outlet, planting some specific questions during the press conference, or by reaching out to some of his peers who had experienced similar inquiries before going public he might have truncated his crisis.

Ultimately, teams and networks proved invaluable to the leaders in this study, and served to provide technical expertise, functional capacity, different or alternate perspectives, as well as constructive criticism and debate. In addition,
these groups expanded opportunities for help, for advocacy, and for social support of leaders in crisis. Most significantly, their contributions concretely demonstrate that leaders, while responsible for crisis resolution on university campuses, cannot and do not act alone.

**Making Sense in a Crisis**

The fast-moving and often-changing circumstances in crisis are almost always accompanied by anxiety and uncertainty in the community. The cases in this study demonstrate that managing meaning in times of crisis has four clear, but interconnected, components. First, leaders manage communications on campus directly, using established communication tools and outlets. Second, leaders create symbols and cues that can be interpreted through their actions and behaviors in response. Third, leaders sometimes intentionally manage the messaging to guide the perceptions of stakeholders. And finally, there is an external dimension to meaning making in crisis that plays out through the media. All four dimensions play a role in the way members of the internal university community come to understand the crisis itself, the institutional response, and the actions of their leaders.

**Direct Internal Communication**

The ways leaders in this study chose to communicate directly to their campuses differed widely, in part because of the circumstances of the crises, when they took place, and the way the leaders chose to lead. In each case, however, presidents ensured they communicated directly to the campus. This signaled presidential control, and provided language and cues from which others could derive meaning. For example, President McPherson at MSU did interviews with
campus and external media outlets to personally explain the mass-vaccination effort. In addition, he was deeply involved in the construction of the messaging to campus, which was delivered by email, newsletters, and through the external media.

At OSU, Gee, like McPherson, tried to address the issue on his campus right away by scheduling and appearing in a televised press conference. Poor planning and terrible execution of the event, however, failed to make it clear to the campus or the larger public that he understood either the nature of the problem or how to address it. Even after the crisis resolution was back on track, Gee and his team opted not to communicate directly to the campus or externally until the following spring, when Tressel resigned. This strategy resulted in the spread of a fair amount of misinformation, and mixed feelings among campus stakeholders.

Unlike at MSU and Ohio State, Chancellor Perlman first communicated with the UNL community only when the crisis there was all but resolved. He was able, however, by detailing in an all-campus email the matter and how he had addressed it, to make faculty understand the situation either as a non-issue or as one that he had handled appropriately.

The involvement of leaders in the direct messaging signaled in all cases presidential awareness of the matters, and the assumption of leadership in resolution, though to differing extents. It is noted though, that at both MSU and OSU, the presidents only briefly engaged with direct messaging and then tapped others to help in disseminating information about the crisis and the institutional response. At Michigan State, McPherson relied on Terry Denbow, his Vice President for External Relations, University Physician Beth Alexander to explain the epidemiology of the
disease and the logistics of the response. Likewise, at Ohio State, when Tressel finally resigned, President Gee stepped back, and Athletic Director Gene Smith made the announcement. The use of alternative spokespeople was accepted in both the MSU and OSU cases and allowed leaders to focus in other areas.

**Symbolic Messaging**

As important as the direct messaging to constituents, however, were the ways these leaders communicated and provided indirect cues through their actions and behaviors in crisis, particularly at Michigan State and the Ohio State University. These cues were important because they further signaled their leaders’ awareness of and engagement with the crisis, and afforded meaning to what they as community members were seeing and feeling.

Two examples demonstrate two very different outcomes of this sort of indirect messaging. First, at MSU, McPherson visited with the family of Adam Busuttil, the infected student, and immediately created for them and others the perception that he and MSU more broadly understood the nature of the problem and would address it. His presence at the hospital, ostensibly to get permission to release Busuttil’s name so that the disease could be contained, signaled compassion and commitment to the family during a very difficult time, and proved important to the response. Later, when vaccination supplies were running low, McPherson signaled his control of the situation to his team, and ultimately the larger campus community, by leveraging his network and the relationships he had with others to gain access to more vaccine and the equipment with which it could be distributed—as well as by being visible at the vaccination site.
In the case at OSU, the second example, Gee tried to use the press conference to assure his community and the general public that he had the matter under control. Gee’s quick-witted gaffe, however, sent the response fully off-track, and it was not until later, when he assembled a larger team and engaged investigators and consultants, that he was able to demonstrate evidence of such leadership. Notably, however, the symbolism of seeking outside help, and of including others, went a long way toward helping convince staff and students that the matter was being addressed, and to seeing the public pressure on Gee lift somewhat.

What is striking in these findings is that Gee, who had enjoyed strong internal campus support and credibility before the crisis, had to prove through his actions that he was deserving of the campus’ trust in this matter while McPherson, who had a reputation for making decisions based on dollars, was able to grow his credibility and respect by proving otherwise.

**Intentionality in Messaging**

Also embedded in many of the actions and behaviors of the leaders in crisis was an element of intentionality—or conscious effort on the part of presidents to behave in ways that would guide stakeholder perceptions of leadership. The leaders at both MSU and Nebraska believed it was important for others on their campuses to see them as leaders, and to recognize that they understood the risks associated with the crises on their campuses. They believed they needed to assume control of the situations and demonstrate that they were actively managing for resolution, even if it meant going against conventional wisdom. At MSU, for example, McPherson was discouraged from pursuing mass vaccination, both by the Centers
for Disease Control and the university physician on his own campus. He was warned of the limited viability of the vaccine itself, and told of the costs associated with embarking on another all-campus response. Despite these warnings, McPherson proceeded, believing that the community needed to see his team, and more specifically the president, in control and driving outcomes. He believed his own personal credibility as a leader was bound up in the way he responded to this crisis, and he understood that to appear weak in this instance, to risk having students flee campus, or worse yet, to lose a student to this seemingly preventable disease, would be devastating to the institutional reputation.

At Nebraska, Perlman assumed a vigorous fight against the AAU long before he disclosed the potential dismissal to his campus, but also felt the need to defend the work of his faculty, and to sustain the upward trajectory that had so recently helped the campus gain membership in the Big Ten Conference. He believed owed it to his faculty to take on the fight. Like McPherson, he said he made the decision primarily because he believed it to be the right one for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln at the time.

In both cases, the presidents believed themselves to be leaders, and intentionally chose to behave in ways that would signal their leadership and control to their communities. Their confidence in and commitment to their roles, while seemingly driven at least in part by personal protection, allowed them to influence perceptions of their leadership among stakeholders. And with strong stakeholder support for their leadership, these presidents were invariably more able to effectively communicate, both directly and indirectly, to their internal communities.
External Communication and Messaging

Finally, in addition to the leaders’ publicly demonstrating that they were in control and managing the internal messaging, there also existed in these cases some intentionality in how the story was presented in the media. What is interesting, however, is how differently those messages played out in each case. At Michigan State, where social media did not yet exist, McPherson and his staff did media interviews directly. The approach explicitly used both the institutional president and other experts as spokespeople, and they chose to largely afford the press full access to their campus and the vaccination site. The result was institutional controlled messaging, and little backlash or counter-argument to the process, the set-up, the costs, or the overall response.

