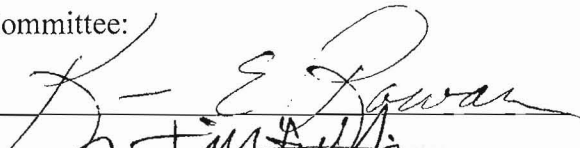


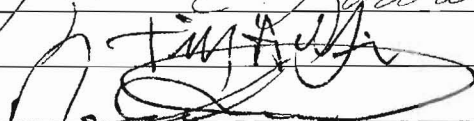
A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION APPROACH TO CRISIS SITUATIONS: A CASE
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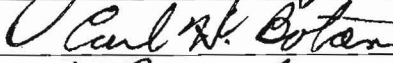
by

Daniel Walsch
A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
Communications


Committee:

 Chair



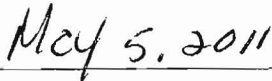



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Sciences

Date:



Spring Semester 2011
George Mason University
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A Strategic Communication Approach to Crisis Situations: A Case Study Analysis of
Transformative Events at George Mason University and Northern Illinois University

A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the doctorate of Communication at
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The undertaking of this dissertation, without question, represents the greatest challenge of my academic life. Fortunately, for me, it also proved to be the most intellectually rewarding and stimulating due, in no small measure, to the guiding and patient hands of a number of very special individuals. To not recognize them for their support would be to do a great disservice, not just to them, but to this project. I firmly believe whatever strengths and positive qualities this dissertation possesses, it is the result of their input. This, it is with the greatest respect, appreciation and everlasting gratitude that I thank the members of my comprehensive examination committee: Professor Carl Botan, Professor Melinda Villigran, Professor Jason Hall, and Professor Kathy Rowan; and the members of my dissertation committee: Professor Nance Lucas, Professor Timothy Gibson, and Professors Hall and Rowan. I was particularly blessed having Professor Rowan serve as chair of both of these committees. Without question, having her serve in this capacity was my biggest blessing in the entire process of this project. It is also important that I acknowledge the individuals who helped review my work to help ensure it maintained a consistent level of logic and consistency and look. The following served as the paper's debriefers: Catherine Ferraro, Elizabeth Johnson and Katherine Lampel. My colleagues Anika Mercier, Aisha Jamil and Heather Crandall provided me with editorial support. I also wish to express great thanks to the numerous professors who were so generous to me with their wisdom and expertise in the classes I took with them. Each one of these scholars did so much to help me keep my head above water throughout my entire doctoral program. And the same holds true for so many of my fellow students. You are the greatest. Finally, but far from least, I give thanks to my wife, Jo. Simply put: she is my best friend, my life's companion and my North Star.

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ABSTRACT

A Strategic Communication Approach to Crisis Situations: A Case Study Analysis of Transformative Events at George Mason University and Northern Illinois University

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George Mason University, 2011

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The great success of George Mason University's men's basketball team in the 2006 NCAA tournament and the multiple shootings that occurred at Northern Illinois University in 2008 placed high demands on both institutions. Each situation matched the elements of a crisis in that they were unexpected, represented a potential threat and required quick response (Hermann, 1969). To assess whether the two institution's crisis communication messages supported their overall core values and missions, 20 top administrators from both universities and over 100 media articles and two major reports conducted in the aftermath of these dramatic high risk/high reward situations were examined. The manner in which each institution handled its situation showed that administrators generally did not approach these high risk/high reward situations with explicit consideration of how their long term, strategic and institutional core values values or mission goals should guide response to these unexpected situations, which required immediate, intense and full-time response

Chapter I: A Tale of Two Universities

Introduction

The sound of applause filled the air on that brisk Sunday afternoon on April 2 as the bus turned into the loading dock area behind the Patriot Center at George Mason University. Nearly fifty men and women – students, employees and members of the community – had gathered to welcome home members of the university’s 2006 men’s basketball team from its final game of the season the night before. There was no brass band; no cheerleaders; no speech making from dignitaries; no formal program. Instead, there was just a random collection of individuals who had come together to offer the twelve members of the team their appreciation for a season of unprecedented highs that had brought the team and the institution it represented national and international accolades.

The players slowly filed off the bus. They smiled and waved to the well-wishers. Each seemed touched by the show of support. Yet they also appeared tired. For them, the night before had been long, frustrating and ultimately disappointing. Their final game of the season had ended in defeat at the hands of a stronger team. Despite the bitter sweet ending, the team and its supporters had much to feel good about. The Patriots had completed its regular season by winning the Colonial Athletic Association season with a league record of 15 wins and 3 loses and an overall record of 27 wins and 8 loses. As a result, with a national ranking of eleventh, George Mason received an at-large invitation to participate in the prestigious 2006 National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament.

The tournament in which 65 colleges and universities participated began March 14 and, for George Mason, ended nearly three weeks later. During that time the Patriots, coached by Jim Larranaga, captivated the sports world by upsetting four teams that were ranked in the top ten. One of the teams, North Carolina University, had even won the previous year's NCAA tournament and had high expectations of maintaining its championship status. Sports Illustrated magazine called the George Mason Patriots the Cinderella team of the year. George Mason's unexpected victories over Michigan State University, North Carolina University, Wichita State University, and University of Connecticut propelled the upstarts to the NCAA's coveted Final Four.

While it was at this point the team's season came to an end at the hands of the University of Florida, for George Mason University the power of their team's performance provided it with notoriety unlike it had ever experienced. For the duration of the NCAA tournament, George Mason and its men's basketball team were the focus of approximately 1,700 stories over the wire services, front page coverage in over 100 newspapers, including *The New York Times* and *USA Today*, the cover story of *Sports Illustrated* magazine, the equivalent of over \$5 million worth of free print advertising. Additionally, it was the subject of over 6,000 television and radio stories or an estimated combined total of 22 hours and 50 minutes of broadcast exposure (Baker, 2007). University bookstore sales even saw a dramatic increase to the point sales representatives and distributors within the college bookstore industry changed from labeling George Mason a "textbook factory" to a "sports school" (Headley, 2010).

This coverage and enhanced visibility far exceeded the national and international media exposure that George Mason University had received in 1986 and 2002 when two members of its faculty were awarded the Nobel Prize in economics: Dr. James Buchanan was the recipient in

1986 and Dr. Vernon Smith was the recipient 16 years later. Buchanan has since retired while Smith has taken employment at another university.

Two years after George Mason University's ascent into the national spotlight, the national media and general public shifted its attention to another institution of higher education, Northern Illinois University, located in DeKalb, nearly 55 miles west of Chicago. This time, however, the occasion was not celebratory. In the afternoon of February 14, 2008, a graduate student majoring in social work named Steven Kazmierczak went on a shooting rampage, killing five individuals and wounding 18. He then turned his gun on himself thus raising the total number of deaths that day to six. Of the murdered and injured victims, all were students. The outburst of violence occurred shortly after 3 p.m. that day in a lecture hall in which over 150 students were seated and ended minutes later with the gunman taking his own life. University police estimated Kazmierczak, a native of Elk Grove Village, Illinois, had fired over 30 shots into the classroom during his spree.

Local and national turned their attention toward Northern Illinois University though not with the intensity that it exhibited ten months earlier toward Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, commonly known as Virginia Tech. What happened at Northern Illinois University was the fourth deadliest university shooting on an American campus in the history of the United States. What happened at Virginia Tech was the worst. At the campus in Blacksburg, Virginia, in April, 2007, a total of 33 students and faculty were killed by a single gunman. The horrific incident at Northern Illinois University occurred over a brief span of six minutes. Less than 20 minutes after learning of the shootings, the university posted a warning that a gunman was seen on campus on its website. Within an hour of the incident, university authorities decided to close the campus for the remainder of the day and the rest of the week. A number of local, regional and even national agencies became involved in the handling and investigation of the

incident. These ranged from the university's own police department and the Illinois state police to the local fire department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Peters, 2009). Further, over the coming hours and days following the shootings the media were joined by an outpouring of calls from state and national figures, including President George W. Bush, Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, United States Senators Dick Durbin and Barrack Obama, and Rev. Jessie Jackson. Not surprisingly, the students, staff and faculty throughout the institution were reported to be in shock, distraught, and numb from the gravity of the horror that had been inflicted upon their campus. They, like many throughout the country, had held the notion that institutions of higher learning are safe and peaceful environments (Langford, 2004). A study conducted several weeks after the deadly violence at the DeKalb campus found nearly 75 per cent of the student body suffering from significant psychological distress (Vicary & Fraley, 2010).

Interestingly, it was the media that actually informed Northern Illinois University's public affairs office that there was a shooting on their campus. Senior communication official Melanie Magara recalled this moment:

Our office did not even know what was going on until we received a call from a local newspaper asking us about campus shootings. We had to check with the president's office before we could even confirm something like that had happened (Magara, 2009).

Media attention quickly escalated after that phone call of inquiry. The institution's public relations office estimated receiving hundreds of media inquiries and calls in the immediate aftermath of the shootings. Approximately two hours after the incident, the public affairs office held the first in a series of press conferences over the next few days. At each of these gatherings,

university officials encouraged the public to go to its website for up-to-date information. The public responded to these urgings as the university reported receiving nearly 14 million “hits” on its website. The administration also relied upon mass e-mailings to remain connected with its publics and interested parties. Three weeks after the incident, university president John Peters urged the campus community and external publics, including the media, to focus on helping them “look forward” (Peters, 2008) as decisions were made on how best to honor those who had been killed and their families as well as on supporting the institution itself as it carried on with the remainder of the semester. Peters finally announced that he would no longer conduct media interviews about the incident, calling the motives of some reporters as being in “bad taste.”

There won’t be a press release. I’m not talking to the press. I think the people of the state understand this. They have to give us a little room here, because this is such an emotional time (Peters, 2008).

Two years after the 2008 shootings, Peters was honored by NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) for the leadership he displayed during and after the tragedy. One year earlier, Northern Illinois University’s office of public affairs was honored with a Silver Anvil Award by the Public Relations Society of America for helping the institution emerge from the crisis with its reputation as a safe and caring institution intact, without threat of legal action and an increase in applications from prospective students.

As the university slowly began returning to the business of educating its students, questions arose as to what the impact on enrollment at Northern Illinois University might be. Reports indicated it had a negative affect on the institution. Prior to the shootings, the institution had been experiencing an upward trend in student growth, particularly among freshmen and

transfer applicants. Despite the public relations honor, a senior admissions officer said enrollment numbers actually declined in both fall of 2008 and 2009 (Lagana, 2010). In their recruitment efforts, admissions officers found themselves dealing with questions from prospective students and their families as to the safety of the campus and whether it would be wise to pursue an education at Northern Illinois University. “We try hard not to let it define us, but it is a very difficult thing to overcome,” said another senior administrator (Buettner, 2011). The admissions office worked closely with the university’s university relations office to devise talking points to help address concerns expressed by potential students. Looking ahead to fall 2011, the admissions office is hopeful it will generate an enrollment increase.

Arguably, the occurrences at George Mason University and Northern Illinois University were among the most notable and written-about incidents in higher education in the nation over the past half-decade. One was a time of great celebration and triumph while the other was gut-wrenching and tragic. Those two occurrences brought unprecedented attention to each institution in ways that continue to this day.

The two incidents are on the opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of life experiences and institutional benchmarks. Despite the obvious differences, however, the two are surprisingly similar in that they presented each institution with distinct strategic communication challenges in terms of dealing with each unexpected circumstance as it occurred and then with related events that followed. George Mason’s Final Four experience and Northern Illinois University’s shootings represented situations beyond the control of each institution. Because of their unexpected and/or unplanned for occurrence, the events placed the two universities in a crisis situation by generating a high level of uncertainty and potential threat to each entity’s reputation (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007). The senior administrators at George Mason and Northern Illinois University found themselves with the challenge of establishing an ongoing dialog with its

internal and external publics to minimize or even prevent any potential damage occurring to their images or reputations (Fearn-Banks, 2007).

Regarding George Mason, an initial threat was financial in terms of the unexpected costs assumed by the university for competing in the NCAA tournament. Thousands of dollars had to be allocated by George Mason to cover travel and living expenses of the basketball team. The initial threat against Northern Illinois University was obviously more physical. People were afraid for their lives. Plus, it was unknown how widespread the shootings were. These two situations threatened to upset each institution's equilibrium because of a possible failure to handle each via effective crisis management and in a strategic manner that kept the focus on each institution's overall mission (Lillibridge & Klukker, 1978). Further, because of the enormous attention being placed on each institution, missteps by members of their internal communities, such as students and administrators, or misstatements by their spokespersons could have jeopardized any level of public confidence in George Mason and Northern Illinois University. Thus, public perceptions of each institution could have been negatively affected, thus snowballing into downward trends in donations, enrollment and even financial support from state government.

Another threat shared by each institution pertained to the organizational identity felt by members of their communities. Specifically, organizational identity refers to the extent individuals within their organization - in this case George Mason and Northern Illinois University – share and support the values and decisions their entities have and make (Silva & Sias, 2010). The stronger the sense of identity one has toward an organization the stronger the degree of identification or loyalty. In the case of George Mason and Northern Illinois University, easy examples would be of employees who wear institutional memorabilia such as sweat shirts or jackets. Studies have shown that the higher the quality of one's identification with an organization the higher level of morale, job satisfaction and commitment will be (Cheney &

Tompkins, 1987). Thus, missteps by either George Mason or Northern Illinois University in dealing with their respective crises, as perceived by their publics, could possibly compromise or threaten the degree of identification that employees and students had toward them. Given the potential harm crises can bring an organization, it is important to explore planning for and management of crises and the extent to which these efforts are consistent with a university's overall values and strategic objectives.

Consequently, the research questions that will be driving this dissertation will revolve around the crisis communication plans of George Mason and Northern Illinois University and the connection or relationship, if any, these plans had with each institution's strategic communication plan. Specifically, the questions will examine whether the two plans within each institution shared common elements or goals; how the two institutions measured the success or effectiveness of their crisis plans; the thoroughness, if any, of the connection between the two plans at each institution; the extent to which the crisis plans and how well they were enacted contributed to the strategic communication plans of George Mason and Northern Illinois University; the impact that the enactment of the crisis communication plan had on each institution's overall reputation or image; and whether the administrative leaders at George Mason and Northern Illinois University considered what happened at their institutions to be transformative. A detailed explanation of each question will be provided in chapter two.

It should be noted here that one key contention in this dissertation is that not all crises are necessarily negative. Depending how it is handled, a crisis can actually serve as an opportunity for improvement and positive enlightenment within an organization. At the same time, a crisis or reputation-threatening situation handled poorly can do lasting harm to an entity's external reputation and internal effectiveness (Guth & Marsh, 2009). This is a threat the two institutions shared, particularly as they were under such intense and close scrutiny by so many national and

international media outlets. The point, however, of a crisis not automatically being a negative occurrence will be addressed in more detail later in this document. Before these and other related questions are addressed, however, it is important to identify the elements that comprise both crisis and strategic communication and directly apply them to George Mason University's Final Four experience and the massacre at Northern Illinois University. In achieving this overriding goal, an exploration of the concept of a transformative event will serve as a lead-in to a detailed description of a crisis, crisis communication and strategic communication and then an extensive review of previous research on strategic communication as it has been applied to crisis management/communication. This is called for to provide context for the actions taken by both institutions. Establishing an understanding of elements that define and lead to a transformative event raises the question: Should crisis and strategic communication occur in a vacuum or be separate from each other or should they have at least some degree of integration? To more precisely relate this question to George Mason and Northern Illinois University, did the leaders of these organizations keep long term, strategic goals in mind as they grappled with these transformative events? If so, then how?

Detailed answers to these and other related questions potentially can play an important role in advancing the key role strategic communication can and possibly should play in times of stress and threat. Additionally, it could even advance efforts to more thoroughly meld strategic communication and crisis communication to ultimately provide a greater depth to the efforts of strategic communicators as they strive to better serve and prepare their organizations for turbulent times. Granted, crisis communication, from a limited perspective, is designed to be short-term in that it primarily speaks to the crisis at-hand. Strategic communication is more of a long-term undertaking as it is designed to support an entity's grand or overarching vision. Findings in this paper could more specifically help institutions of higher learning solidify their own overall

communication efforts by designing crisis communication plans that feed into the broader strategic communication efforts. Doing so could potentially help them advance their reputations, solidify support from various publics, and ensure open lines of communication with their internal and external constituencies in times of normalcy and crisis.

George Mason University and Northern Illinois University

A brief overview of the histories of George Mason University and Northern Illinois University pertaining more directly to the specific foci of this dissertation is called for to help provide context to discussions of their transformative events and to allow appreciation of how much of an impact or potentially transformative effect to the environment the Final Four was to George Mason and the shootings were to Northern Illinois University.

George Mason University was initially created in 1957 as a satellite campus University of Virginia. When its doors opened, only sixteen residents of Northern Virginia were on-hand to take the extension center's first-class offerings. Along with the region itself, the institution grew at a rapid pace. Several years after its beginning days, it was moved to a Fairfax location that totaled over 600 acres. In 1972, carrying the name George Mason University, it was granted independent status by Virginia's state council for higher education. As its 2009-2010 academic year got underway, George Mason had become the largest four-year institution of higher education in the Commonwealth of Virginia in terms of enrollment, with a total student population in excess of 33,000.

Prior to 2006, George Mason boasted 20 athletic teams, each of which competed in the Colonial Athletic Association. These figures have not changed. The university's teams range from basketball, track and field, lacrosse and soccer to baseball, tennis, golf and swimming. Prior to the 2006 Final Four experience, none of the sports had enjoyed significantly high attendance on any kind of consistent level. The men's basketball team, however, has traditionally been the

most popular among all of George Mason's teams with an average home attendance of 4,533 per game. This number jumped to 6,834 per game after the 2006 season (Baker, 2007).

Given this history, George Mason's Final Four experience was unlike any it had ever had in terms of game attendance and overall interest in the university. After the NCAA 2006 tournament, this even spilled over into other areas at George Mason. Bookstore sales, for example, totaled \$1 million in 2006 as compared to \$625,000 the year before. The university's admissions office experienced a 150 percent jump in web hits: out-of-state student applications increased by over 15 percent; and freshmen applications saw a 10 percent jump (Baker, 2007).

In terms of strategic communication, for much of its existence George Mason's core mission has revolved around being an institution of regional distinction and relevance. Further, George Mason's initial academic priorities – high technology, the arts and public policy – were identified to meet the needs of Northern Virginia-Washington, D.C. region. In recent years, the university has expanded its vision to become an institution of national relevance and international prominence. It has done so largely by promoting the expertise and academic achievement of its faculty, its regional connections and partnerships, and institutional image of being innovative and entrepreneurial.

Unlike strategic communication, emphasis on crisis planning and crisis communication was and is a recent phenomenon in the evolution of George Mason. While university leaders have always placed high importance on the safety of its internal publics and its ability to handle crisis situations, doing so in a well-coordinated, strategic and comprehensive manner was never adequately articulated. Two unexpected and deadly incidents played key roles in reversing this mindset. The first was the tragedy of September 11, 2001. This unprecedented event motivated George Mason's institutional leaders to establish a viable crisis plan designed to give the campus a workable plan of action should tragedy befall it. Alan Merten, president of George Mason,

reflected on this day and its impact on the university. “From our Arlington campus we could see smoke coming from the Pentagon. This really drove home the reality that we were vulnerable to any kind of attack that occurred in the capitol and even outside it. We had to make ourselves ready,” he said (2007).

Thirteen months after the attack by terrorists, Virginians, Marylanders and resident of Washington, D.C. found themselves caught up in what has since been labeled the “D.C. sniper incident” (Censer, 2010). Over a three-week period, ten men and women were murdered and three others seriously injured by what turned out to be a bizarre murder spree enacted by two males. The randomness of the killings and shootings reinforced feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty in a part of the country that was, in many ways, still reeling from the terrorist attack that occurred in 2001. The snipers provided a greater sense of urgency in institutional and security leaders at George Mason to further strengthen its crisis management efforts.

Northern Illinois University’s history is much more extensive than George Mason’s in that it is over twice as old. Northern Illinois University was founded in 1895 as Northern Illinois State Normal School. Presently, it has outreach centers in four different locations throughout Illinois and boasts a total student enrollment of approximately 24,400 students. Northern Illinois University offers 63 undergraduate and 78 graduate degree programs, including 11 doctoral level areas of study.

In terms of campus crime, Northern Illinois University’s campus crime rate was and remains modest. Prior to the 2008 shootings, its most serious violent crime rate was in the category of burglaries or thefts with 66 offenses in 2007. It also had 50 liquor law violations and 44 drug law violations that year. Since the 2008 shootings, those numbers at Northern Illinois University have remained constant. The institution has been recognized for its efforts to reduce the amount of alcohol drinking among its student population.

As was the case with officials at George Mason University, those at Northern Illinois University were motivated to enhance their institution's crisis plans as a result of the September 11, 2001, attack by terrorists. Their sense of urgency was further enhanced by the shootings that occurred in April, 2007, at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, commonly known as Virginia Tech.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Strategic and Crisis Communication

As separate areas of research and practice, strategic communication and crisis communication are growing fields within public relations. More and more, organizations are devoting significant portions of their budgets toward strengthening their hands in both as they seek ways to ensure successful futures as well as cope with events that cause them to stray from their normal flow or routine. Overall, the two foci are designed to help keep their entities moving forward toward fulfilling an overriding vision or carrying out an organizational mission as articulated and established by their leadership. One way to help ensure this is for both the strategic and crisis communication plans to tap into what Daft & Lengel (1986) labeled a heavy use of media designed help keep message misunderstandings or ambiguity to a minimum. Ideally, the two communication plans should be part of an integrative approach to management that benefits the direction of an organization (Dyck & Neubert, 2010).

Despite the similar characteristics of strategic and crisis communication, often the two are viewed separately as the implementation of each is seen as being largely appropriate only at particular times: strategic communication when an organization seeks to launch a comprehensive image campaign of some sort with elements within a particular environment (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002); and crisis communication when a crisis – positive or negative – occurs and the organization seeks to contend with it in a manner that does not harm its standing in the eyes of the public (Sandman, 1983). At present, scant research exists that pertains to case studies of crisis and strategic communication plans within an organization being interconnected; the advantages or

disadvantages of such a linkage being made; or even surveying officials on attitudes they may have regarding such a connection being made. Thus, this dissertation seeks to fill this void by exploring the concept of melding communication and strategic communication plans.

A review of research on the two, however, indicates that individually each represents an effort to maintain a straight line or continuum toward a specified goal or finish line. If the two are more directly melded together, then an organization's ongoing efforts to continue moving forward will be greatly enhanced (Fombrun, 1996). While a primary difference between crisis and strategic communication might be in the circumstance of their implementation and enactment, their overall integration would better serve the greater good of the organization.

The discussion of each field of public relations that follows touches on this innate linkage. When applied to the situations at George Mason University and Northern Illinois University, it further highlights the question of the role that strategic communication played in the handling of each of their respective situations. In addition, when applied to the matter of each event being potentially transformative, research suggests that strategic communication is a key component in helping set the stage for dramatic changes in an organization's culture or environment. Thus, an examination of transformative events would serve as a lead-in to the more over-arching question of a potential connection between strategic communication and crisis communication. First, however, a brief overview of those histories of George Mason and Northern Illinois University pertaining most directly to the specific foci of this dissertation is called for to help provide context to this discussion of their transformative events and to allow appreciation of how much of an impact or potentially transformative effect to the environment the Final Four was to George Mason and the shootings were to Northern Illinois University.

The Concept of a Transformative Event

By definition, a cliché is a well-worn or overused phrase or expression that has become such a regular and common part of the human lexicon that its frequent use is second-nature to those who use and hear it (Nurberg & Rosenblum, 1989). Even though, for many, their origins may be lost, the feelings these phrases evoke appear to be without end. “Life happens” is one example of such a cliché. When compared to the concept of a transformative event, it represents one end of the spectrum in terms of day-to-day occurrences in the existence of an individual or an entity or organization. If “life happens,” more to the mundane, a transformative event stands out as dramatically different from the routine of the culture of an organization (Hess & Martin, 2006). Further, a transformative event is one that may depart so much from routine that it encourages organizational members to question or change the mission of an organization. This notion echoes a question raised by McAdan and Sewell and others: do such events inevitably bring about organization changes or do they simply have the potential to do so (2001)? Further, must transformative events be entirely surprising?

Much of the time, however, these events occur not by happenstance or without warning. Rather, they begin with some level of forethought and planning. Transformation often begins with proactive thinking and vision that eventually comes out of discussions and collaborations with stakeholders. Rarely, if ever, is a transformative event a singular phenomenon that is carried out and/or implemented by an individual (Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2001). What happened to George Mason University and Northern Illinois University are good examples. In the case of George Mason, the men’s basketball team had just completed a highly successful regular season of play. Thus, the team was moving in the direction of a significant showing in the NCAA tournament. In the case of Northern Illinois University, the institution had already established a crisis plan to help prepare for any kind of unwanted event, thus acknowledging the possibility of a negative occurrence. Further, events such as the Final Four experience and the Northern Illinois

University shootings are more likely to serve as a catalyst for lasting adjustments (Zald & Ash, 1996).

More examples, some commonplace and some not, of transformative events being the result of planning and collaboration are plentiful. For instance, one would be hard-pressed to find a mother or father who would say the birth of their child was not a transformative event in their lives. Yet the pregnancy of the mother is not totally unknown and therefore the birth is not unexpected. A second example is the 2008 election of Barrack Obama as the first African American president in United States history. As notable as his election was, this transformative event was not a surprise as he was only one of two primary candidates, the fact his candidacy was the result of the work of many individuals and, thus, Obama's possible election had been well known for months.

The example of Obama's election can be interpreted as an occurrence that resulted from a social movement. This would be in keeping with a popular theory that transformative events are tied to the efforts of activists who seek to cause a significant turn or shift in society (Flacks, 2004). Another example would be the integration of major league baseball in 1947 when African-American Jackie Robinson took the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers of the National League. Soon afterward, teams in both the American and National leagues began integrating their rosters as well. This, in turn, contributed to a greater acceptance on the part of the American public of whites and persons of color collaborating as equal partners. But as brave as Robinson was back then, he could not have done it without the leadership of, among others, Branch Rickey, owner of the Dodgers. Thus, the transformative event that Robinson represented was actually the result of the actions of more than this one athlete. Others planned for the change to occur. Robinson served as the public face representing the transformation much as chess pieces controlled by chess players represent change in the eyes of outside observers. The examples of Barrack

Obama's election as president and Jackie Robinson and the integration of major league baseball serve as dramatic illustrations of the earlier point that transformative events are more likely set in motion via strategic planning.

Definition of Crisis

While many organizations or institutions contend with difficult or challenging times or moments, the great majority of these incidences are viewed as being routine or regular occurrences. Meeting end-of-the-month deadlines or dealing with unexpected employee shortages might be considered examples. A crisis, however, is a distinct moment with a potentially negative outcome that affects the organization or entity as well as its public, products, services and reputation (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Similarly, a crisis is viewed as a potential disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, its subjective sense of self and even its existential core (Pauchart & Mitroff, 1992). It possesses three defining characteristics: (a) surprise, (b) threat and (c) short response time (Hermann, 1963). The circumstances, while underway, often seem to take on the characteristic of unpredictability, thus seeming to leave those caught up in it to be at the mercy of how the occurrence itself (Heath & Millar, 2004). Such was the circumstance at George Mason and Northern Illinois University. Typical of a crisis, both saw an escalating intensity in interest by the public, fell under close media scrutiny, experienced interference in their normal operations, and even felt potential threats to their public image and economic stability (Fink, 1986). While there existed a variance in the element of surprise for each institution, neither one had specific contingency plans in place for what they faced. Specifically, while George Mason certainly wanted its men's basketball team to go as far as it could in the NCAA tournament, it had no articulated plan in place that addressed steps to take should the team win its way to the Final Four, the final two, or to the championship itself.

It was the same with Northern Illinois University. This institution had a campus-wide crisis plan in place but nowhere did it address steps to take in response to the specific actions that Kazmierczak took despite the fact it had previously turned to Virginia Tech for guidance on what to include in such a plan. Northern Illinois University's crisis plan, as posted on the institution's website, had been updated most recently approximately less than one year prior to its shootings. Nowhere in this document can there be found a specific mention of a scenario involving an armed intruder (Appendix F). It could be argued that the matter of Kazmierczak at Northern Illinois University represented what Beamish (2002) calls a *crescive* or gradually increasing trouble in that Kazmierczak's difficulties dealing with others had been building over a period of time. Accounts by various media outlets supported this notion as they indicated that several of Kazmierczak's peers said he had been behaving in an erratic manner due to the fact he had apparently stopped taking his medication (Peters, 2009). Prior to this, many viewed him as being a hard working and successful student.

Nevertheless, threats the leaders at the two institutions faced touched on each institution's ability to organize public support, keep their internal publics well informed, maintain their normal routines as much as possible, and contend with added fiscal and personnel burdens brought about by their respective situations. Further, these exceptional challenges faced by George Mason and Northern Illinois University were immediate and provided each institution with little margin for error. What both institutions faced, if these events were significantly mishandled, were threats to public safety, reputation loss and financial loss (Coombs, 2007). What happened to George Mason unfolded nonstop over a matter of weeks while the duration of the scenario at Northern Illinois University was a matter of minutes. Despite the dramatic differences in the length of time of their respective situations, George Mason and Northern Illinois University's time to react in a coherent, organized manner was limited. Seeger, Vennette, Ulmer & Sellnow (2002) identified

this reality as an example of something that could contribute to a level of uncertainty experienced by entities in a time of crisis. Further, each institution and their various spokespersons faced the added challenge of avoiding misstatements that would either perpetuate inaccurate information or impressions or actually escalate the intensity of their situations. In the face of the heightened media scrutiny each faced, even innocent misstatements could have serious consequences.