In contrast, at Ohio State, a breaking story on an online site led to the furious construction of a poorly executed press conference. While the press conference was set up to intentionally manage the message, leaders of the university lost control of the story and were forced into a reactive mode.

Nebraska chose to release information on their dismissal from the AAU only after it was complete, though Perlman was decidedly more intentional about the ways the external media could impact the way people on his campus and off would understand the event. Perlman knew that Nebraska’s ouster would generate significant media interest, and while he did not want to publicly disparage the very organization for which he had just fought to remain a part, he was willing to let someone else do so. Indeed, both the Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Ed sought the assembled documents through an open records request and each
published stories, as did several regional and national outlets. While many of the articles written were ostensibly about Nebraska, the materials the university provided exposed the difficulties Perlman faced interacting with the AAU leadership and evidence of flawed process—which then became the highlights of the media coverage. As noted previously, when members of the Nebraska community—both on campus and off—read the Chronicle and Inside HigherEd articles in particular, they could not help but think that the AAU was in the wrong, and that Perlman had done everything he could. And they reached this conclusion without Perlman having had to say a single negative thing about the AAU or its leadership.

Ultimately, while the three cases in this study were very different, they provided important insights into the ways internal and external messaging impact stakeholder perceptions and guide the social construction of crisis on campuses. The findings suggest that leaders must recognize and understand all three facets of managing meaning in crisis, particularly as media interest in campus crises grows, and universities no longer control the news cycles or how messaging is distributed to their communities.

**Crisis Understood Beyond the Executive Suite**

Earlier sections of the analysis have begun to demonstrate the ways in which the actions and behaviors of leaders in crisis impact stakeholders’ perceptions—of the crisis, of the response, and of presidential leadership. The analysis now turns more directly to the perceptions of leaders from within the campus—for leaders in many instances are only as effective as their perceived leadership. This section
explores the trust and credibility leaders bring to crisis as well as the ways leaders’ engagement and communications impact stakeholder perceptions.

**Leaders as Trustworthy**

Leaders enter crisis, as stakeholders do, with a perspective and a sense of their communities. By virtue of their roles, however, they also bring to crisis a preexisting identity and an ascribed notion of trust and credibility among those they lead—a trust borne long before the crises occurred. The findings suggest that the actions of the presidents may have mattered less than their perceived trustworthiness—and that some presidential actions and behaviors served to shift or grow trust well before the crisis situation occurred.

At both Nebraska and OSU, the presidents were widely respected by the major campus stakeholders before the crises occurred and each enjoyed widespread trust on campus. Each had proven to their constituencies that he made decisions carefully and deliberately, and put the interests of the university ahead of his own. Even those who described Perlman as arrogant believed him a strong leader, and one who had demonstrated, over time, his strengths in running the university. Similarly, Gee, who enjoyed celebrity status on campus, was widely respected. He had demonstrated that he understood—and celebrated—the organizational culture of the university, and the balance of academics and athletics that is its signature.

In each of these cases, the leaders were perceived by stakeholders to have actively taken control of the crisis, and although Nebraska got kicked out of the AAU, and Gee and OSU spent months being lambasted in the media, their institutional stakeholders expressed confidence in both the institutional response and the
leaders themselves. Ultimately, the stakeholders forgave Gee’s handling of the press conference, and Perlman’s withholding of the crisis from the faculty, essentially arguing that both leaders had the trust of their campuses and acted, if not perfectly, with the stakeholders’ and the universities’ best interest in mind.

At MSU, McPherson managed to build trust among his campus constituents through his leadership in crisis. Before the meningococcal meningitis scare, he was viewed less positively than either Gee or Perlman, though it would not be fair to say he was disliked. Instead, McPherson was understood to be a number-crunching, cigar-chewing bureaucrat who struggled in front of crowds. He was not viewed as a particularly warm man, though nearly all on campus agreed that he was more than adequately performing the tasks with which he was charged. He was trusted, but to a lesser extent than the leaders at OSU and Nebraska.

When crisis struck, McPherson shed his number-crunching persona and showed a softer, more compassionate side of his personality. He was visible—with the family, and on campus—and his concern for the community was palpable. Students, faculty and staff there recognized the symbolism of his taking charge, being physically present, and leading the charge, but letting others who were more qualified, share the messaging about the epidemiology of the disease and the logistics of the response. He showed leadership by capitalizing on the relationships he had forged with the media, the military, and others in less turbulent times, and was able to deliver on a response that put the safety and security interests of the community at the forefront. Ultimately, the community stakeholders said it was
refreshing to see the softer side of McPherson, and that their belief in him as a leader grew as a result of his leadership in response.

**Active Engagement of Leaders**

While the trust leaders brought to crisis appeared to be the single largest determinant of stakeholder perceptions, the actions and behaviors of leaders also served to influence the ways campus personnel understood the crisis and the response. In particular, behaviors that demonstrated active engagement with the crisis served to help leaders grow trust, and in all three cases, stakeholders said that seeing their leaders engage actively in responding to the crisis was important to their perceptions about both safety and leadership. Simply knowing someone was in charge and was paying attention made them feel secure, even when, in the case of Nebraska, they learned of Perlman’s efforts after the initial crisis had passed. Respondents said that seeing McPherson on the news detailing plans for the vaccination effort at MSU convinced them that he understood the enormity of the situation and that he had a plan to protect their well-being. McPherson’s active engagement both in the media and at the vaccination site signaled to the community that he was embracing his responsibility as leader, and established himself as in-command. Likewise, at OSU, while it was not clear just how, or how well, the matter was being handled, Gee’s visible presence in the press conference signaled recognition of the importance of transparency, as well as some assumption of presidential responsibility. Later, his efforts to convene a larger team and hire outside help suggested he also had a plan to protect the institutional reputation.
Institutional Communication

In addition, the types and manner of institutional communication about the crisis appeared to be important to stakeholder perceptions in each case in three ways. First, it was important for institutional stakeholders to hear the University leadership say they that they were managing, or had managed, the crisis and to show evidence of that management. Members of the community at MSU noted the significance of seeing McPherson, who did not regularly appear in the media, on television and in the news explaining the circumstances and his plans for response. Likewise, at Nebraska, stakeholders pointed to the internal messaging Perlman sent to the community detailing his efforts to avoid dismissal from the AAU as grounds for their support of both his leadership and the response.