Yet, despite these similarities, it is helpful at this juncture to address the nagging question of whether what each of these institutions experienced was a crisis. Regarding Northern Illinois University, the answer is clear because of the negative nature of what happened. The campus was literally under siege and lives were lost. The threat to the institution, its reputation, and its community were clear. In terms of George Mason, however, the question is not quite so obvious. As was stated at the beginning of this document, what happened to George Mason was obviously a positive occurrence. How then, one might ask, can it be construed or be labeled as a crisis? After all, is not a crisis by definition automatically a negative thing? Can a comparison between George Mason's basketball success and Northern Illinois University's horrific tragedy be logically made? Can a person or an organization unexpectedly experience an extremely positive occurrence, yet still be considered to be in a state of crisis? If a person of low economic means, for instance, wins a \$100 million lottery, can that person be considered to be in a state of crisis the same way as a person whose house burns down and, as a result, loses all possessions?

Previous research responds in the affirmative to this question despite the fact it may run counter to conventional wisdom. Going back to the components of a crisis articulated by Hermann (1963), a crisis represents a surprise and threat and requires a short response time. At the conclusion of the regular 2006 college basketball season, George Mason's team was considered by many to be good but not necessarily a national powerhouse. Further, it was only able to enter the annual NCAA tournament via an at-large bid rather than solely on the merits of

its regular season performance. This perception contributed greatly to the campus-wide surprise of the team's success throughout the tournament. George Mason's team thus became a novelty to which sports fans and journalists became intensely drawn. Comments at the time from George Mason's President Alan Merten illustrated the intensity of the media coverage:

I remember one afternoon being interviewed by a local television station but I had to cut that short in order to sit down with a reporter from "The News Hour."

Immediately after that I had to speak at a campus pep rally at the Johnson Center that was being covered by the major networks and probably close to a dozen print outlets. This kind of media intensity was exciting but also something we had never quite experienced before (Merten, 2006).

This top administrator's recollection speaks to the surprise element of the heady and happy crisis experienced by George Mason. This time in George Mason's history, as well as that fatal day at Northern Illinois University, was intense. Each institution's various publics were very much aware of and caught up in the reality of these dramatic situations. Their reactions to the circumstances of their respective institution matched what was occurring. For instance, the mood of those following the mounting success of George Mason's men's basketball team in the NCAA's 2006 tournament was upbeat and positive. Conversely, those directly affected by the multiple shootings at Northern Illinois University were upset and shocked. Kreps (1984) has indicated it is not uncommon when the public reacts to a specific transformative event in ways similar to the entity at which the event occurs. Further, Vecchi (2009) echoed this view. He said the emotions as experienced in the cases of those at George Mason and Northern Illinois University were not unusual. The fact that the publics at George Mason were virtually giddy with

pride and joy while the publics at Northern Illinois University, particularly the students and the faculty and staff, felt much stress, were very much in sync with feelings of high emotion, great pressure or personal threat that people often exhibit under circumstances of this nature.

The unrelenting intensity of press interest in all aspects of George Mason, including its facilities, student life, campus support, academic programs and overall athletic program, placed the institution under a level of scrutiny the likes of which it had never experienced (Baker, 2007). As a result, the university administrators, particularly its university relations or press team, were called upon to work in a high-alert fashion that required them to be on-call throughout the days and evenings, including weekends, for the duration of the men's basketball team's success. George Mason was under major public scrutiny. Demand for information from it was intense. The pressure to ensure this unexpected degree of interest depicted it in a favorable light was high. This meant no inaccuracies, no overlooking informational requests and no less-than-professional behavior. Press requests included accessibility to various officials and students, admittance into various facilities such as residents halls, student unions and even classrooms, and permission to do live remotes and broadcasts on the campus. While some requests were more complex than others, all required close attention. Additionally, in my recollection as George Mason University's press secretary at that time, the requests were often made with little advance notice. Thus, the remaining two characteristics of a crisis as defined by Hermann (1963) – threat and short response time – were very much on display at George Mason.

Other institutions of higher learning have had similar experiences as George Mason and Northern Illinois University in which significant events have occurred placing them under intense public and media scrutiny.

In the sports world, University of Memphis is one example. While its overall record with the NCAA tournament is superior to George Mason's, like the Fairfax-based institution, it has

never won the championship even though it has gotten as close as appearing in the final championship game twice. In its history, University of Memphis has appeared 21 times in the NCAA tournament. Memphis' most recent heart-breaking loss occurred in 2008 when it lost in the championship game in overtime to Kansas State University. A senior communication officer at the University of Memphis, assessed their office's role with the team during the tournament:

This was a busy time for us but I feel like we pretty much handled the media well. Mainly we scheduled the interviews and media requests around the practice sessions of the team and after their games. The coach kept telling us to enjoy the moment and that's what we did. But we did not make any effort to tie in what the player and the coach were saying in their interviews with any larger message from the university. We felt the focus should be on the team and its success.

(Chance, 2010)

Another example, this one more tragic in terms of number of victims than the incident at Northern Illinois University, was what happened at Virginia Tech. In April, 2007, an English major in his second year went on a shooting rampage, killing 32 individuals. He then turned the gun on himself thus raising the total deaths that day to 33. Of the victims, 27 were students and 5 were faculty. The murders occurred over a two and a one half hour time span that morning. Police estimated the shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, a native of South Korea, had fired approximately 200 rounds during this spree. A senior official at Virginia Tech recalled this day:

Certainly it was a time like we have never seen or known before. It truly was a situation. The reaction was overwhelming. In the aftermath, it was important for

us – the university and the students – to be seen as coming together and that people continue to be aware of our resilience (Tillar, 2010).

Examination of Virginia Tech's crisis plan reveals a document similar to Northern Illinois University's in that the names of offices to be part of a crisis emergency team were identified and various emergencies scenarios were outlined with the exception of a campus shooter (Appendix F). However, there are no details as to the specific staffing of the plan. For instance, the specific individuals to be involved in carrying out the plan upon its implementation are not identified. In terms of the shooting crisis itself, according to a senior communication officer at Northern Illinois University, the institution's primary goals included providing as much timely information on its web site and through the media as possible, treating the media as partners, maintaining internal credibility, and reinforcing its institutional image of being a safe and caring place. These strategies were inspired and implemented by how officials at Virginia Tech handled their situation (Magara, 2009).

A review of these examples raises a key question regarding the relationship between a transformative event and a crisis. Is a crisis a kind of transformative event or are they simply two differing phenomena that can cause organizations to re-think and possibly even make changes in their fundamental features of their missions and strategic plans? Generally, researchers have found that while significant transformation occurs as a result of a crisis, there remains no guarantee that all crises automatically lead to organizational or even individual transformation of any significant degree (Poindexter, 1997). Such variables as the nature of the crisis, the extent of its duration, its immediate impact on the entity involved and even the level of preparedness of those who deal with the occurrence are among the variables that can and do influence the extent transformation may occur. These variables apply to whether a crisis is situational or tied to the

unexpected, social or tied to larger societal or cultural events, or compound or in reaction to earlier events (Golan, 1986). Also, should a crisis lead to significant transformation within an organization, these changes do not necessarily occur immediately. They can come about following a comprehensive assessment or measurement of the crisis and how it was handled and of the public's reaction. This could take an extended period of time.

Definition of Crisis Communication

The challenges faced by George Mason and Northern Illinois University, despite their different situations, were not insignificant: facing intense public scrutiny, maintaining positive images, maintaining lines of communication with their various publics, creating effective messages, maintaining as close to normal operations as possible, and effectively dealing with the crisis itself. Further, while these general challenges were the same, as Benoit noted (1995), as is often the case with various crises, it was the specific situations at George Mason and Northern Illinois University that shaped the communication strategies each institution devised to deal with them. For George Mason and Northern Illinois University, crisis communication represented a continuation of the dialogue between each organization and its publics prior to, during, and even after their respective occurrences. This reinforces a point made by Fearn-Banks (2007), who recognized while crisis communication may represent a change in an entity's way of communicating with its various publics, it does not reflect a sudden departure from that same entity's efforts to remain connected to its external and even internal constituencies.

Beginnings of Crisis/Risk Communication

It is not uncommon for these two terms to be used interchangeably. The reality, however, is that they are different. Risk communication refers more to preparation while crisis speaks to dealing with an actual situation as it occurs. The seeds of crisis/risk communication as it is viewed today were first planted over 30 years ago. At the time, the United States was rationing

gasoline, tensions in the Middle East were mounting, and Americans seemed to be growing less and less confident in their government. Events such as the Love Canal disaster of August, 1978, which involved the unsafe disposal of toxic waste, and Three Mile Island nuclear power plant failure of March, 1979, that shook public confidence, made the importance of effective communication during hazardous events vividly clear. Thus, it was perceived by the federal government that the general public was growing increasingly concerned that decisions affecting their safety, welfare and overall health were being made without their input or knowledge (Covello & Sandman, 2001). As a result, to address this disconnect, governmental and industrial leaders joined forces to begin better informing the public about such issues as environmental policy. This effort bolstered work on risk and crisis management and communication.

Crisis communication goes beyond simply responding to unexpected situations as they occur. One basic challenge is helping those involved with or affected by the crisis contend with the emotional element of the situation (Weber, 2006). If people are afraid, for example, they may behave or react in a manner that actually makes the situation worse or actually adds to the severity of the challenge. At Northern Illinois University, for instance, how much worse would things have been if people on campus ignored warnings from authorities and ventured over to where gunfire had been coming from? At George Mason, the institution's efforts to control its messages to the media and general public might have been compromised if any of the employees had ignored guidance from the administration in which only certain individuals speak on behalf of the university.

At its most effective, crisis communication entails a well-rounded plan designed before a crisis even occurs, good relations with an entity's key publics, effective communication tools or vehicles from which to work, and a strong acceptance on the part of the publics to honor a crisis plan should it be necessary to implement. Such fundamentals are captured in a CAUSE model

that serves as a bridge between preparing for a disaster and managing them when they occur (Rowan, Botan, Kreps, Samoilenko & Farnsworth, 2009). This model outlines the stages or process entities can and should follow in preparing their publics for prospective disasters or crises. The specific goals to which CAUSE refers include: building Confidence, Awareness, Understanding, Satisfaction with recommendations, and Enactment of them. Collectively, these goals are designed to inform, establish acceptance and instill a tangible level of readiness within a public should a specific crisis occur. Also taken as a whole, these goals are not necessarily easy to attain, nor are they able to be achieved in relatively easy or quick fashion. Further, each requires continual communication efforts in order to ensure they remain foremost in the minds of the pertinent publics should a crisis strike (Ripley, 2008).

A viable example of the value of repetition is found in the consistent and ongoing steps taken by Morgan Stanley Dean Witter in the World Trade Center following the 1993 bombing of those structures. The company's chief of security, Rick Rescorla, initiated a training session for its nearly 2,000 employees which had them participate in weekly drills on what to do should another terrorist bombing attack occur. With the backing of the top officers of Morgan Stanley Dean Witter, Rescorla was able to ignore many of the complaints from employees about participating in these regular drills. Thus, the drills were instituted and the workers were schooled on the proper steps to take should it be necessary. As we know, it turned out to be necessary. On September 11, 2001, terrorists struck again. As a direct result of Rescorla's efforts, the great majority of this company's workers successfully evacuated the towers and survived the devastation and tragedy of that day. Unfortunately, Rescorla himself did not survive, but he remains a hero to this day.

The CAUSE Model and Effective Crisis Communication

This Rowan et al. CAUSE model can be used to identify the features of a well-rounded and thorough communication effort. It suggests that successful crisis communication depends upon long term planning. As Sandman (2002) explained, crisis communication plans represent a process in which organizations, over extended periods of time, initiate research, conduct table top exercises, assign tasks to appropriate individuals to carry out various portions of the plan, and then ensure the plan is kept fresh and timely so that it may be enacted immediately. Despite the fact researchers have not explored a linkage between crisis communication plans and strategic communication plans, the fact both involve thorough research over extended periods of time suggests strongly that strategic communication goals may be achieved if detailed crisis communication plans explicitly delineate the links between managing crises well and adhering to an organization's core values and long term goals. Both crisis and strategic planning, for instance, include organization-wide actions, strong elements of persuasion, measurable goals, and ensuring connections with various publics. With similarities this significant, the two ideally should complement each other and, thus, lock each into being more interdependent on the other.

Applying the CAUSE model to the earlier example of Morgan Stanley Dean Witter and the efforts of its top security officer illustrates this. For there to be any chance that thousands of employees within that company would listen to the safety information communicated to them via Rescorla, they must have had confidence in the company itself. One possible source of this confidence is a belief in what the company stands for as well as a belief that company leaders are actively engaged in the well being of their employees (Crozier, 2010). Did the workers believe the company has their best interest in mind? Was Rescorla a credible vehicle of information? If the workers had a negative attitude toward either question, then Rescorla's insistence that all employees practice evacuating from their World Trade Center offices, as endorsed by the company, no matter how well-intentioned or factual, would largely have been ignored by the

workers. Seeds for the confidence in the company on the part of the workers in all likelihood were probably planted long before the attacks on the World Trade Center. What Heath (1995) would call the company's credibility infrastructure was well in-place. Trust or confidence was the key for the company's successful implementation of a crisis strategy. It was and is the result of parties holding favorable perceptions of another to the point that various outcomes can be and are achieved (Wheless & Grotz, 1977). Thus, effective or successful crisis communication depends upon long term practices, such as building trust, confidence and a high level of readiness, with key constituencies. These characteristics are shared by effective strategic communication.

This flows right into the model's next step: awareness. Here the CAUSE model shows that crisis messages can fail if their intended recipients are not aware of them; that is a warning message is not seen, heard, or detected in other ways. At Northern Illinois University, for example, there were reports that initially many students, staff and faculty members were not even cognizant that deadly shootings were occurring on campus despite efforts by university officials to inform the campus community shootings were occurring and that people were in danger. At Northern Illinois University, the administration utilized its web page as the primary vehicle for communicating its emergency to its numerous internal publics. The obvious obstacle in this case was that not everyone had access to the university's web page at the time of the crisis. It is vital, of course, that publics immediately understand when they are being notified of an actual danger or crisis. The obvious benefit of this is that they will give these messages serious attention.

The third goal of the CAUSE model refers to how well publics can comprehend or interpret a message. Assuming people detect a warning message, do they even know what is being said to them? For instance, if workers are told of an approaching snow storm and that, as a result, only "essential employees" are to report for duty, how well is this term understood? Do they even know who counts as "essential?" Speaking or communicating in a way in which people

can understand is a fundamental tenet of communication. Another example of potential confusion occurs at many colleges and universities when due to inclement weather conditions it is announced that institutions are opening “two hours late” without further explanation. Often, employees are uncertain about the specific starting time on a normal work day, so they are left to wonder: does the late opening time begin two hours after morning classes normally begin or two hours after their individual work day begins? To make this even more confusing, the official work time for many employees varies. Does this then mean they report to work at different times? A basic component of communication competence, as first identified by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) that helps distinguish between messages that are simply heard versus ones that are followed is ensuring those messages are then fully understood. Further, because people often take action based on what is communicated to them, how well they understand the messages is vital (Botan & Hazelton, 2006).

The fourth feature of the CAUSE model is the “s” for satisfaction, involving recommended actions designed to achieve satisfaction. Also, potential obstacles to agreement with proposed solutions should be anticipated. Ideally, these steps should be addressed as part of the planning stage so as to avoid confusion and possible tragedy when a real crisis occurs. Providing information about a proposed solution in a balanced way is one step that has proven to be one effective strategy for instilling a level of satisfaction within the receivers of a message. This process, which is the essence of the inoculation theory, is designed to raise the level of satisfaction – decrease resistance – in the message on the part of the public (McGuire, 1961). In it, before introducing their reasons for making certain recommendations, the sender acknowledges other perspectives to address a particular situation. This two-sided persuasion strategy reinforces the notion that senders have been open to all suggestions before coming up with their own particular set of recommendations. For instance, in preparing for a possible attack,

rather than simply telling workers they must evacuate the towers via the stairs, Rescorla at Morgan Stanley Dean Witter could acknowledge earlier recommendations of taking the elevator or crouching underneath desks and then explained why evacuation using the stairs was the safest method of escape. Generally, people preferred to be talked with rather than talked at. Two-sided persuasion recognizes this and, if done well, advances the effectiveness of the message (Hovland, Lumsdaine & Sheffield, 1949). Also, a message is more likely to be accepted if listeners believe it to be of value to them (McQuail, 2010).

The final goal of the CAUSE model speaks to enactment. This step speaks to how well receivers of the information/messages implement what is being recommended to them. Do they merely agree that a proposal is a good idea or do they actually enact it? In the case of the workers at the twin towers, the ultimate goal was that by rehearsing evacuation from the Twin Towers via the stairs, when a crisis struck, they would immediately for the stairs and escape. At George Mason University, how mobilized was the campus community regarding the prospect of how best to handle the intense attention of the national and international media? How well did the communicators at George Mason get across the necessary information? At Northern Illinois University, how prepared were students and employees for knowing what to do should a shooter appear? Did the communicators at this institution do an effective job of sharing this information as well as Rescorla did at his company? Particularly in the case of Northern Illinois University, how well did university authorities teach its internal publics to incorporate preparedness behaviors into their day-to-day lives (Booth-Butterfield, 2003)?

Significance of CAUSE Model

The purpose of this lengthy review of the CAUSE model was to illustrate the criteria or features of effective crisis communication. Yes, it involves the communication efforts during the time of a crisis, but to not include the plans that, in essence, set the stage for its effectiveness is to

shortchange any explanation of such an effort. During times of upheaval, as was experienced at George Mason and Northern Illinois University, those affected look for familiar signs from which to draw feelings of stability, information, resources to obtain help, and guidance (Jay, 2001). Much research, of course, has been conducted on the role of communication in helping people deal with a crisis, but as Sandman (1983) and other scholars readily acknowledge, a viable connection between communication in-general and communication during a crisis situation calls for thorough planning and logic in the sequence of strategies as much as one often finds in a well-thought out novel. Acknowledging the connection between the two also refutes concerns that crisis communication is strictly a reactionary exercise (Sturges, 1994). A more complete depiction of crisis communication might be found in an emergency planning-crisis communication model in which the elements of risk and crisis communication are combined. Such a model speaks to the reality that success in handling a crisis from a communication perspective begins in the preparation for a crisis and does not end until the postscript or aftermath of this unwanted or unexpected occurrence.

Effective Crisis Response

To help complete this comprehensive portrait of crisis communication, then, it is important to address primary components of an entity's responses. Successful implementation of these values helps an organization maintain strong ties with its publics in the aftermath of a crisis, including those communication efforts needed to ensure a successful conclusion. The components include demonstrating openness, being courteous, providing apologies when necessary, sharing community values, and being compassionate. Collectively, these values help keep possible community outrage to a minimum and help the organization, such as an institution of higher education, retain public support and a positive reputation. On the flip side, organizations should not adhere to or even give the impression they are engaging in secrecy, stonewalling, or being

discourteous, confrontational or dispassionate (Sandman & Miller, 1991). From a broader perspective, however, the question of how interlocking an organization's crisis communication plan is with its strategic communication plan remains. Is the crisis communication plan designed solely to help the organization navigate its way through a crisis or does it have a second, dual function of supporting the organization's core values and long term strategic communication plan or plans? Should it? A lack of research on the existence of a direct link between crisis and strategic communication plans suggest organizations treat the two of planning as important, yet separate. Crafting the two so that they overlap might actually enhance their overall effectiveness. On the flip side, treating them as separate efforts might detract from each. These questions will be explored in interviews with various key members of the administrative teams at George Mason and Northern Illinois University.

Definition of Strategic Communication

In the beginning years of the war in the Pacific, shortly after the United States began responding to the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, the naval commander Ernest King was quoted as muttering to his staff, "I don't know what in the hell this strategic communication is that Marshall is always talking about, but I want some of it" (Murphy, 2008).

Since then, strategic communication has evolved into something many others inside and outside the military have wanted as well. It has emerged as a term often applied to planned communication efforts or campaigns (Botan, 1997). These efforts can and are often carried out under numerous labels that range from public affairs, crisis management and public information to risk communication, strategic marketing and public health. Also, it is a management function in which communication is used to support and advance an organization's mission, achieve its goals and enhance its reputation or image. It involves detailed research and evaluation components and includes the efforts and/or involvement of the full set of an organization's assets

(Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic & Sriramesh, 2007). Further, strategic communication represents an all-encompassing effort designed to enable an entity or organization to achieve policy goals that ultimately contribute to its advancement (Smith, 2009). The goals can range from strengthening relations with surrounding communities, enhancing internal relations within the organization itself, or even persuading pertinent publics to take specific actions or alter core beliefs or attitudes. As Dess and Lumpkin wrote, part of this effort is found in designing ways in which to control the internal and external flow of information and even the behavior of those involved in the overall plan (2003). The organization can help ensure this control by designating specific spokespersons, specific channels of communication or communication vehicles, and assigning relevant personnel with specific tasks and responsibilities. Also, goals such as these can be pursued or even achieved by an organization as a collective body or by individuals within the organization. Further, it is the components of comprehensive research, evaluation, and well-organized plans that enhance an organization's image, visibility or ties with its environment that separates strategic communication from public relations (Soto & Botan, 1998). Whether driven by specific people or the organization, the goals represent examples of results which strategic communication is designed to address: measurable benchmarks set to move the organization forward for the purposes of its own successful and sustained survival. In essence, strategic communication is a well-formulated road map geared to move the organization toward an objective that enhances its overall position.

Early traces of strategic communication go back hundreds and even thousands of years in relation to military leaders and their efforts to gain power and communicate with wide audiences and conflicts between different armies and countries. One of the earliest recorded examples of strategic communication may be the actions of Julius Caesar during his military campaigns to enhance the power and empire of Rome leading up to his defeat of the Gauls in 49 B.C. During

this time Caesar proved to be a great general, but also revealed talents in the art of self promotion (Freeman, 2008). Driven by ambitions to gain a seat in the Roman senate and possibly ascend to an even higher position of power, Caesar initiated a regular stream of communiqués to the Senators and to the citizens of Rome in which he boasted of his military victories and exploits. These efforts greatly increased the future emperor's popularity among the general population and helped neutralized the distrust those within the Senate had for him.

In the infancy of public relations itself, pioneer Edward Bernays characterized practitioners as problem solvers who devised or formulated strategies to help a client or organization effectively deal with a problem or challenge (Bernays, 1923). Doing so involved conducting necessary research on the issue at-hand, identifying publics with whom to communicate, bringing together the appropriate tools or communication vehicles to utilize, settling upon the appropriate messages or information to put forth, formulating specific strategies by which to communicate those messages, and establishing ways to measure how well all efforts were carried out.

Though he labeled it public relations, Bernays was actually laying out the function for what scholars have come to identify as strategic communication. The elements first articulated by Bernays included the launching of formative efforts to set goals; pinpointing specific publics; setting specific, well-integrated communication strategies for each public; carrying out the strategies, and employing mechanisms by which to assess the overall efforts' effectiveness and success. These are ingredients comprising strategic communication (Pfau & Wan, 2006).

Research and strategy should be linked when it comes to well-planned and organized communication efforts (Taylor & Botan, 2004). Ideally, devised strategies should be the result of careful planning. An example of this would be the launching of a test-marketing campaign of a particular product prior to the official unveiling of that product. Gaining a documented sense of

how a public perceives the product helps place communicators on firmer footing in their outreach efforts. Not coincidentally, it is this research element that helps distinguish strategic communication from public relations, particularly the kind of public relations often associated with the mere enactment or carrying out of technical assignments. Examples of such a public relations effort would range from composing press releases, designing brochures and posting messages on a web site. While the ability to perform these tasks is important and should not be minimized, none necessarily require strategic planning. Further, none of these actions can result in changes in a public's behavior or represent a means by which to achieve that change or ways to measure that success (Tatham, 2008). Each requires the support of a number of other strategies that are developed and launched as a result of grand strategies reflecting policy-level decisions as they pertain to an organization's goals, ethics, relationships, and structure (Botan, 2006).

The components of strategic communication represent the life span of this procedure. The duration of a strategic communication effort is not necessarily measured in traditional days or other similar metrics, but rather in terms of how effectively it has achieved its objectives. Examples of this include influencing public attitudes regarding social and environmental issues such as becoming more accepting of the science of climate change or the moral necessity of civil rights (Chaffee, 1991). Whether the focus is a social issue or simply advancing the image of an organization, strategic communication begins and ends with publics and is designed to persuade (Botan & Hazelton, 2006). This coincides with Smith's definition of strategic communication (2009) as well as what is being followed for the purposes of this dissertation. Strategic communication is a (a) well researched process (b) initiated by an organization (c) involves measurable, organized and integrated strategies formulated for the purpose of advancing that body and its mission, and (d) is tied to targeted publics. How well or closely George Mason

University and Northern Illinois University adhered to these components will be evaluated via planned interviews with administrators at each institution.

Because of its heavy persuasive nature, strategic communication is very similar to a public relations model called two-way asymmetrical by Grunig & Hunt (1984). It is true the other three models they identified – press agency, public information and two-way symmetrical – have elements of persuasion in them. But none of these other three have as their main purpose the goal of persuasion. Press agency, for instance, is primarily geared to create greater visibility. The public information approach to communication is geared mainly to inform. The two-way symmetrical model speaks much more to establishing partnerships. The two-way asymmetrical particular model speaks to efforts by one entity to persuade a public or publics to take certain actions or accept or adopt certain perspectives. It and the other three models were introduced by Grunig and Hunt based upon the evolution of public relations since its beginning days within the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. The two-way asymmetrical model is not so much about establishing partnerships as it is striving to persuade publics to take certain actions they might not otherwise take or adopt positions they might not otherwise have (Guth & Marsh, 2009). Thus, the key here is found in efforts to persuade publics. This is particularly applicable to strategic communication as both are designed to influence rather than simply make a connection.

As it applies to George Mason University and Northern Illinois University, the challenge with their respective crises was to devise strategies to help their publics adjust to their situations as well as manage their situations in ways consistent with their respective values. Creating a structure in which organizations can react quickly to increasingly turbulent and even extreme situations is one factor that helps determine such an entity's ability to succeed in carrying out its goals and working toward its respective mission (Kennan & Hazelton, 2005). This involves both effective long-term planning and equally-effective short-term crisis management. As an audience-

focused process, then, strategic communication can be utilized to keep organizations adaptive to situations that arise and challenge the normalcy of their day-to-day operations (Tatham, 2008).

The context of this challenge is that, generally, college and university campuses are viewed as being safe havens where only rarely life-threatening situations occur (Hemphill & LaBanc, 2010). This reality is reflected in Barnlund's transactional model of communication (2008) which identifies five principles that comprise the communication process. They are: it is ever-changing; is circular in that feedback is part of an interaction between a sender of the message and the receiver; is complex in that it involves interpretation and understanding between participants; is irreversible in that it cannot be erased or taken back; and involves one's total personality in that it cannot be separated from the ones doing the act.

It is not uncommon to associate strategic communication just with efforts to contend with external publics, particularly since it is these outsiders from which organizations largely draw support and profit. However, as an organization's internal workers also represent a viable public on which the overall organization relies for consistent and constant support and foundational stability, then it behooves the organization and its leadership to put as much effort and attention toward establishing and maintain their support as with any outside public or group (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1986). As a result, this would entail enhancing the relationship between employer and employee as well as establishing a positive climate within the overall organization (Eco, 1976). Harmony between employers and employees plays a key role in the implementation of any plan to contend with a crisis.

One example of effective strategic communication as applied to the internal public can be found at Midwest Processing, a food processing plant that has consistently received high evaluations from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for surpassing federal quality and safety standards. Without a passing review from the federal government, Midwest Processing would not

be able to remain in business. To help ensure a collective and collaborative sense of purpose within its organization, management has empowered its workers to speak out when they notice problems and to participate in and help direct all training sessions. The company's managers have also established a transparent style of management open to scrutiny by those at all levels of the organization. The result was not only high marks from the federal government but an equally high level of job satisfaction among its workers. This strategy was the result of research conducted by the company to help ensure its employees remain motivated and engaged in its success (Novak & Sellnow, 2009). In summary, Midwest Processing has a communication plan that is compatible with this dissertation's working definition of one seen as strategic because it (a) has a focused organizational mission; (b) two-way transparent relations with employees; and (c) ongoing research aimed at learning what would support the success of the employees and the organization itself.

When designing a strategic communication plan, should an organization make any attempt to ensure it is linked to any crisis communication plan it might have? Would doing so benefit the organization in any meaningful way or strengthen its overall outreach efforts? As indicated earlier, researchers have identified that both have elements of strategy. But few researchers have touched on or explored efforts to closely link the two. It would seem wise for organizations and their communicators to do so in order to ensure greater coherency of message in both times of unexpected or unwanted occurrences and proactive outreach.

Strategic and Crisis Management/Communication

While researchers have not specifically or directly connected these two fields of study and practices within communication, enough overlapping of the two has been identified to leave little doubt that they are closely intertwined. For crisis management to be effective, for example, Sandman identified six strategic principles to be followed for any kind of unwanted or

unexpected situation to be handled (1983). These principles call for the entity or organization in question to keep its existing relationships informed, to treat the media as an ally or partner, to maintain the reputation of the organization as the top priority second only to any safety issues that might arise, to be accessible to the public as much as possible, to adhere to full disclosure, and to speak through one primary voice. These principles keep the organization focused as well as serve as a road map toward following ethical behavior at a time of high stress. How closely, if at all, was this followed by either George Mason in 2006 or Northern Illinois University in 2008? This, too, will be explored via upcoming interviews and other forms of data collection.

Interestingly, Smith matched Sandman's principles with six of his own (2009). These principles pertain more to an organization's communicators as they contend with carrying out their duties effectively in times of crisis. They include determining the information that needs to be shared with the public, devising the logistics of how best to reach various publics and work with the media, deciding what publics need to be reached and/or informed, assessing how best to solicit suggestions and feedback from the public, deciding how to manage such non-information parts of the primary messages as sounding confident, giving reassurances dealing with the emotions of a situation, and seeking ways to overcome any communication barriers that may arise.

Collectively, the Smith-Sandman principles highlight the notion that crisis communication is a strategic undertaking that not only adheres to a precise framework of actions and/or steps to take but is also based upon research designed to maximize its overall effectiveness. Rounding this out is an evaluation component that is as prominent as would be found in any strategic communication effort. For communicators on behalf of organizations to be effective in such areas as crisis management, they are going to need to continue to be strategic in their planning (D'Aprix, Clemons, Windsor-Lewis, Likely, Baron, Moorcroft & Quirke, 2005).