Second, the findings show that messaging crafted internally is inherently more trustworthy than messaging created externally. For example, members of the MSU community reported that they trusted inherently information they found in institutional emails and newsletters. They found institutional experts such as University Physician Beth Alexander to be credible and trustworthy, and believed the information provided by she and others, in part because the messengers were delegated by McPherson to speak on behalf of the university. Stakeholders advised that over time, they had grown suspicious of the East Lansing media because of their tendency to blow campus stories out of proportion and incite hysteria—but then explained that they had learned to cull from the stories and reports only those messages provided directly from the university. They listened for reports from institutional messengers on television and the radio, and sought out the direct
quotes from university experts in newspaper accounts—effectively separating the internal messaging from the external reports.

Similarly, at Nebraska, members of the community found the messaging crafted by Perlman to be credible, both because of the trust they had in him as a leader, and because of the tone and language it used to describe the situation. Stakeholders there, like at MSU, described a healthy skepticism on campus for outside media coverage, particularly of negative events. They explained that they believed, however, the accounts in Inside Higher Ed and the Chronicle of Higher Education, largely because they relied upon documents provided directly by the university. One respondent explained that the documents (largely letters and emails) were created in real time to address the situation as it transpired. That they could now be used to demonstrate the AAU’s original intentions only strengthened their validity—and Perlman’s credibility.

At OSU, where Gee’s gaffe at the press conference became television and internet fodder around the globe, stakeholders expressed the significance of hearing directly from their leaders in crisis. Gee’s remarks, as well as Tressel’s, while detrimental to the crisis resolution and the institutional reputation, were helpful in guiding perceptions about the crisis for many on campus because they were unfiltered and allowed stakeholders to frame the situation. In contrast, when the second team was investigating and no information was provided to the institutional community, the media messaging filled the void. Members of the community recognized that most of the media reports were speculation, but absent alternatives, began to engage with and even believe the reports. This finding in particular
demonstrates the importance of maintaining some level of institutional messaging, even when there is little information to share.

Third, and finally, the findings demonstrate that it matters less whether the president is the only or the key institutional messenger in crisis and more that the messaging is delivered by trustworthy institutional sources or representatives who have the support of the president. This notion is supported both by Michigan State, where President McPherson relied on content experts to detail the facts about the disease and the logistics of the response, as well OSU, where Gee participated in the initial public press conference, but then stepped away from the media and relied on the athletic director to communicate Tressel’s firing. In that case, respondents on campus said it made sense for Gene Smith to be the spokesperson on this news, as he’d been Tressel’s boss. In addition, most on campus conceded that Gee’s willingness to discuss the overall situation only in select groups, in person, after the firing, was typical, and appropriate. What is not clear is how much the earlier reputational damage caused by Gee’s off-the-cuff remarks—which were no longer isolated to this case and ultimately contributed to his departure from OSU—-informed the perceptions of the administrators, staff and students who were interviewed.

Ultimately, all of the findings suggest that stakeholder perceptions are dependent on the trust leaders bring to crisis and their ability to instill confidence through their actions, behaviors and communications in response to uncertain situations. When they are able to demonstrate both a recognition of the
circumstances and the need of others to make sense of the ambiguity, leaders can positively influence perceptions of the crisis and their own leadership by actively engaging, ensuring adequate internal messaging, and using credible, trustworthy spokespeople to explain the response.

**Conclusion**

Collectively, these cases afford some important lessons about the ways leaders behave in crisis and how stakeholders make sense of such actions. They also bring to the surface several questions and significant findings which will be explored more deeply in the discussion section, which follows.
Chapter Six: Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

This research is about how leaders lead. It was undertaken to understand better what university presidents do in times of crisis, what actions and behaviors they take, and how they communicate. It sought to know the ways presidents use teams and how they independently or collectively managed meaning for others—as well as how institutional stakeholders perceived the actions and communications, intentional or otherwise, of leaders in crisis. The findings provide some important lessons about leaders in times of crisis, and offer meaningful contributions both to the literature and for other presidents likely to face crises on their own campuses. They also raise some interesting questions. This chapter discusses takeaways from the research and concludes with a series of recommendations for presidents and ideas for future research.

The Lessons of Leadership

While these cases detailed the efforts presidents made to be active, visible leaders on campus, the types of teams they assembled to help, and the ways they communicated with those teams and the larger campus community, the fact that the presidents in all three cases recognized these matters as important, and ultimately as crises that they needed to manage and engage with personally is important and in the end, at the foundation of this research. Also significant, and a little surprising, is how much matters of trust—both the kind leaders have for others, and the type afforded to leaders by stakeholders—surfaced as important to presidential behavior in crisis.
Defining When a Problem is a Crisis is Important

Presidents of large, public research universities have tremendously busy, complex jobs. The volume of information that they must process on any given day is remarkable, as is the diversity of topics about which they are expected to be experts. While one line of inquiry in this study was how the campus community understands or makes sense of a crisis situation, the three cases show that this is an equally important task for presidents. Presidents have to go through their own process of sense making to identify a particular situation as a crisis and to adopt a crisis approach in response. In fact, Gee’s inability to do this constructively initially actually exacerbated the crisis at OSU. Central to leaders’ sense making were the wisdom and insights they had gained through experience, not a formal or mechanical sorting process they had intentionally developed. Each suggested their experiences as leaders had taught them to ask questions and to evaluate risk in unknown and unfolding circumstances. In as many words, each also explained that he led as much with his gut as with his head, and simply understood these matters to be problematic. At MSU, McPherson benefitted from having experienced an outbreak several years earlier, but at both Nebraska and OSU, the situations were new and the threats to the campuses were unknown. That these leaders were ultimately able to recognize these matters as critical is important and illustrates the significance of experience and intuition to crisis identification.

Although connections between experience and decision-making in crisis are noted in the literature (Muffet, Willet & Kruse, 2009; Klein 2008), no one has examined how experience or intuition influence the ways leaders first identify crises
In general, or the types of crises that do not involve police, emergency responders or other more visible crisis triggers in particular. This research begins to fill that gap in the literature, and points to the fact that leaders play a key role in determining when a crisis is a crisis.

But recognizing personal and reputational risk is different from outwardly describing circumstances or events as crises, and equally telling in this study was the way leaders decided to perceive and label these events as crises. In the MSU case, McPherson declared the situation a crisis early on, even after regional medical experts and the CDC advised that a hand washing campaign was the best course of action. Importantly, his declaration of crisis caused others to recognize the situation as emergent, and was key to his being able to secure key resources and assistance for the mass vaccination effort, both on campus and off. Likewise, at Nebraska, Perlman recognized the threat dismissal from the AAU posed to UNL, and he described the situation as a crisis to the small team who would help him gather the data. His characterization of the situation caused others on the team to share his belief, and as in the MSU case, invested them in the resolution—even if their role was ultimately rather small. In both cases, the presidents recognized the long-term threats these circumstances posed beyond what they were experiencing at that moment. At MSU, McPherson feared the prospect of an epidemic, and at Nebraska, Perlman recognized the ways the AAU dismissal would stall the momentum that had been building in the institution’s research enterprise. Each leader, therefore, chose to get out in front with hopes of avoiding those less attractive long-term prospects.
In contrast, Gee at OSU did not at first see the football violations as a crisis, but instead as a problem that he could make go away. While the press conference was ostensibly about providing transparency and explaining the university’s position on the accusations and Jim Tressel’s leadership, Gee’s opinions about the gravity of the situation—or lack thereof—showed. Instead of demonstrating that he understood both the facts and the depth of risk this matter posed to the institution, he came across as cavalier and detached, characterizations that served to alter the trajectory of the situation negatively. It was only after the press conference that Gee conceded the matter as a crisis—and put into place a crisis resolution plan more aligned with the deliberate, methodical approaches used by McPherson and Perlman. By this time, however, Gee and OSU were in the midst of the worst case scenario, and were no longer in a position to take actions to defer or deflect the crisis from worsening.

The OSU case also raises an important point about when leaders are both part of the problem and necessary for its resolution. It was Gee’s actions that in large part created the crisis at Ohio State, but it was also expected that he, as leader, would get them out of it. In order to do so, Gee needed to reframe his sense of the situation and demonstrate both to the administrative team he assembled and the larger community that he understood the risks and could effectively guide them through to normalcy. In this case, Gee had the buy-in of the crisis management team and members of his Board of Trustees and was able to deliver on his promise; not all leaders in similar situations can.
Collectively, these cases demonstrate both the way that leaders’ engagement influences the path of crisis, and that the mindset and sensemaking of leaders matter in crisis. The presidents in this study relied on intuition and experience, as well as on cues about what threats the situations might pose to both their institutions and their individual ability to lead, evidencing progression through several of the properties of sensemaking identified by Weick (1998). In particular, the findings demonstrate that presidents play a role in producing part of the environment they face (Weick, 1995) and build upon the work of Pondy and Mitroff (1979) which found that sensemakers simultaneously shape and react to their surroundings, creating narratives that are both individual and shared. Importantly, however, the narratives created in these cases did not always serve favorably the resolution of the crisis.

**Trust is Fundamental**

This study also highlighted the ways that trust plays into crisis. In particular, the findings demonstrate the importance of presidents having a cache of trust with stakeholders before a crisis situation occurs as well as the utility of leaders having trust in others.

The trust placed in leaders allows them to act somewhat independently as situations emerge, as evidenced by Perlman’s proceeding at Nebraska without having checked in with the faculty and the fact that McPherson took a million dollar action without consulting with his board. The provision of this trust by stakeholders is explored more deeply below together with the implications trust has on stakeholder perceptions. Important here is the idea that leaders who have earned
the trust of their communities feel a responsibility to act on their behalf. This finding provides additional context for the literature that suggests that who people believe themselves to be shapes the way they behave and the meaning they make of events (Pratt, 2000), implying that leaders who are trusted understand themselves as representatives of their communities and protectors of the institutional reputation as well as the people within. Good leaders want to lead, and demonstrate their commitment to institutional ideals by embracing their charge to do so.

The trust leaders place in others is also important, as evidenced by the MSU case. McPherson relied on his team not just for advice and counsel, but also trusted them to serve as spokespeople on his behalf, and to assume functional leadership for full elements of the response. This delegation of responsibility allowed him to focus on other dimensions of the crisis—and to be intentional with his time and energy.

Trust that is given too freely or is misplaced can be problematic, however, as the OSU case showed. Gee’s trust in and loyalty to Jim Tressel caused Gee to downplay the severity of the situation that actually made the crisis worse. Gee affirmed his belief in the coach publicly without knowing the whole story, assuming his stance would be understood and accepted by the campus and the public—who revered the coach as well. Some on campus argued that he was right to stand by his long-standing and well-accomplished hire, while others said Gee should have hedged more until he knew the whole story. Both positions point to the pressures that come with the provision of trust, and highlight the need for leaders to consider
the implications of their actions on the trust they have been provided, and the ways
their own biases can cloud their perceptions.

**Leaders In Crisis Do Not Act Alone**

Leadership is often portrayed in the media and the literature as heroic acts
performed by solitary beings. In this study, each of the leaders engaged teams to
help them understand and respond to the crisis situations they faced, underscoring
the fact that leaders do not act alone in crisis. The teams in the study suggest the
importance of group composition and structure, and the ways teams and teamwork
can influence crisis resolution. Further, the cases in the study illustrate that
presidents’ contributions as leaders of teams are important to the team function,
and much as other stakeholders do, team members assign meaning to leaders’
language, actions and behaviors. Finally, leaders in crisis utilize networks and
leverage relationships that are important to, but which were not intentionally built
for, crisis response.

**Teams extend presidential leadership.** Leaders assembled teams to help
them think through issues, gather information and data, serve as sounding boards,
and offer technical and functional skills important for resolution. Several teams in
the study also served to provide emotional and personal support to the presidents.
Not surprisingly, the composition and structure of these teams differed across the
sites, but the strongest teams were those composed both of well-known senior
leaders with whom presidents had familiarity and technical experts who could
inform the situation and advise the team. For example, the group McPherson
assembled at Michigan State, which included members of his senior leadership team
as well as the University Physician Beth Alexander and Vice President of External Relations Terry Denbow, was by virtue of its composition and structure, more effective at preparing him to talk about the crisis and the proposed resolution than was the group Gee first assembled at OSU. While members of both Gee and McPherson’s teams had worked with one another before, the structure of the MSU team was set up such that members were encouraged to challenge one another and McPherson, and to do so by assuming positions with which they themselves might not agree. This sort of group is defined in the literature as a cognitive team, and is celebrated for the fact that it offers both creative inputs and a corrective feedback system (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993). McPherson’s team gathered information, served as a sounding board for his ideas, and offered him both technical and functional skills. It afforded him the luxury of anticipating any concerns his approach might generate and preparing responses accordingly. As such, he was ready to respond when asked why he ignored the advice of the CDC and initiated mass vaccination anyway, and could confidently say he and his team had considered both the risks of Reye’s Syndrome and other alternative responses to the crisis.

In contrast, Gee initially surrounded himself with people who shared his loyalty to Jim Tressel, and who were able to reinforce his deeply held—but as yet untested—belief that Tressel had done no wrong. He assembled the group with a resolution in mind, and did not invite from them counter proposals or even data to inform his own behavior. He did not rely on the group to gather information or to challenge his perspective. In the end, the composition and the structure of the team contributed to Gee’s under preparedness in the press conference, and his inability to
predict what sorts of questions or outcomes would surface—effectively reinforcing the literature suggesting that this sort of team, often called expressive, can lead to insularity and without care, can serve to make leaders and members alike look out of touch (Bensimon & Neumann, 1993).