Further, strategic communicators are of most value to their clients and entities they represent whether they are establishing plans to contend with the media or with a crisis (Goldstein, 2004). A recent example of this is seen with the Philip Morris tobacco company. The company adopted a crisis strategy in which it attempted to camouflage controversy over the health impact of cigarettes in a series of planned speeches by its chief officers (Oliverra & Murphy, 2009). The strategy was the result of research-based planning by the company designed to help maintain its profit margin during a time of increasing concerns with the tobacco industry. While this effort was well thought out, it illustrates that just because something is strategic does not mean it is necessarily ethical or above-board. Glossing over the safety hazards of tobacco use casts a dark cloud over any merits of the Philip Morris plan.

The elements of the challenges faced by Philip Morris and Ashanti were similar to those faced by George Mason University and Northern Illinois University. The two companies and the two institutions of higher learning had publics that were uncertain in what they knew and in how well their colleges were handling things, in need of more information, and in search of guidance on how they might be able to provide assistance and support. The situations faced by George Mason and Northern Illinois University were not black-and-white issues in the sense that the challenges were simple and easy to address. Emotions among the publics and within each of the institutions ran high. Thus, the communication in each institution's respective crisis had to be strategic and, as a result, include all elements found within a strategic communication effort. The crisis at each institution, as is the case with others, provided both with an opportunity for internal collaboration and strategizing across all communication functions (Vahouny, 2004).

But is the fact both crisis communication and strategic communication share strategic thinking and elements enough to cement their connection? As indicated earlier, research on this question is sparse. In fact, while research on the two reinforces the commonality of the two, it

does not speak clearly to the potential importance of a crisis communication plan being purposely designed to address or even support an entity's strategic communication plan or plans.

Additionally, researchers have not explored a direct link between the two. Rather, crisis and strategic communication have largely been studied and depicted more as processes that co-exist rather than as processes that should support one another. Looking at George Mason University, for example, one of the institution's strategic plans is to establish a reputation as being entrepreneurial and innovative. But does the institution's crisis communication plan for dealing with a natural disaster such as a tornado or heavy snowfall, for example, really contribute to such a strategy? The same holds true for Northern Illinois University. As comprehensive as any of its crisis plans might be, how well do they specifically enhance any strategic plans its admissions or development offices might have? The fact the two communication plans have only been depicted as being parallel rather than congruent might actually weaken the effectiveness of each one. While such an observation will be examined closely as key members of each institution are interviewed, a comparison of key points made in several definitions of crisis and strategic communication would be appropriate at this juncture.

Building on the elements of a crisis as identified by Hermann (1963), crisis communication refers to an organization's effort to cope with a situation that is unexpected, threatening and requires a short response time (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007). Further, it represents an organization's attempt to manage, respond, resolve and learn from a potential turning point (Botan, 2006). Regarding strategic communication, such planned activity speaks to an organization's reliance on qualitative research to determine both direction and strategy (Pfau & Wan, 2006). Additionally, it is an encompassing effort designed to enable an entity to achieve policy goals that ultimately contribute to its advancement (Smith, 2009).

Placing these definitions side-by-side, a difference between the two in immediacy emerges. Crisis communication is geared to address the hear-and-now in a systematic, well-planned way. Strategic communication represents a more long-term undertaking designed to persuade targeted publics to help an organization advance. At the same time, to be able to achieve these ends requires coordination, organization and strategizing.

One other intriguing aspect of the relationship between crisis and strategic communication plans is the underlying tension that exists between the two. Despite their key similarities, the dynamic between the two is similar to many relationships in that at times they do not always function in sync. At times, their implementation conflicts to the point of being in direct opposition to the other. For instance, if a crisis erupts within a particular organization, then sometimes its leaders must take steps that are counter to how this entity normally operates. A fire breaks out in the office building thus threatening the safety of its employees. Leaders decide to send everyone home for the day and possibly longer until the building is declared safe. As Coombs (2007) notes, such a decision is a safeguard against intensifying the crisis despite the fact the disruption in the business itself will in all likelihood lessen its productivity and customer connections. Such a temporary shutdown moves the organization in a path directly opposite from where its strategic communication plan seeks to take it. As has been stated earlier, strategic communication plans are often designed to help organizations enhance their profit margins and visibility via proactive public outreach. Shutting down the business, even for a reason legitimate as the safety and welfare of its employees, may seem to put the crisis and strategic plans in direct conflict. On the other hand, if we view these planning processes through the lens of long-term strategic planning perhaps they are not actually in conflict.

Strategic Planning

For any organization or, more specifically, any institution of higher learning, to be able to sustain a high level of viability, it must develop and maintain strong outreach plans designed to market itself to various publics (Naddoff, 2004). As a result, as competition among colleges and universities continues to escalate, developing communication plans becomes more important. Institutions such as George Mason University and Northern Illinois University can no longer remain content to be “ivory towers” that young men and women seek out to further their education. Rather, they must become proactive in instituting a range of self-promotion activities (Arnett, German & Hunt, 2003).

Does this reality stop in times of crisis? Obviously, everything must be done to deal with a crisis, particularly when lives are at stake as was the case at Northern Illinois University or when an entity’s reputation might be in jeopardy as was the case at both Northern Illinois University and George Mason. At the same time, is it reasonable to assume that just because a crisis is at-hand, the institution must therefore cease efforts to advance its image, persuade publics to continue providing financial support, or recruit high quality faculty and students? Reality says “no.” Yet researchers suggest little direct tie-in between plans to deal with a crisis and ones incorporating the elements of strategic communication has been attempted or implemented.

In interviews with key administrators and personnel from George Mason and Northern Illinois University, reflections on any efforts they may have made or attempted to make in the integration of the two will be explored. Their thoughts, coupled with a close inspection of each institution’s actual crisis and strategic communication plans, will potentially shed light on whether such integration occurred as well as on the possible value of establishing a more direct link between the two. The interviews I will be conducting will revolve around a general set of topics or themes rather than a specific set of questions. Examples of these themes include “core values for the organization,” “overall goals,” “strategies implemented,” “feedback received,”

performance assessment,” and “degree of involvement.” I anticipate open-ended interviews will enable me to address various vantage points and levels of involvement that each of the key participants had (examples: institution’s president versus the chief of police or the alumni director versus the admissions dean). At the same time, all will be asked to talk about similar themes. Such an approach will address the strategic communication approach to crisis communication in a free-wheeling and potentially enlightening manner. As part of the effort to examine the role of strategic communication, the concept of grand strategy will be explored.

Grand strategy speaks to the policy-level decisions an organization makes about goals, ethics and relationship with its publics while strategy represents the campaign-level decisions involving the use of resources and ways to carry out the grand strategies (Botan, 2006). A distinction between grand strategy and strategy applies to the crisis faced by George Mason and Northern Illinois University. Prior to the Final Four experience or the multiple shootings, each institution had goals of striving to be universities of the highest caliber. A review of the mission statements of both institutions depicts these overarching goals. For George Mason University, the institution’s strategy is “to become the leading public university in the National Capital Region, through dynamic expansion of its educational programs and a growing emphasis on research aimed at broad societal needs” (George Mason University literature, 2010). To achieve this, the university identifies seven principal goals or strategies: (a) raise its profile as a nationally-ranked university; (b) emphasize its commitment to teaching and maintaining access for students; (c) continue to embrace diversity; (d) commit to providing innovative programs of lifelong learning opportunities; (e) develop a leading role as a global university through diverse international partnerships; (f) build on its community and regional partnerships; and (g) establish an infrastructure to achieve all of these goals. For Northern Illinois University, the grand strategy revolves around a focus on teaching, research, international education, public service, and

partnerships to provide opportunities for students to achieve personal growth, succeed economically, and improve the quality of their lives (Northern Illinois University literature, 2010). These grand strategies will be dissected in the greater detail in the context of the strategies to achieve them and in exploring with the extent to which their respective crisis communication plans were integrated with these grand strategies.

Efforts to support individual programs and initiatives within each institution constituted strategies compatible with their overall objectives. For instance, in its history, George Mason had nearly two dozen other athletic teams that strove to achieve national ranking in 2006. Each has their own strategy for reaching this goal. Northern Illinois University, as mentioned earlier, had a crisis plan in-place designed to ensure a safe campus environment. By design, the special strategies were and are geared toward supporting the grand strategy. The grand strategy, in essence, provided each of the strategies revolving around it with their own set of parameters or operational boundaries.

The question of tactics comes into play here as they speak to special or individual activities or products designed to support the strategy and, ultimately and less directly, the grand strategy. Tactics are tangible products developed to achieve some goal. Examples range from press releases and brochures to direct mailings and in-person presentations before various publics. It is this aspect of the public relations effort that is considered to be more technical in-nature.

This, then, leads to a demonstration of how I will identify what counts as a strategic communication plan. To gain better insight here, I have reviewed several successful strategic communication plans designed and implemented by two nonprofit organizations to advance their respective missions: Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society on behalf of the city of Toronto (2003) and the city of Long Beach, California's department of parks, recreation and marine (2009).

Each of these entity's plans begins with an overriding mission or comprehensive goal statement that provides a framework or parameters in which their respective plans are carried out. In the case of Long Beach's parks, recreation and marine department, the mission is to create healthy communities by offering family-oriented and culturally informed health, nutrition and exercise programs as well as visible educational opportunities. Supporting this overriding statement is a list of more specific or narrow goals. The final primary elements in the plans included research, the development of specific messages, implementing the plans, and evaluation. The research phase involved methods of collecting data to determine the effectiveness of park programs. For the Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society, the strategic goal was to gain a better understanding of why newcomers to this area only make little use of settlement services that are available to them. Research was conducted by organizing focus groups, conducting community interviews and launching professional surveys. The final aspects of their strategic communication plans included the actual implementation by launching a series of tactics and then the evaluation or measurement of its success.

To recap, the key elements of the examples of strategic communication represented in these various plans comprised (a) building on the organization's mission; (b) conducting comprehensive research on a particular topic, (c) articulating an overall mission statement, (d) identifying targeted publics, (e) developing specific messages and effective channels of communication, (f) the implementation or launching of the plan, and (g) the evaluation of this total effort's success and/or impact. Collectively, they were and are designed to persuade or influence special publics (Pfau & Wan, 2006) and are compatible with the working definition of strategic communication depicted in this dissertation.

Summary and Research Questions

I seek to determine whether the crisis communication efforts of George Mason and Northern Illinois University included these elements. My research questions are as follows:

RQ1: Did George Mason University and Northern Illinois University have crisis and strategic communication plans at the time of their respective crisis events? If so, did the crisis communication plans of each institution, as they were enacted, include such elements of strategic communication as putting forth a mission statement, identifying targeted publics, specific messages, effective channels of communication, and designating ways to measure their success?

Prior to either George Mason's involvement in the 2006 NCAA basketball tournament or Northern Illinois University's 2008 experience with multiple shootings, the two institutions had crisis plans in-place. But what steps, if any, had either institution taken toward the creation and implementation of a strategic communication plan? If either institution had such a plan, was there any connection between it and their crisis plans or were the two kept separate? This question is designed to determine the existence of such a plan and whether it was utilized to provide guidance to each institution in their efforts to remain connected to their various publics and maintain a positive image during a time of stress and disruption. Also, the question is designed to assess whether there were any meaningful strategic elements in either institution's crisis plan, or were these plans merely comprehensive to-do lists for various offices and key individuals? Answers to this overriding question will help provide a better understanding of the importance George Mason and Northern Illinois University placed on strategic communication at a time when their reputations were being threatened.

RQ2: How did George Mason University and Northern Illinois University measure the success or effectiveness of their crisis plans? Was any part of the measurement based on the level of integration between each institution's crisis

and strategic communication plans? What was the impact of any possible integration?

Whenever a crisis occurs, it remains paramount for the entity involved to manage as well as possible (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007). Nevertheless, for an entity to emerge with an enhanced reputation, then steps designed to showcase this perception are needed. In the cases of George Mason and Northern Illinois University, did such strategies exist and how were they measured in terms of their level of effectiveness?

RQ3: Did the senior administrators at George Mason and Northern Illinois University consider these events to be transformative?

Though both events were clearly dramatic and captured the attention of all segments of the internal publics at George Mason and Northern Illinois University, this question seeks to explore the aftermath of the events. What fundamental or mission-altering changes, if any, did these events trigger at either institution? For instance, did they lead to adjustments or alterations in either institution's mission statements, administrative structure or institutional priorities?

This question explores linkages between each entity's crisis communication and strategic communication plan. Was there any overlapping between the two at each institution? If not, then in authoring each of these plans for their particular crisis, did either George Mason or Northern Illinois University even recognize or acknowledge any possible value in making such a connection? I will seek to address this by locating any crisis and/or strategic communication plans formulated by each institution prior to their respective incidents and speaking to those who may have helped author them. In these interviews I will attempt to determine if my interviewees saw links at the time or in hindsight between their organization's core values or long term mission and its approach to a crisis.

RQ4: To what extent did the execution of the crisis communication plans of

George Mason University and Northern Illinois University at the time of each specific situation contribute to the success of each institution's strategic communication plans?

To address this question requires a thorough assessment of both the strategic communication plans of each institution as based upon the benchmarks of measurement set forth by the two and the execution or carrying-out of the plans. At George Mason, the strategic areas range from global partnerships to research dollars raised by faculty. At Northern Illinois University, the areas include the financial health of its foundation and the quality of its instruction. Once this is done, then an equally detailed assessment of the role of how well the crisis communication plans actually played in the success will add another dimension to understanding how well the two were integrated.

It is important to note the sole purpose of this dissertation is not to rehash each event as they unfolded or to simply critique or editorialize on how George Mason University and Northern Illinois University reacted to what happened to them in the sense, for instance, that one did well and the other did not. Rather, a proposed relationship between strategic communication and crisis communication will be explored in the context of the two institutions of higher education. Additionally, the dissertation will have several primary foci that revolve around strategic communication. Within the parameters of four research questions, the following points will be explored: how each institution managed its crisis and the role that strategic communication played in their efforts. Did either institution have a strategic communication plan in-place prior to their respective crisis? How effective were the communication efforts that were undertaken by each institution during the duration of their respective incidents and in their aftermath? What strategies, if any, were utilized? How were these efforts measured? How well did the crisis communication plans contribute to the strategic communication plans? How well integrated were

they? What publics or audiences did George Mason and Northern Illinois University attempt to address and remain connected to? How much did the execution of the crisis communication plans contribute to an improvement in the image or reputation of the two institutions? Did leaders from each institution consider their respective events to be transformational? Finally, does the fact that these particular incidents occurred in a higher education setting shape or influence a possible connection between strategic and crisis communication?