**Leaders establish team dynamics and function.** That the stronger teams were more diverse is interesting, and lends credence to previous research suggesting that while these well-diversified, cognitive teams are known to be the most difficult to create, they help leaders avoid oversimplifying matters or prematurely ending discussion about issues requiring more attention (Bensimon & Newman, 1993). But these cases also suggest that the strength inherent in cognitive teams is more nuanced and is deeply connected to the ways leaders and team members work with one another.

First, we saw that the stronger teams in this study were largely made up of people with whom the leaders had worked with closely in the past, and who the leaders trusted deeply. The team members were comfortable enough to make suggestions, to debate with one another, or, in the case of MSU, to make counter arguments, and flat-out disagree with the president. Because the literature suggests that leaders under stress sometimes behave in ways that cause them to see only part of a situation, or to revert to old, conditioned responses (Albrecht, 1996 as cited in Murawski, 2011), the significance of having a group of trusted advisers who feel comfortable and encouraged to help leaders understand the full picture of their circumstances should not be overlooked. Further, because the experience and trust inherent to these types of teams cannot be created in crisis, but instead must be
forged over time, it makes sense for leaders to rely first on their senior leadership teams in crisis, even perhaps, when the circumstances fall outside of their predominant areas of purview.

Second, and equally important, we learned that the strongest groups are led in ways that maximize the contributions of the members. For example, at MSU, members reported knowing their charge and being encouraged to debate and talk with one another, as well as offer up suggestions about how McPherson and the university should proceed. McPherson made it clear that he was the final decision-maker—as did all of the leaders in the study—though he also explained that before any decision was made, he needed the advice and counsel of the group and his actions reflected his sincerity. His leadership resulted in an effective crisis response at MSU, and served to foster collaboration and buy-in among the team’s members that McPherson later leveraged to provide functional leadership over several elements of the response.

In contrast, Perlman utilized his senior-most advisors not to provide him perspective or to offer insights into Nebraska’s response, but only to gather data. He guided his best people into subservient roles, and perhaps without intention, closed off some of his greatest assets. While the nature and confidentiality of the problem at Nebraska may have limited Perlman’s capacity to more fully engage his team, the question remains about whether the outcome would have differed had he invited more perspective or allowed his own ideas about the response to be challenged. And there is little doubt that the isolation he felt, particularly in the final days of the crisis, could have been mitigated with more engagement of his senior-most advisors,
if for no other reason than they would have more fully shared in the response. As it was, Perlman effectively managed the response—and suffered its results—alone.

Similarly, at Ohio State, Gee was intent on doing a press conference to temper concern on campus, yet the team he assembled did not include anyone from communications or marketing, nor did they practice or plan for media breaks. In fact, he essentially let the accused coach run the press conference. He did not seek from the group data or advice, nor did he encourage or invite discussion or debate about the proposed response. He failed to assemble or lead the team effectively.

Presidents lead on at least two levels. They provide public leadership, but also serve to guide the function of their response teams. The actions of Gee, Perlman and McPherson collectively affirm that the best teams are those which are led in ways that the contributions of members can be fully realized, and that the effectiveness of teams in crisis is determined in large part by the leadership presidents provide. Teams can afford leaders more and better data, the opportunity to have their ideas tested and challenged, and the space to spend their time more intentionally on the things that matter most. Most importantly, though, these benefits can only be realized if leaders consciously think about what they expect of their teams and assemble and lead the groups accordingly.

A Deep and Well-Managed Rolodex is an Asset. Perhaps as significant as the teams leaders used in this study were the connections and resources they assembled by leveraging broad networks and contacts forged in calmer times. When McPherson realized that he did not have enough vaccine, he called the Department of Defense (DOD) directly, though not surprisingly, did not get very far. But when
McPherson called Senator Levin, who also served as the chair of the defense authorization committee, the response was very different, and he had vaccine on campus the following day. Likewise, long-ago established relationships with faculty who were active in the National Guard helped McPherson acquire vaccine guns and the personnel to use them.

McPherson’s ability to look beyond the campus and to tap into his network saved the day at Michigan State. While the contacts Perlman at Nebraska relied upon were unable to provide the same sort of savior, they did provide social support and allowed him to track the progress of his case with the AAU. These networks take time and energy to build, and cannot be created during the heat of a crisis. Their formation is instead an important part of crisis preparation, and builds upon research which shows that leaders who actively engage in preparing for crisis are often better positioned to guide their organizations out of turmoil and through to recovery (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

**Leaders Communicate with Words and Action**

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges presidents face in crisis is effectively communicating what they know and the efforts they and others might be making to protect the institution and its community. The spectrum of cases in this study demonstrate just how much the media landscape has changed over time, and highlight the ways social media, twenty-four hour news cycles, and open records requests have changed the nature of reporting, and the ways crises are explained. The findings teach us some important lessons about how leaders can plan for and
work within the expanded scope of coverage, and the ways they might leverage institutional tools and personnel in messaging.

**Communicating with intention is key.** There is little doubt that the growth of the media and technology industries has changed the way crises on campus are understood. Online, on-demand news sources have all but eliminated the concept of news cycles, capitalizing on both the speed with which information can now be transmitted and the appetite users have demonstrated for more information, from more sources, in several forms. And while traditional media outlets still dominate the news environment, social media platforms and blogs have expanded the market for news creation and delivery. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumbler have served to grow the number of voices in the press, but have also raised questions for many about journalistic integrity, balanced reporting, and content accuracy.

The cases in this study demonstrate the ways that the changing landscape of the media environment has shifted control of institutional messaging away from campuses over the past fifteen years, and highlight how rapidly things can go awry if detailed and well-thought-out communications plans are not put in place. They also underscore the importance of thoughtful, intentional messaging in crisis.

The Michigan State University crisis, which took place in 1999, occurred before the advent of social media as we know it. McPherson and his team were able to effectively manage their messaging independently by positioning their story and experts in the media and relying upon the morning and evening news cycles for distribution. Just twelve years later, however, President Gee at OSU proved that a single off-hand comment, made ostensibly to add some levity to a tense situation,
could in a matter of minutes turn a bad situation into a full-blown crisis. Before the
press conference was even complete, Gee’s quip about not firing the football coach
was distributed around the world, and suddenly a regional sports story that had
been about an athletics violation became a national story about presidential
leadership.

The speed with which information travels today means that news of crisis is
certain to spread quickly, and that leaders must find ways to work in accordance
with the changing media environment, as opposed to against it. Presidents should
build on the suggestions in the literature that advise the creation of communications
plans (Mitroff, 2001; Lerbinger, 1997) and identify the tools and outlets that will be
most useful when crisis strikes. Further, leaders and their teams need to concede
that they will not be able to control all of the messaging, or refute all of the
speculation inherent to crisis. Instead, they must decide which audiences matter
most, and leverage the notion that stakeholders most trust messaging generated
internally. Most importantly, leaders must be intentional about determining the
content of their messaging, testing it with their teams, and then distributing it in
ways that are congruent with the organizational culture of their institutions. This
lesson should not be considered apart from earlier research suggesting that to be
effective in communications, leaders must align their strategies with the cultures of
their institutions, matching the language and tone to the culture of the community
(Birnbaum, 1992). Instead, messaging should be intentional both in its content and
its construction.
**Prepare for open records requests.** In addition, while the growth of technology has served to change the way people on campus and in the community acquire and ingest news, it has also impacted the structure of the news outlets themselves. Print readership has declined in many markets, slashing revenue streams and ultimately resulting in fewer reporters. One of the outcomes of that downsizing is an increase on public university campuses in the numbers of open records requests—a reality that lends credence to the idea that public expectations and judgments of an organization and its leaders are higher the greater the public nature of the organization (Lerbinger, 1997). Many of these Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests are made in response to tips or stories, but many others are submitted as broad, wide-open searches, with the hope that the collected materials will expose the makings of a story. In this study, open records requests generated both negative and positive results. At OSU, the messages between Jim Tressel and the outside informant were discovered as a result of one of these types of open-ended inquiries, and served to trigger the great unraveling of Tressel's original story. At Nebraska, Perlman was able to anticipate public interest in the process, and began assembling documents even before the requests came in to the university. He demonstrated how presidents can plan and prepare for records requests and use them to benefit the institutional story, though history suggests that few situations allow for such strategic management of the process.

Ultimately, public university leaders need to be cognizant of not just what their outward facing messages are in crisis, but also what the documents behind the scenes, such as agendas and emails, say about their actions in crisis. Leaders need to
expect that their documents will be requested, and should consider the ways these things either support or detract from the outward-facing, more visible response efforts. The alignment of what presidents say and do in public and what surfaces as a result of records requests and other sorts of investigations is key to their maintenance of trust and credibility on campus—as well as to the successful resolution of crisis.

**Determine the “best” spokespeople.** It is also important that leaders carefully identify the best spokespeople for their audiences. The Michigan State and OSU cases in particular, where medical experts and athletic department personnel were used respectively to help communicate the institutional position, demonstrated that credible, trustworthy, internal spokespeople can be used effectively in crisis, especially when it is clear that the president is still engaged and in-charge of the larger institutional response. At MSU, Dr. Alexander was tapped to communicate the epidemiology of the disease to members of the marching band, and she and Vice Chancellor for University Relations Terry Denbow also explained publicly the response McPherson had set up to vaccinate the campus. At OSU, Athletic Director Gene Smith ultimately made the final announcement about Jim Tressel’s resignation.

The use of multiple spokespeople refutes the common belief cited in most crisis literature suggesting that the leader must be front and center (Farmer & Tvedt, 2005). Loretta Ucelli, former White House communications directly under Bill Clinton was a strong advocate for having the CEO serve as the lone spokesperson, arguing, "Visibility cannot be delegated. Leadership cannot be
delegated,” (Farmer & Tvedt, p. 27, 2005). It seems, however, that at large public universities, where leaders are responsible for such a broad and diverse scope of work, the use of the leader as sole spokesperson is cumbersome and could prove ineffective. In particular, this research shows that leaders must manage their time in crisis carefully, and it is difficult in complex situations for leaders to be in multiple places at once and to manage such diversified tasks. Further, in those instances where leaders are either not trusted by their communities, or are unable to speak effectively about the details of the circumstances, this strategy could prove problematic. While presidents need not avoid the media, they might instead find ways to demonstrate their management of the situation, and rely on common talking points and trusted spokespeople to help distribute the institutional messaging.

**Institutional Understanding in a Crisis**

Leadership is defined not only by what presidents do, but also by the impact of their actions on institutional stakeholders. Leaders need followers. Ultimately, stakeholders make judgments about leaders and their actions in crisis, and do so based in part on the cues provided to them. Leaders have the ability to manage those cues through their messaging and their behaviors, and to intentionally create understanding among their constituents by leveraging the work they have done in preparation for crisis, assembling meaningful teams, and communicating directly to the community. The findings of this study highlighted two points worthy of more discussion.
**Actions convey values and priorities.** First, stakeholders recognized in the language and behaviors of leaders context and cues that allowed them to make sense of crisis and to feel confident in—and essentially trust—the leadership of the president. At MSU, for example, stakeholders were able to understand McPherson’s priorities when he embarked, at the behest of the CDC, on a mass vaccination effort. His willingness to spend one million dollars on the effort signaled the importance of health and safety, and his visible presence at the vaccination site and in the campus call center exposed a softer, gentler side of their leader. Similarly, at Nebraska, even after the crisis had been resolved, Perlman was able to signal through an email filled with heartfelt language, his leadership of the situation. While the message expressed great disappointment at the dismissal, it also exposed an optimism which demonstrated that he believed the campus—and by extension, all of those in the community—would be all right. In both cases, the actions and behaviors of the leaders fulfilled the expectations of leadership stakeholders had for their leaders, and served to allay concerns about the crisis itself. The key takeaway is that stakeholders look to their leaders to help them make sense of uncertain situations, and while formal communications are one way to demonstrate leadership, the actions and behaviors of leaders can demonstrate command and control as well. This finding is supported in the literature, and lends credence to Birnbaum’s (1992) determination that the meaning stakeholders derive from the actions and behaviors of leaders serves to develop and sustain systems of belief that regenerate participants’ commitment to the organization.


**Action trumps inaction—even if it is misguided.** Second, and related to the first point is the somewhat surprising finding that what presidents do in crisis matters less than that they are trusted by their communities and that when crisis strikes, they assume an active, engaged role in the crisis resolution. This insight supports prior findings about trust, but points to the complementary role action in crisis plays for stakeholders. Even in the case of Ohio State, where Gee independently made a bad situation worse, stakeholders, noting that he had corrected course and helped OSU through to the other side of the crisis, affirmed their trust and faith in his leadership. While some expressed concern at the press the situation garnered, they explained that Gee had acted immediately, and in the end acted with the best interests of OSU in mind. They also pointed to the fact that the new football coach was on track to win a national championship—a reality only possible because of the crisis. This lesson, while somewhat perplexing, suggests stakeholders do not expect their leaders to be infallible. Instead, they seek leaders who they can trust—as outlined earlier—and who will correct course when they have veered off track.

**Implications for Presidents and other Practitioners**

Crises, by definition, are hard to predict. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that today and tomorrow’s presidents will continue to face crises, and will suffer the increased scrutiny that surrounds their leadership during them. This research highlighted several implications for leaders of higher education institutions. What follows are seven guidelines, borne out of the research, for what leaders should do both before crises hit, and once they do.
First, leaders must work to grow the trust of their communities in calmer times. This research showed that leaders who proved their understanding of and willingness to both lead within and embrace the organizational culture of the institution gained the trust of their stakeholders, and were thus supported in crisis, and given the benefit of the doubt when they faltered.