I believe my questions are best addressed via the qualitative case study method. Specifically, a collective case study is most appropriate (Yin, 2003). According to Yin, collective or multiple case studies involve the examination of an issue by analyzing more than one case in order to gain greater perspective on it. With George Mason and Northern Illinois University, focusing on both institutions is potentially illuminating because it illustrates how turns of fortune, one positive and one negative, can dramatically affect an entity and require a strategic response that is well researched and assessed, has measurable goals, and be designed to enhance the image and/or reputation of the organization in question. The elements represent fundamental components of what constitutes strategic communication (Smith, 2009). (It needs to be emphasized here that in exploring the impact of the terrible event at Northern Illinois University on the institution's image or reputation, it is no way meant to minimize or trivialize the horror and everlasting tragedy of the deaths that occurred. The senseless loss of these men and women stands alone in significance from other after-effects of that day.)

According to Patton, qualitative research evolves out of three primary kinds of data collection: in-depth, opened ended interviews; direct observation; and written documents (2002). Collectively, these forms of data help researchers gain a better, more comprehensive understanding of a particular challenge, problem or situation as one way of providing insight into helping others cope with similar situations that may occur in the future. Following this approach

enables me to adhere to a systematic effort to gain a better understanding of the first-hand experiences of the professionals involved in each crisis (Jackson, Drummond & Camaram, 2007). Also, doing so enables me to focus directly on the human experience of each event as well to grasp what Denzin and Lincoln (2000) said individuals go through in contending with their respective situations and what efforts they made to either incorporate or follow any kind of strategic communication plan in their management of the crisis.

One challenge with qualitative research is that viable generalizations based on case studies are not necessarily possible. That is, when one gathers notes on distinctive experiences of individuals, those experiences may be just that: distinct understandings of a few individuals, rather than findings which can be applied more generally. However, case studies can generate further research on how people or, in the case of this dissertation, universities should manage and/or plan for potentially transformative events, such as a shooting or a spectacular success. Thus, to increase the chances that my findings will serve as a springboard for further research, I will focus on specific data I believe to be realistically applicable to other similar entities that can and even do face similar challenges.

Another challenge is that I want to make judgments about whether the efforts of the individuals I interview do or do not fall under the heading of strategic communication. To increase the chances I will be able to make that judgment soundly, I am presenting an operational definition of what constitutes strategic communication. Drawing from definitions as dissected earlier in this dissertation, strategic communication is a researched, measured, multi-layered, coordinated outreach/information effort designed to advance an organization toward a well-defined goal. Additionally, in an appendix at the conclusion of this research effort, I present a comprehensive breakdown of the results of my coding of the various interviews I conducted and

data from various sources I collected to render a more sound judgment about the extent to which George Mason and Northern Illinois University handled their situations in a strategic manner.

Finally, drawing from my operational definition of strategic communication, I will attempt to label statements by the interviewees, relevant written plans, existence of budgets, plans for rehearsing or practicing crisis plans, and assorted on-line materials as strategic or partially strategic if they reflect the following elements or concepts: research, evaluation, identified publics, an assessment of their specific levels of internal involvement and coordination, delineated goal or goals, and specific strategies.

Chapter III: Methodology

Data Collection Strategy

Working from research on the issues revolving around the situations at George Mason University and Northern Illinois University, in these case studies I sought to assess the extent to which the strategic communication plan informed each institution's crisis communication plan and their execution. In terms of data collection, my efforts were not exhaustive but instead focused on the time frames when public scrutiny for both institutions was at its height and primarily within each institution's respective states. For George Mason, the media coverage time line will go from March 1, 2006, when the decisions were being made by NCAA officials as to which teams would be participating in the tournament, to approximately six months after George Mason's Final Four experience. While coverage has been given George Mason beyond that benchmark, it is this six-month period when external attention was most intense. For Northern Illinois University, the coverage dates of my data collection were primarily from February 14, 2008, the date of the shootings, to six months after the tragedy. For George Mason, my intent was to draw primarily from the major print outlets within the Commonwealth of Virginia, including *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, *Roanoke Times*, *Virginia Pilot* and *Washington Post*, and from the largest and primary electronic or television markets outlets that include stations in Richmond, Roanoke, Norfolk, and Northern Virginia. I also examined several national media outlets, including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and such national magazines as *Sports Illustrated* and *Time*. From Northern Illinois University, my intent was to draw primarily from the major print and electronic outlets within the state, including those situated in or around DeKalb,

Rockford and Chicago. Further, I identified internal reports that George Mason and Northern Illinois University compiled on their respective situations. I drew pertinent information from each.

Additionally, collection efforts also included compiling and assessing archival material, including memoranda and reports on each crisis that were generated by the institutions, as well as by any other pertinent entity such as the governor's office. I also conducted extensive interviews with pertinent members of each institution, including their admission officers, top communicators, alumni officers, development officers, and key campus police officers.

Archival material I reviewed included newspaper clippings, news footage from television networks throughout Virginia and Illinois, internal reports and communiqués generated by each institution, pertinent governmental reports on either of the events, and any miscellaneous reports or articles from community organizations. Collectively, these materials enhanced the historical record of each event and depicted what I view as the color or human element, including the drama, of George Mason's Final Four adventure and the multiple shootings at Northern Illinois University. Coupled with comments and perceptions that emerged from the interviews, analysis of these materials provided a detailed and rounded analysis of the events as they related to my research questions.

Regarding interview subjects, my preference was to talk with those key or relevant administrators directly involved in the crisis at each institution. I confirmed who they are via reports, media clippings taken from the time of the incidents, word of mouth, and reference tools such as internal phone books and staff directories. Had any of these individuals no longer been associated with either institution, then I still would have attempted to contact them. Further, in my initial outreach to each potential interviewee, I provided the working title of my dissertation so they had a more clear sense of what topic I wished to explore with them. This effort helped me

present a complete depiction of the lessons learned by George Mason and Northern Illinois University as well as gain greater insight into the possible role of strategic communication played in such stressful situations as the two institutions faced. Initially, I estimated the total number of interviews from the two institutions that I would conduct would not exceed 25. It did not.

The interviews I conducted were not totally free-form but rather took place within a set of self-imposed parameters: the chronology of the events themselves; the role, responsibilities and actions played by the subjects during the situations; key terms and/or concepts that emerged from what constitutes strategic and crisis communication, such as research, publics, evaluation and strategies; and an historical perspective on the events themselves several years after their occurrence. Interview topics and questions that served as my interview guide s are outlined in Appendix A.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) sought to explain the process by which qualitative researchers seek to gain a better understanding of the reality they study as well as the methodology they follow to most effectively explain it. As part of this process, researchers make a range of assumptions that can be classified as ontological (nature of reality), epistemological (relationship between researcher and topic), axiological (value of research), rhetorical (language of research), and methodological (methods used in process) (Cresswell, 2007). In the process, researchers seek to lessen the distance between themselves and that which they are studying, recognize that research is values-laden and, as a result, biases are preset, acknowledge that how interviewees and subjects view reality is subjective, and study the specific subject within its context that include budgetary realities.

The data I collected, particularly from the various interviews, were emergent as I did not know what points the interviewees would be making even though they were responding to a pre-set list of discussion topics. Because of this, I followed inductive reasoning as I drew from

specific events and ultimately reached some conclusions based upon the results of my field work. This data collection represented a triangulation process. Specifically, data were collected via open-ended interviews from a general outline of relevant topics, internal and external materials on the events at George Mason and Northern Illinois University, and research on the areas of crisis communication, strategic communication, transformative events, and crisis management.

Finally, regarding the interviews, so as to reduce any possible chance of unduly influencing the subjects, I attempted to refrain or keep to a minimum using the word “crisis” as much as possible, particularly in my interactions with persons from George Mason University. People have their own preconceptions of what a crisis is. Almost universally this term connotes images of a negative occurrence. Also, I was concerned that if I immediately began connecting the word “crisis” to the institution’s successful participation in the 2006 NCAA tournament, then the interviewees might be inclined to label that experience as a non-crisis. To avoid this, in my interviews with persons from George Mason, I referred to the Final Four as a high-risk/high-reward situation. As a result, I found the subjects less likely to speak of this experience from that context as opposed to automatically labeling it as all-good with no negative consequences or threat. Further, as was appropriate, I also used the high-risk/high-reward phrase in my interactions with persons from Northern Illinois University.

I did not anticipate any significant threats to the validity of my efforts (Maxwell, 2005). Simple examples of an external threat might be that identified subjects would have been unreachable due to unexpected travel plans on their part, the fact they no longer are employed at either George Mason or Northern Illinois University, or they simply did not wish to participate in my project. It was my judgment the unavailability of a minimum number of key subjects would not compromise the validity of my study. However, if too many planned-for subjects proved to be unavailable, then this could have presented a threat to my work and forced me to adjust my

research process by either relying more on second-hand sources and data collected from such outlets as media clippings and various reports. To minimize the possibility of not connecting with enough potential subjects, I scheduled interviews at the convenience of the subjects, thus risked little chance of missing them. Also, because each of the subjects would be speaking about well-documented events that occurred only three and four years ago, I did not anticipate any faulty memories or insincerity or overtly biased reflections on what transpired. At the same time, I recognized that people instinctively want to place themselves in a favorable light, so I weighed what the interviewees said against what was reported at the time of the crises. I found no significant differences. To keep this threat to validity to a minimum, I offered each interviewee the option of not identifying them by their specific names in my dissertation. I offered to give them such labels as “senior administrator,” “senior communication officer,” senior security officer, “former student,” current student” or “alumni officer.” None expressed any objection to being fully identified.

Approaching these interviews, it was not my intent to challenge or seek out discrepancies in the recollections or reflections of the subjects regarding George Mason’s Final Four experience and the shootings at Northern Illinois University; but neither did I have any intention of whitewashing or ignoring any potential critical, controversial or even incriminating comments that might be made. For myself, I drew my questions from the best set of unbiased array of facts and data I could collect. As a researcher, my loyalty was to the facts I collected and to my overriding goal of presenting the information I obtained fairly and accurately. My goal was to reconstruct, as well as I could, the communication practices of George Mason and Northern Illinois University along with the reasoning and logic exhibited by the main actors involved. Further, whatever conclusions I did draw was based as strictly as possible on the data and not any attempt to either avoid making any individual or institution emerge in a positive or negative light.

Nevertheless, all interviews were audio recorded as agreed upon by the Human Subjects Research Board. Transcripts of the sessions were shared with each interviewee to provide them with opportunities to review their comments and make any adjustments in their comments before I begin utilizing them for this dissertation.

Finally, in my data collection, I sought to address several research questions. As the questions revolved around the concept of strategic communication, it was important to reiterate recognized elements that comprise such road maps designed to help organizations achieve specific goals. Such plans are geared to provide (a) truthful information about an entity; and (b) communicate it in a timely manner (Stavridis, 2007). Further, they bring into play the concepts of (c) grand strategy, (d) strategy and (e) tactics. Several essential elements of a strategic communication effort are research and evaluation or the measurement of the possible outcomes. For the purposes of this dissertation as it relates to George Mason and Northern Illinois University, I explored whether the goals of each institution's crisis communication plans in any way were compatible with strategic communication plans each may have had at the time of their respective crisis. This required determining the goals of the crisis communication plans and then seeking to identify any direct or even indirect linkages with the strategic communication efforts. Such linkages helped reveal the extent to which the crisis communication plans of either institution contributed to an enhancement of the overall image of their institution, how such a contribution was made, and how it was measured. One question explored, for instance, revolved around whether the crisis communication plans of either institution improved the educational mission of either institution. This was one key aspect of each institution's strategic communication plan.

Data Analysis Strategy

As much of my final text revolved around the comments of those I interviewed, great attention was paid to what was shared. In reviewing the transcripts, I followed several phases of selective coding such as open and axial in order to identify common themes, words, or even attitudes toward patterns of behavior (Cresswell, 2008). Cresswell suggests a visual model designed to provide an in-depth portrait of multiple case studies. In it, descriptions of each case study, common themes that emerge from interviews with pertinent subjects and even differences in perceptions among those interviewees are identified and analyzed. I pursued these angles in an effort to examine whether there was any correlation between crisis and strategic communication at either George Mason or Northern Illinois University. As each institution dealt with its specific situation, did a tangible association or linkage between each institution's crisis and strategic communication plans emerge?

Following Cresswell's research approach, I attempted to ensure that the heart of the analysis of collected data for this dissertation evolved out of simple categories such as crisis, crisis communication, transformation, and strategic communication. These categories were developed under the umbrella headings of internal perspectives and external perspectives (Riffe & Freitag, 1998). The categories, as they fall under each general heading, were not rank-ordered.

In terms of anticipated results, it was my intention to examine efforts by each institution to assess whether any attempt was made to incorporate their crisis plan into any potentially broader strategic communication efforts. As part of this, I sought to see if either institution handled their respective crisis in a strategic communication manner regardless of whether they formally labeled their efforts as strategic communication. I expected to identify lapses or gaps in each institution's crisis communication/management efforts that suggest the plans in place during these two events were more reactive than strategic. My preliminary assessment was that this

would be the case. A potential example of this may possibly be found at George Mason. The nature of its crisis – a possible national basketball championship – was universally seen as a positive turn-of-events and therefore not anything for which administration at George Mason could plan. As a result, a difference between how the Final Four experience and the shootings were perceived contributed to a slight gap between the planning and behavior at each institution. At George Mason, there simply was no plan even considered for the basketball team's unprecedented and surprising success. But at Northern Illinois University, the institution did plan for a threat to its campus and internal members. Thus, both institutions viewed the prospect of a crisis in a traditional way: a crisis is negative so therefore should be planned for. Though I have argued that what George Mason experienced was also a crisis, its situation was obviously positive and therefore I expected to find no plans for its possible occurrence to be in place.

Another way I analyzed my data evolved out of the set topics I provided those senior administrators I engaged at both George Mason and Northern Illinois University. It was my intent to interview such university officials as the presidents, senior communicators, chief academic officers, primary budget officers, and admissions directors at each institution. As indicated earlier, I conducted open-ended interviews with all subjects. Once the results were collected, as was appropriate, I conducted a position by position comparison/analysis of their responses to these set questions (Appendix A). It felt it would be intriguing to see how the perspectives of the provost of Northern Illinois University regarding his crisis of the multiple shootings, for instance, compared with the perspectives of the provost of George Mason regarding the challenges of the Final Four.

Working with data collected from two sets of interviews questions – one open-ended and the other more uniform – provided me with a rich data base from which to assess these case studies and, ultimately, examine the question of whether crisis and strategic communications

plans were integrated by the two institutions. To strengthen my coding efforts in the analysis of the data, I also recruited the efforts of several peer briefers, each of whom works professionally in communications as well as possess graduate level credential in research. These colleagues were asked to review conclusions I drew from the collected data and determine whether they seemed logical and presented in a balanced way based on their credentials and objectivity to the study. This device helped enhance the validity of my efforts (Glesne, 2006). The debriefers and their comments are identified in Appendix I.

Themes emerging from the data were identified as on the basis of like-perspectives expressed by the interviewees and similar observations articulated by the media. One shared similarity I found at each institution was the fact their respective situations progressed in a well-defined manner. At George Mason, as the basketball team continued to win, the crisis continued to mount. With the team's eventual loss, a slow process of declining media and public attention resulted. As the intensity of external scrutiny decreased, the crisis itself eventually subsided. At Northern Illinois University, the crisis erupted with the abrupt actions of the shooter. Even when the shooter took his life, the intense atmosphere at Northern Illinois University did not immediately subside. However, the sense of urgency felt throughout the institution did begin to fade.

This logic model or chain of events at each institution (Yin, 2009) and their impact on the reactions of each institution were part of the data analysis. In looking at a logic model, I attempted to see if there existed a linkage between actions by each institution to address their crisis with goals stipulated in their overriding strategic plans. For instance, as communicators at George Mason attempted to devise messaging strategies as the basketball team kept winning, were they doing so with the idea of supporting the institution's overall effort of gaining an international academic reputation? As the crisis communicators at Northern Illinois University

attempted to provide information to its various publics throughout the shooting incident, were they also trying to strengthen its community relationships? Such a strategy is designed to trace events when specific program interventions are designed to produce certain outcomes or sequence of outcomes (Wholey, 1979). These questions complimented my inquiries about whether crisis communication plans utilized by George Mason and Northern Illinois University were formulated separately from their respective strategic communication plans or in an effort to complement them.

Trial Data Collection/Analysis

To help enhance the strength of my data collection and analysis, including coding and interceding efforts, I conducted several pretest or trial interviews with persons at institutions that experienced situations similar to George Mason University and Northern Illinois University. These institutions were West Virginia University and Binghamton University. In April, 2010, West Virginia University played its way to the NCAA's Final Four bracket before losing to Duke University, the team that ultimately won the tournament. I talked with a senior communication administrator at this institution. In December, 2009, Binghamton University in Vestal, New York, experienced a tragic situation when one of its professors was stabbed to death by a student with whom he used to live. While this tragedy does not equal the scope of what occurred at Northern Illinois University, it still triggered a sense of danger and uncertainty at Binghamton. I interviewed one of this institution's senior communication officers.

Questions I asked of these two professionals revolved around how they perceived their respective situations, communication strategies they used to help keep their institution's various publics informed, communication goals, how they measured the success of their efforts, whether their efforts were considered to be part of their institution's crisis plans, and what connection, if any, did these plans have with their institution's overall strategic communication plans.

Specifically, topics of discussion and questions covered may be found in Appendix A of this dissertation.

The usefulness of these trial interviews was limited because I talked only with one representative from each institution. One point on which the two agreed was that neither official felt their respective incidents were transformative. One key difference that emerged from the interviews was that only one – the subject at Binghamton University – saw the institution's situation as a crisis. The subject at West Virginia University did not see her situation in that light because of its positive nature. Thus, my initial theory, as dissected earlier in this dissertation, that a crisis can emerge from a positive situation as well as a negative one so long as the possible impact of a dramatic occurrence has the potential to alter an entity's image or reputation did not coincide with the views of these subjects.

These interviews, then, took me back to the original focus of this dissertation: Did George Mason University and Northern Illinois University integrate their crisis and strategic communication plans at the time of their high risk/high reward situations? The trial data collection/analysis shed further light on a point touched on earlier: the inherent tension between crisis and strategic communication plans. While both plans share common elements that include specific goals, targeted publics and points of measurement, they also function to a degree at cross-purposes. In terms of goals, a crisis communication plan is primarily geared to address a short-term incident while strategic communication goals are more long-term. In terms of publics, a crisis communication plan may have its internal audience as a primary public with external publics being more secondary in importance. For a strategic communication plan, the opposite is generally the case. Regarding points of measurement, the success of a crisis communication plan is more likely geared toward an immediate result: did we communicate enough information about the fire? Did we give people enough information about the gas leak so they knew what to do? For

a strategic communication plan, success is geared toward a longer term perspective. For instance: did enrollment go up over the past semester as a result of our advertising campaign? Did we increase donations as a result of our alumni drive?

The tension between crisis and strategic communication plans is present because of differences in what each plan is designed to do. Crisis communication plans are brought into play to help an entity maintain, or in some cases, regain control as it attempts to deal with an unexpected situation (Sandman, 1983). Strategic communication plans are designed in an atmosphere of control and planned outcomes (D'Aprix, Clemons, Windsor-Lewis, Likely, Baron, Moorcroft & Quirke, 2005). The purpose of integrating the two is not to reduce or eliminate this tension. Instead, it is to provide greater support for an entity's overall strategies and help keep it from being irrevocably sidetracked from its overall mission.

Case Study Participants and Context

To explore the question of whether George Mason University and Northern Illinois University integrated their crisis and strategic communication plans in the context of contending with a high-risk/high-reward situation or potentially transformative event, I interviewed specific administrations from each institution, each of whom played direct roles in helping their respective university contend with dramatic situations. The administrators represented top ranking leaders from each university. Specifically, I interviewed eight administrators from George Mason University and seven individuals from Northern Illinois University, including six administrators and one student. My brief interview with the student from that institution helped provide a further glimpse into the campus atmosphere as word of the unexpected violence began to spread. All of my interviews with officials from George Mason University were conducted in-person while all of my interviews were persons from Northern Illinois University were conducted via telephone.

To provide a more rounded overview of efforts by institutions to integrate their crisis and strategic communication plans, I also interviewed administrators from West Virginia University (www.wvu.edu), Binghamton University (www.binghamton.edu), University of Memphis (www.memphis.edu), and Virginia Tech (www.vt.edu). Collectively, input from these subjects reinforced the notion that having crisis and strategic communication plans in place is important under any circumstances. It also further emphasized the fundamental question of this dissertation: were the two plans integrated? All of these interviews were conducted via telephone. Added to the interactions with subjects from George Mason University and Northern Illinois University, I conducted a total of 20 interviews for this study.

As I have already touched on, the two case studies were strikingly different as one was a time of celebration while the other was one of deep sadness. Getting people to agree to be interviewed proved to be as much of a contrast as the events themselves. At George Mason University, everyone I approached to be interviewed quickly and even happily agreed. Though their comments proved to be as insightful as they were enlightening, the tone of my conversations with them was never less than upbeat. George Mason's Final Four experience was and is a source of pride and joy. As a result, talking about it was something all subjects were happy to do.

My experience with administrators at Northern Illinois University was the opposite of what it was at George Mason. For these subjects, memories of the shooting and brutal murder of students at Northern Illinois University remain painful and difficult to discuss. Consequently, not all administrators with whom I requested interviews even agreed to talk with me. The ones who denied my requests had very similar explanations: they simply did not want to live through that time again; they have talked about it enough and do not want to do it again; or the memory of it remains too painful. The individuals at Northern Illinois University with whom I did talk were polite and cooperative, yet not nearly as talkative as their George Mason counterparts. It was

clear that the fatal attack on their students that occurred four years ago remains a fresh wound for those who lived through it.

Data Gathering Procedures

I purposely selected each of the specific subjects from both institutions; that is, I used purposive sampling. They were selected on the basis of their level of responsibility as it applied to the specific situation at each institution. As a result, I interviewed each institution's top communication officer, chief academic officer, the head of their respective alumni operations, top officers within their public safety or security operations, persons from their admissions offices, persons involved in student life, and persons directly involved in budgeting. Because of their specific responsibilities and those of their offices, each person played a key role in helping their institution administer and/or contend with their high-risk/high-reward situation.

The questions I asked each subject were both general and specific in-nature. Collectively, they were designed to provide me with a well-rounded portrait of that person's perspective of the situation as it related to them directly and to their institution. Additionally, the questions were designed to gain an understanding of the subject's perception of what kind of integration occurred during their specific crisis between their organization's crisis and strategic communication plans. The subject's area of responsibility dictated whether I approached this question directly or indirectly. For instance, in my conversations with each institution's top communication officer, I raised the question directly because this person was a key player in the design and implementation of each plan.

In terms of the actual length of the interviews, duration of the encounters varied from subject to subject. Generally, the in-person encounters lasted longer than ones conducted on the telephone.

Complementing the interviews was my review of several key documents and reference sources either generated by George Mason University and Northern Illinois University or by outside entities in response to the case studies. Specifically, these documents consisted of various reports. Additionally, I conducted a review of the media coverage of each event by primarily examining key outlets within Virginia and Illinois as well as the crisis and strategic communication plans of each institution at the time of their specific events. Regarding the media coverage, I assessed approximately 100 articles, including blogs, stories, editorials and/or transcripts of news articles from the states. I identified the articles and other communiqués largely through various internet search engines and archive offices of George Mason University and Northern Illinois University. The archive offices proved to be of particular use. This data remains active. In terms of my analysis of the media coverage, I studied such variables as depth, content, tone, and sources utilized within the stories.

Data Analytic Techniques

Interview transcripts generated nearly 70 pages. I transcribed them myself and did not utilize the services of any external vendor. In these transcripts, I did not include every aspect or word of the interviews/conversations I had with each subject at each of the institutions. Only included in this paper are pertinent highlights of the conversations/interviews relevant to the topic of the dissertation. It is important to note, however, that by far the largest parts of my exchanges with each subject are included in this paper.

In terms of facing the challenge of analyzing the data I collected, I devised a multiple approach. Each part consisted of several phases. In the first part, I created three overarching categories based upon the specific source. One category, labeled “media,” consisted of material extracted from media coverage of the two case studies. A second category, labeled “reports,” consisted of material collected from internal reports conducted or sponsored by each institution.

The final category, labeled “interviews,” consisted of material collected from my interviews with the various subjects from George Mason University and Northern Illinois University. I then divided each of these major categories into two primary subsets: each one exclusive to each individual institution. Under the heading of each category, my analysis consisted of identifying specific themes, any forms of consensus from the main data sources, and common phrases or observations that may have emerged from any of them.

The second part of my multiple effort consisted of comparing the findings from each of the two institutions. This part consisted of several steps. Specifically, the first step comprised comparing findings under “media” for George Mason with those for Northern Illinois University; the second phase comprised comparing findings under “report” for George Mason with those from Northern Illinois University; and the third phase comprised comparing findings under “interviews” from George Mason with those from Northern Illinois University.

The final part of my analysis consisted of my conclusions from all data as they applied to the four research questions. These questions addressed the relationship between each institution’s crisis and strategic communication plans prior to their specific crisis, how the institutions measured the success of their crisis communication plans in relation to their strategic communication plans, whether senior administrators from each institution considered their specific crisis to be transformative, and what impact, if any, the execution of each institution’s crisis communication plan had on their strategic communication plan.

I did not confine my analysis to common or like-threads from the data sources. To provide a more rounded portrait of the topic as it relates to the two case studies, I also sought to identify points of disagreement, ambiguity and tension that emerged from the data sources under each of the overarching or main categories. These differences covered both those that emerged within each institution and between each institution. The purpose of including this element of the

findings was two-fold: to reinforce the reality that not all research generates clean or purely consistent findings and to highlight the complexities of communication, particularly as they relate to dealing with a crisis and maintaining an overall strategy. Also, this fulfilled my intent to bring attention to each of the multitude of voices that emerged - directly and indirectly - in the pursuit of this study. Collectively, they added to the potential richness of this effort as well as helped pave the way for further research and conversation on the overall topic itself. These differences or discrepancies were factored into each of the three parts of my analysis.

As this is a qualitative study, specifically a case study approach, the primary focus of my analysis is on data collected from interviews with those directly involved in the situations at George Mason University and at Northern Illinois University. Thus, in my final analysis, it is these particular data that are given the most weight in terms of my summaries, conclusion and recommendations. The principal purpose of data collected from reviews of reports and media coverage, while important, is to help me frame the key information and perspectives that emerged from those interviews.

For illustrative purposes, the following outline frameworks are included to further describe how the results of my data analytic technique will be identified. This format pertains to the explanation for the first two parts of my three-part analysis technique. It is this information that is designed to frame the findings identified in part three. These data will be outlined in a more traditionally descriptive format. Further, findings in part three will address the four research questions.

Parts I and II

Identification of common themes and discrepancies out of primary data sources for George Mason University and Northern Illinois University

- Media

- George Mason University and Northern Illinois University
 - Common themes
 - Discrepancies
 - Comparisons
- Reports
 - George Mason University and Northern Illinois University
 - Common themes
 - Discrepancies
 - Comparisons
- Interviews
 - George Mason University and Northern Illinois University
 - Common themes
 - Discrepancies
 - Comparisons

In the final phase of the methodology that I followed, I shared the collected data with three debriefers. Each reviewed this information in the context of the questions I set out to address and then the conclusions I ultimately drew from my research. These individuals were included in the process to add independent perspectives to my work and to help determine whether my conclusions were drawn logically from the data that I collected.

Chapter IV: Results, Analysis and Recommendations

Addressing the four research questions which served as the focus of this paper required taking incremental steps toward this end. This involved drawing each of the primary data sources. Did any of the reports, for instance, allude to efforts by either institution to integrate their crisis and strategic communication plans? Did any of the interviewees allude to trying to make such a connection? Was there any significant coverage of either of the institution's core values or mission goals in any of the media coverage? Doing so served as a way of building toward achieving an understanding of whether the two institutions integrated their crisis and strategic communication plans and, more generally, raised the premise that such a linkage would bring benefit to an organization or entity. I followed this process to build an in-depth picture of the two case studies (Creswell, 2007). It included: (a) assessing the overall context in which these two case studies – the ascension of George Mason University's men's basketball team to the coveted Final Four competition of the 2006 NCAA tournament and the unprovoked and brutal slaying of students by a single killer at Northern Illinois University in 2008 – occurred; and (b) eliciting how key participants assessed their situations and their role in helping handle it. Finally by drawing from multiple sources of data – reports, media coverage and interviews – it inferred the complexity of the case studies (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995).

Specifically, this involved several steps: conducting a thorough review of what was written and/or communicated about each event as they occurred and in their aftermath; reviewing reports about each crisis that were generated largely by each institution; conducting interviews with persons who were directly involved in each situation; and then, talking with multiple persons

who were involved in similar incidents at their respective institutions. This package of data, I believe, helped enhance an overall understanding of the primary issue of this dissertation: whether a linkage between each organization's crisis and strategic communication plans occurred during their unique situations. As a lead-in to an examination of this data, however, an analysis of each institution's crisis and strategic communication plans is in order. I begin with George Mason University and then follow with Northern Illinois University.

Assessment of George Mason University's Crisis and Strategic Communication Plans

George Mason University's crisis communication plan (Appendix D) is directed by the institution's office of university relations. As written, this plan outlines the actions of key officers within this unit once it has been determined that a crisis situation is underway. At no place within this plan is any mention made of George Mason's overall mission or values or strategies designed to support the institution's overall priorities.

George Mason University's strategic communication plan (Appendix C) is also directed by the institution's office of university relations. Not surprisingly, this plan does speak to the priorities of the university's mission and values. Specifically, this plan identifies efforts to promote such appropriate themes as innovation, research and academic achievement. Additionally, it outlines key publics to connect with as well as a number of communication vehicles to utilize in their outreach efforts.

Assessment of Northern Illinois University's Crisis and Strategic Communication Plans

Northern Illinois University's crisis communication plan (Appendix F) is similar to George Mason's in that it outlines the protocol to follow should a crisis situation occur. Also, nowhere is the institution's overall mission goals or values or strategies to support them mentioned. One notable exception in this plan is the fact the institution defines the elements that constitute a crisis. These criteria are broad and include: any incident that has potential impact on the

surrounding community or other individuals, any incident that is likely to draw media attention, any incident raising questions of legal or risk management issues, any incident requiring follow-up or long-term intervention by the university, or any incident in which a staff member feels uncomfortable handling without assistance.