Second, leaders should establish a broad network of contacts and resources from which they can draw in crisis. The MSU and Nebraska cases illustrated just how valuable relationships forged in calmer times can be for leaders in crisis. The establishment of a golden Rolodex of sorts builds on the research conducted by Pearson and Mitroff (1993) in which the authors noted that because effective damage containment mechanisms are nearly impossible to create during the heat of a crisis, leaders who actively engage with crisis preparation are often better positioned to guide their organizations out of turmoil and ensure both short- and long-term recovery.

Third, leaders should build and lead their senior leadership teams to become cognitive working teams (using Bensimon’s framework) upon which they can rely for both insight and function. Leaders in crisis need help understanding the situation they face, planning a resolution, anticipating the challenges of response, and communicating to their constituents. Presidents need teams to challenge them to more fully formulate responses and to extend their presidential reach. This research demonstrates that Bensimon’s (1993) study showing cognitive teams to be most effective at helping presidents avoid oversimplifying matters or prematurely closing matters that require more attention is applicable in crisis as well. It makes
sense for leaders to assemble and lead their senior leadership groups to function as cognitive teams, both for day-to-day management, and also so that they might be ready when crisis strikes.

Fourth, leaders should establish communication plans in preparation for crisis, and make determinations about who might serve as spokespeople. The findings of this study support previous research calling for the creation of crisis communications plans (Jacobsen, 2010; Lerbinger, 1997). In assembling these plans, however, leaders should consider what tools and outlets the university will use to communicate in crisis, and how institutional messaging will be placed in today’s very fluid media landscape. To the extent possible, the plan should reflect the university’s traditional means of communicating and consider elements such as who might serve as institutional spokespeople, the role the president should play in communication, and the mechanisms the campus will use to distribute shared talking points to others.

Fifth, leaders need to identify the ways they might recognize crisis in the myriad issues and topics that surface in front of them everyday. The findings of this study suggest that such recognition is influenced in part by intuition and experience, but is also related to the way leaders make sense of the information they receive. Leaders who recognize both the immediate threat and the long-term potential impacts of situations ask lots of questions, leverage their teams to challenge their perspectives and help them to see the pitfalls of their arguments, and anticipate the worst case scenarios.
Sixth, when crisis strikes, leaders need to immediately make clear to the campus community that they know about the crisis and are taking action. Respondents at all three sites in this study remarked on the importance of leaders' active engagement to their understanding of the crisis and their confidence in the response. Leadership in crisis can be demonstrated both with words and through actions, like at MSU, where McPherson met with the family and was visible at the vaccination site. The findings show that it is more important for presidents to demonstrate leadership than it is for them to prove they have all of the data or have the crisis resolved.

Seventh, leaders should communicate with campus, either directly, or through spokespersons. If spokespersons are delegated, they need to be chosen wisely and intentionally, and stakeholders must understand them to be both credible and have the authority of the leader. Communication with campus may take place as part of the previous guideline, or separate from, but as soon after the crisis occurs that leaders are able to confirm the basic facts of the case or once a plan for response as been established, leaders should either directly communicate to campus, or delegate spokespersons to do so on their behalf. Consistent with the literature (Lerbinger, 1997; Mitroff, 2001), the communications should be honest, should evidence awareness of the threats the university's reputation, and should expose the full truth, even if the news is damaging to the leader or the university. In addition, any remarks or talking points the president or his or her designee uses should be scripted and tested, preferably by the leadership team, and all spokespersons should work from the same points. Testing of the points allows
assumptions to surface and blind spots to be revealed, and common talking points limit the likelihood of conflicting or inconsistent messages. In this study, both the MSU and OSU cases demonstrated that alternate spokespeople can be used effectively in higher education, particularly if they are credible and trustworthy.

And finally, leaders are the principal meaning makers in crisis, and they should not lose sight of the fact that their actions and behaviors and words in crisis signal to others their management and control of the situation at a time in which people are reassured by a sense of control in leadership. Gee’s mismanagement of the situation at OSU symbolized to many his lack of control, while McPherson’s calm demeanor and reasoned delegation of some key responsibilities to others so he could remain focused on the big picture signaled to his community that he was well situated and well supported to lead MSU out of the crisis. Leaders must remain conscious of how their direct and indirect actions can be translated, and are encouraged to utilize their teams in helping ensure meaningful alignment of the two.

While not an exhaustive list, this set of guidelines merges the findings of this study with existing research to form a framework that, if followed, should position leaders well both to navigate to crisis resolution and to ensure the ongoing trust and support of their stakeholders—in crisis and beyond.

**Implications for Future Research**

The findings of this research provide important insights into what presidential leaders do in crisis, and the ways in which their actions and behaviors impact both the resolution of the crisis and the perceptions of stakeholders on campus. They also point to several areas that merit further study.
For instance, this study explored only three sites. The crises in the study are representative of the types of crises to large, public research universities, though did not include any crises that required the intervention of police or other emergency management personnel. Future studies might benefit from additional cases involving more emergent types of crises or incidents in academic medicine, another common area of concern for large, public universities. Further, future studies might explore situations that leverage the emergency operations plans so common on campuses today.

Additional research might also consider crises at different types of institutions, such as small, private liberal arts colleges, or fully residential campuses where the relationships are perceived to be closer and fewer, and the circumstances might require different leadership approaches. Private institutions do not have the same obligations to report to the public as the sites in this study, but might offer important insights into how leaders behave and what they choose disclose in crisis, and their reasons for doing so. Likewise, this study explored only human-induced crises; future research might also consider the role presidents play in mitigating the effects of natural disasters on or near their campuses.

In addition, generalizations about stakeholder perceptions were made in this study based on relatively small numbers of interviews and the perceptions noted in the newspaper clippings and other materials included in the document review. There may be value, in future studies, in looking at individual stakeholder groups more specifically, and noting, for example, the ways presidential actions and behaviors impact faculty perceptions, or student perceptions. Each campus
stakeholder group has different institutional interests, and their connection points with the leadership differ, so an analysis across constituent groups might provide more insights into which actions, and in what ways, impact the various groups’ understanding. A quantitative survey approach could be added to allow for more significant representation and more comparative analysis.

Finally, the role trust plays in crisis warrants more study. This research showed that institutional stakeholders’ perceptions of presidential leadership and crisis response were influenced by initial feelings of trust, and that presidential behaviors and actions could deepen trust and sway perceptions of leaders in the positive ways. More study is needed to determine if there are actions or behaviors that negatively impact trust in leaders, and to understand to what extent trust and confidence in leadership determines positive feelings about response in crisis.

The dissonance respondents in the Ohio State case reported over Jim Tressel’s character and who they believed him to be opens another avenue for the study of trust. While Tressel was not the primary actor in this study, the findings show that several people on the OSU campus believe him to be a good man who committed a bad mistake and retain their trust in him. Others, who watched the same incident play out, believe the facts show that Tressel is a less savory character who snooked the community for far too long. It is not clear what causes people to place their trust in some people or at which point they decide someone is not, or is no longer, a person to be trusted, but such data would be useful in considering the role of leaders in crisis, and could serve to open up the ways trust in leadership more generally impacts organizational culture.
Conclusion

This study sought to know the ways leaders in crisis behaved. It looked at how they used teams and how they independently or collectively managed meaning for others—and ultimately, how institutional stakeholders perceived the actions and communications, intentional or otherwise, of leaders in crisis. Birnbaum (1992), when engaged in a debate about whether institutional presidents matter, suggested to his higher education leadership colleagues that a better question might be under what conditions, and in what ways, can leaders make a difference. This study pursued that same line of inquiry but with a focus on crisis.

The findings of the research show that there were some important constants in the ways leaders behaved in crisis. First, institutional presidents recognized the personal and reputational risks these matters posed early on and each chose to engage personally immediately. They all believed it was important to actively and visibly lead, and pursued resolutions that demonstrated their understanding of the importance of action and which allowed for them to be recognized as managing or handling the matter. Further, they assembled teams and relied on others to help them understand the circumstances, provide them information, and in some cases, challenge their own perspectives. All of them publicly explained their efforts at response, sometimes on their own, and sometimes with the help of others, and finally, they each communicated with constituents, both directly and indirectly.

The study also revealed some important revelations and implications for both the literature and presidents in practice today. Perhaps most surprising was the extent to which the trust leaders brought to crisis mattered—both to how
leaders were able to behave in response, and to how stakeholders perceived their actions in resolution. Also noteworthy were the implications of leaders labeling events as crises, the myriad challenges associated with communicating about crisis in a very dynamic and fluid—and sometimes hostile—media environment, and the ways stakeholders inferred meaning in the actions of leaders in crisis. Ultimately, the research elicited a list of guidelines that presidents should consider both as they prepare for crisis, and once they are in its midst. The list, while not exhaustive, implies the need for leaders to be intentional about the work they will need to do in crisis, and underscores the importance of planning and preparation long before it strikes.

In the end, this research uncovered just how important presidential leadership is both to the resolution of crisis, and to the perceptions of stakeholders about both the crisis and the leader him or herself. In this way, the study also offers one answer to Birnbaum’s question of twenty years ago. Presidents can, in times of crisis, make a difference. They can influence the outcome or resolution of the crisis, and they can affirm or grow the trust the community has in their leadership through their behaviors and actions. Importantly, however, and perhaps most revealing, is that to be effective in crisis, leaders must be trusted by their communities, and they must act with integrity and with the protection of the institutional reputation at the forefront of their actions and deeds.
Appendix A

The following interview and document sources were used to generate the findings at each of the sites. Several interview sources are unnamed, to protect the identities of the respondents. The sources listed provided context and aided in the triangulation of the findings. Specific uses are noted next to the source name.

**Michigan State University**

Interviews (Conducted primarily during campus visit September 11-13, 2013)

- Peter McPherson, former President, now President of the Association of Public Land Grant Universities
- Lou Anna Simon, President. Simon served as Provost at the time of this crisis
- Fred Poston, Vice President for Finance and Operations
- Bob Noto, Legal Counsel
- Terry Denbow, Vice President for University Relations
- Beth Alexander, University Physician
- John Madden, Director of University Bands
- Adam Busuttil, former student. Adam was the student who contracted meningococcal meningitis and septicemia, setting off the response
- Unnamed university staff member who witnessed the response
- Unnamed university staff member who witnessed the response
- Unnamed university staff member who witnessed the response
- Unnamed former student, also a band member, who recalled the response

Documents or Sites

- Institutional messages and documents maintained in the University Archives. Included copies of campus newsletters, local and regional newspaper coverage, and institutional correspondence about the 1999 meningitis outbreak, as well as others that occurred in 1995 and 1997. Retrieved on Thursday, September 12, 2013.
- [www.msu.edu](http://www.msu.edu). Site was navigated to find data used in institutional profile, as well as to identify possible respondents for interviews.
- [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com). Site was used to confirm understanding of meningococcal meningitis as described by University Physician Beth Alexander.

**University of Nebraska Lincoln**

Interviews (Conducted primarily during campus visit October 2-4, 2013)

- Harvey Perlman, Chancellor
- Ellen Weissinger, Senior Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs
• Bill Nunez, Chief of Staff
• Mike Zeleney, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Research
• Unnamed member of the faculty. Also former chair of Faculty Senate
• Unnamed member of the faculty.
• Unnamed member of the faculty. Former faculty senator.
• Unnamed member of the faculty. Member of the National Academies.
• Unnamed junior member of the faculty.
• Unnamed member of the faculty. Former faculty senator.
• Unnamed member of the administration.
• Unnamed member of the administration.

Documents
• Two sets of materials gathered in response to Freedom of Information Act requests (Acquired October 3, 2013)
  o The first set included copies of letters between Perlman and AAU, and email correspondence between members of Perlman’s team, colleagues in the Big Ten, and collections of some of the data gathered to make the University’s case.
  o The second set had similar documents, but also included copies of the Chronicle of Higher Education and Inside Higher Education stories, reproductions of the materials submitted as part of the review, and correspondence with faculty and alumni after the dismissal was complete.
• www.unl.edu. Site was navigated to find data used in institutional profile, as well as to identify possible respondents for interviews.

The Ohio State University

Interviews (Conducted primarily during campus visit October 13-15, 2015)
• E. Gordon Gee, former President. Gee now serves as President at West Virginia University.
• Jeff Kaplan, former Vice President for Administration and Planning
• Gene Smith, Athletic Director
• John Bruno, Faculty Athletics Representative
• Unnamed faculty member
• Unnamed staff member, Alumni Affairs
• Unnamed staff member
• Unnamed staff member, Student Affairs
• Unnamed staff member, Student Affairs. Former student.
• Unnamed staff member, University Housing. Graduate student.
• Unnamed staff member, Student Union
• Unnamed staff member, Athletics. Former student.
• Unnamed board member
• Unnamed board member
• Unnamed former student
• Unnamed former student

Documents
• [www.osu.edu](http://www.osu.edu). Site was navigated to find data used in institutional profile, as well as to identify possible respondents for interviews.
• Packet of materials with examples of letters and responses shared with me during my campus visit. These letters had contact information redacted, but showed the types of messages Gee received in response to news and provided some examples of the types of responses he and OSU sent in return.
• One copy of an undated New York Times article detailing Gee’s tenure as OSU president and featuring his ten best gaffes.
• NCAA documents and proceedings, as found on [www.osu.edu/news/ncaadocs/](http://www.osu.edu/news/ncaadocs/) These materials chart the timeline of the matter and detail the NCAA perspective.
• Archival materials, gathered during a visit on October 13, 2013. Include copies of student newspaper articles, as well as regional and national coverage of the story. Much of this content is available online as well. Was useful in confirming the timeline.
References