The strategic communication plan at Northern Illinois University (Appendix E) is notable for its brevity. Here it is mentioned that two units at the university handle strategic communication efforts: office of external affairs and economics development and office media relations and internal communication. Nowhere is there mention of how either unit would support or promote the university's mission or values.

Analysis of Data

The results of my interviews with persons who had like-experiences to those administrators and officers at George Mason and Northern Illinois University have already been discussed and will not be repeated in this chapter. Instead, this chapter focuses on my examination of how administrators at the two case study institutions - George Mason University and Northern Illinois University - described, reported and reacted to their crisis. The perspectives, recollections and assessments of these individuals will be what I assess and analyze.

My own conclusions of this collected information will then be directly applied to the four research question. Following that, I will then use these data as a basis on which to make recommendations as to possible benefits of integrating crisis and strategic communication plans and ways in which this topic can be further explored and advanced by future scholars.

Using the three-part format outlined in the previous chapter as a general guide, I begin with a review and assessment of the media coverage and reports on the case studies involving George Mason University and Northern Illinois University. In doing this, I provide general observations of the media coverage received by each institution and then compare this coverage

and general observations of the various reports on the two crises and then, as is appropriate, conduct a comparison of the findings from each institution's report.

Results: Media

The overall narrative of the coverage of situations at George Mason University and Northern Illinois University was driven by the specific tone of the events. For instance, for George Mason, media coverage was upbeat, positive, "feel good." But for Northern Illinois University, the coverage was as somber and grim as its crisis. Examples include the Associated Press' initial story: "15 Shot at Northern Illinois University" and WLS Channel 7's breaking news report on violence at NIU. While both pieces were incomplete in terms of the information they presented, the coverage itself reflected the intensity of the drama itself. Thus, the stories themselves seemed to drive the narrative, including the manner of the media's depiction of it.

If one word had to be selected to describe the media coverage of George Mason University's experience in the 2006 NCAA basketball tournament and its rise to the Final Four bracket, it would be "celebratory." Such headlines as "By George, Look at the Locals" (Bowen, 2006), "Small Wonders! George Mason Topples Tar Heels" (Albers, 2006), and "Patriot Acts as Giant Killers, Again" (Kay, 2006) are representative samples of the kind of headlines generated by George Mason's men's basketball team during the NCAA tournament. Coverage was completely positive. "Being the belle of the ball is a new role for the men's basketball program at the school.....But now, not even family members can expect a break prying tickets from (Andrew Ruge), the school's associate director for marketing," (Morello & Health, 2006) is one example of this positive coverage. Nowhere could I identify anything critical of the team, its administrators or the university itself. In essence, for George Mason, the success of its men's basketball team was treated by media outlets throughout Virginia much as a surprise birthday party that carried on for nearly a month. Media coverage of the university throughout the state

reflected this tone. Because of the upbeat nature of the team's performance, reporters seemed content to let this attitude drive their stories. There were also numerous electronic and print stories, for instance, which were little more than a string of man-on-the-street interviews in which George Mason students were asked to comment on their reaction to the team's success. "The student center at George Mason University was more like a rollicking high school gym yesterday, as students, some professors and staff in green and gold cheered the Patriots improbable run in the NCAA basketball tournament" (Wagner, 2006) is one example. This type of soft news-type story began appearing at the beginning of the coverage and carried on far beyond the university's eventual loss and even the tournament itself. Thus, common themes in the numerous print and electronic media coverage and articles were: (1) Mason as an underdog; (2) campus excitement; and (3) impact of team's success on the university (Fatsis, 2006).

Interestingly, the more hard coverage of the George Mason story was driven largely by the sports media. It was this aspect of the press that delved more into the behind-the-scenes efforts of the team as well as the team's specific games, the experiences of the players, and the coach's efforts to keep the team going. Still, the articles were largely personality-driven but also analytic in terms of examining the team's strengths and weaknesses in comparison with other teams in the tournament. Profile pieces on the coach, some of the team's star players, the institution itself, and even George Mason's president, Alan Merten, were examples of this (Kinzie & Smith, 2006).

Following the 2006 NCAA tournament, stories on George Mason continued. Not surprisingly, the focus of the media articles was different than what it was during the tournament. In the aftermath, members of the press focused on looking on the impact tournament had on the overall institution as well as various aspects of it, including student applications, campus morale, and whether the university was considering putting more money into its athletic programs as a

result of the success of the men's basketball team. An example is The Wall Street Journal article, "Upstart George Mason Hopes to Turn Hoops Success into More Students, Money" (Fatsis, 2006). The volume of these "morning after" type stories did not begin tapering off until several months after the tournament (Cohen & St. Clair, 2010). It is worth noting that none of the coverage, according to the university's chief communication officer, either after or during the NCAA experience, even remotely touched on any connection between the manner in which the university handled its team's success and its overall strategic mission. "The first stories coming out of the games were about some small liberal arts college from a sleep little town. I remember thinking, 'this is terrible'" (LaPaille, 2010).

In reference to Northern Illinois University, I found the nature of the coverage to be more fast-paced. In contrast, coverage received by George Mason was a steady escalation due to the team's ongoing success over an extended period of time. What happened at Northern Illinois University was much more sudden, unexpected and fast-breaking. Media responded accordingly by descending on the campus in rapid fashion and then reporting information as they collected it. The size of the press onslaught even caught the university's public relations office off guard. "One thing we did not anticipate was that the size of our staff was not adequate," recalled Magara (2009). Thus, with each story by local television stations, including WMAQ, WGN and WFLD to cite several examples, often-times a few more facts would be included than were in their earlier stories. Media outlets from around the country also put their stamp on the tragic event. The front page headline in the Oregonian the day after the incident was a particular attention-grabber: "Run, He's Reloading the Gun" (2008).

The shootings at Northern Illinois University constituted a hard news story. Not surprisingly, news teams, often led or consisting of crime or police reporters, handled this event for their respective outlets. Despite the fact the tragic incident technically was over within

minutes, these reporters stayed with this story for days and even weeks afterward. As one top administrator recalled, it was not till weeks after that tragic day when the tone of the stories began taking a different slant. These stories, the administrator said, began focusing on a number of larger issues related to this violent act: campus safety, gun control and handling grief. Media began “doing more color stories, focusing on fleshing out the stories. Who were the victims? What about mental health? Were campuses safe enough? The university made every effort then and even to this day not to get involved in any policy debates such as guns on campus” (Buettner, 2011). Further, she added, none of the coverage received by Northern Illinois University touched on its crisis in connection with its overall institutional strategic mission. This was similar to coverage received by George Mason.

In terms of volume of coverage, neither institution knows precisely how much media attention they received as a result of their specific crisis. But both generated the attention of media outlets from countries all over the world. Each reported such an experience as being unprecedented in their respective histories. And each reported the media coverage as being so intense to the point of being at-times overwhelming (LaPaille, 2010, Buettner, 2011).

Results: Reports

As dust from the crises settled, each institution initiated reports on their unique experiences. George Mason University had a research professor in its college of education and human development, Robert Baker, author a comprehensive report on the impact of the team’s success on the overall institution (2007). The report conducted by Northern Illinois University was different than the one that George Mason authorized. Under the leadership of its president, John Peters, Northern Illinois University’s crisis response or emergency team put together a comprehensive report on the incident. This report focused only on the specific event, not on its aftermath or impact.

The George Mason report was titled *Impacts of NCAA Final Four Appearance on a Mid-Major Division I University*. This effort, some of which was alluded to earlier in this dissertation, touched on such areas of the university as admissions, media coverage, revenue generated, and alumni reaction. It did not attempt to assess the university's handling of its experience. While it did not represent a critical assessment at all of the university, the report was statistics-driven. Further, it did not draw conclusions or make any recommendations in terms of improvements or adjustments university officials might make should something similar happen to George Mason again or what university officials might do to capitalize on the Final Four experience. Without any prompting from the report, George Mason did create a legacy committee to address this matter. Interviews indicated that after several months of meetings, very little came out of this particular group. Instead, several individual offices received budget increases and carried out their own initiatives. Examples of this as brought out in the interviews ranged from an increased outreach effort by the admissions office and a regional advertising campaign by the university relations office. The admissions and chief communication officers at George Mason University reported receiving budget increases of hundred of thousands of dollars to assist in their efforts to generate higher levels of visibility for their institution (Flagel & LaPaille, 2010). The fact the report did not include any kind of critique, indicates four possible explanations: university officials were only interested in the impact of the Final Four experience and nothing more; the positive nature of the situation did not trigger a need for any critical assessment; university officials were not focused on a direct link between its event and its overall strategic mission; and university officials were pleased with the experience and their action during it. Thus, they felt no need for such an assessment, complimentary or not.

The title of Northern Illinois University's report was: *Report of the February 14, 2008 Shootings at Northern Illinois University*. This document was quite comprehensive as it included

profiles of the persons who died on that day, an open letter from the institution's president, police records of a chronological breakdown of that day, a profile of the shooter, detailed descriptions of the institution's procedures and initiatives for various emergencies, including inclement weather, and a listing of major findings and responses in the aftermath of this day. The university's full report is several hundred pages in length.

In his open letter to readers of this report, Northern Illinois University President Peters described this day as the darkest in the institution's history. He also expressed puzzlement at what motivated the shooter to take the action he did. While the report attempted to explore this question, the president conceded it remains unanswered (Report of the February 14, 2008 Shootings at Northern Illinois University, 2008, viii).

There are several other notable aspects in this document. One is the full text of a report on the shootings as commissioned by Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich: *State of Illinois Campus Security Task Force Report to the Governor*. As explained in this report, its primary purpose was to serve as a tool to help leaders at other colleges and universities throughout the state maintain safe campuses. Another interesting section was an additional report. Titled *U.S. Fire Administration/Technical Report Series NIU Shooting*, it includes a four-page description of how what happened at Northern Illinois University paralleled the 2007 tragedy at Virginia Tech. Specifically, this section focused on the two shooters. Among the parallels outlined were that it was noted how colleagues of both shooters considered them to be odd, how both shooters had a history of mental illness, how both were viewed as being above-average students, how both had older, successful sisters, had expressed admiration for previous mass murderers, had previous incidents involving the police, and, ultimately, how both had committed suicide at the scene of their crimes (U.S. Fire Administration/Technical Report Series NIU Shooting, 2008, pp. 7 – 10).

As was the case with George Mason University's report on its Final Four experience, it is striking that nowhere in Northern Illinois University's comprehensive report is there a critique of the institution's handling of the crisis or the performance of individual offices and/or administrators. Rather, the institution provided detailed description of what it did but not any perspectives on how well it carried out its various actions, including any effort to connect with its institution-wide mission or vision. This should not be interpreted as a criticism, however. Instead, it suggests three conclusions: the university did not see a need to include any kind of critical or complimentary observations; the university did not see view such additions as being in-keeping with the overall purpose of the report, which was to describe the day's unfolding and response to it in a dispassionate manner; due to the sensitive nature of the crisis, the university did not want to make itself vulnerable to any legal repercussions as has happened at Virginia Tech; and, overall, university officials are pleased with the institution's performance and felt adding a self-congratulatory tone to the document would be inappropriate.

Results: Interviews

In my interactions with the various subjects, I followed what Patton (2002) described as an interview guide approach. While the topics and specific issues of the interviews had been covered in advance, I decided upon the specific sequence and wording of the questions in the course of each interview. It was my judgment this conversational style enhanced the comprehensiveness of the data and helped make the collecting and analyzing of it more systematic.

A number of common themes or like-perspectives emerged from my interviews with administrators at both George Mason University and Northern Illinois University. Similarly, there were also several points in which subjects at each institution disagreed or viewed differently. Overall, interviewees from each institution felt they and their institution handled their situations

well. Interestingly, despite this generally positive assessment, interviews revealed negative consequences were experienced by both institutions in the aftermath of their respective crisis. “(George Mason) had twenty-two percent more applications after the tournament but the number of students who accepted our offer for admission was low” (Flagel, 2010). At Northern Illinois University, the admissions office observed a similar trend. “We have experienced declines...The shootings have had an impact. A negative impact.” (Lagana, 2010). Additionally, subjects interviewed revealed few indications that decisions they made in dealing with their crisis were shaped to connect it to the overall mission of their institution. First, I will assess the interviews with the George Mason members, then the ones with Northern Illinois University members, and finally, conduct a comparison between the two sets.

Those with whom I talked from George Mason University readily agreed that the institution’s Final Four experience was highly memorable and a significant highlight in the institution’s history. Though the university had enjoyed past achievements that had generated national and international attention, all subjects viewed the visibility created by the Final Four as being unprecedented and unmatched. In fact, much like a favorite song, the melody of the Final Four very much lingers on in their thoughts in a very positive way. Not only was the men’s basketball team a success, the university officials with whom I talked feel they and the institution handled this unexpected situation well and in a manner that brought much goodwill George Mason’s way. “Part of the fun of this whole thing was the spontaneity of the whole experience. None of us had done this sort of thing before. That was part of the charm of it all” (S. Scherrens, 2010). In fact, this was one of the common themes that emerged from the interviews. Others were as follows: the interviewees recognized the Four Final experience as having risk attached to it and no one saw a direct connection between how he or she handled this crisis with the institution’s overall strategic communication plan. Primary discrepancies included mixed perceptions on the

impact of the Final Four on George Mason and disagreement as to whether this event was transformational.

As positive as the Final Four experience was for the administrators at George Mason, all conceded concerns they had throughout the duration of the entire situation. A particular concern revolved around potential negative behavior on the part of the students. One administrator, with experience in how students from other institutions behaved during their school's athletic success by becoming violent, triggering riots, and engaging in disruptive and chaotic behavior to the extent surrounding communities felt threatened, was so concerned that he initiated behind-the-scenes precautions in case Mason's students suddenly became similarly unruly. "Our planning....was to be ready but not in an overt way. Our plan was to do what was necessary to enforce the law but hopefully not in a way that detracted from the celebration" (Ginovsky, 2010).

Another risk was the advent of misinformation about George Mason being circulated throughout the print and electronic media. This misinformation pertained to the institution's size, location and academic focus. The interviewees, particularly ones involved in areas of outreach, acknowledged they were not successful in fully countering the inaccurate information that was being communicated by several journalists and broadcasters. Their inability to do so, they added, contributed to challenges that occurred after the Final Four experience. "...you had announcers over and over again referring to Mason as a small, private, rural, commuter college. None of those things, of course, was true about us. And we were never able to overcome that misinformation" (Flagel, 2010).

The final source of high risk concern to which all interviewees agreed pertained to the need to communicate information about George Mason in a timely manner. Because of the unrelenting, high demand for information about Mason from media, university administrators all agreed that had they failed to be as responsive as the situation demanded, the university's image

and their professional reputations could have been compromised. From their perspective, this did not happen

Another major point of agreement among George Mason's administrators pertained to an intersection between the institution's crisis and strategic communication plans. While all inferred, overall, this did not happen. While interviewees acknowledged the Final Four experience was akin to a crisis, the closest the institution came to formulate ideas on how best to handle this situation and take advantage of the high volume of media and public interest by promoting George Mason happened after the tournament. Additionally, only two administrators (LaPaille & Flagel, 2010) that I interviewed acknowledged attempting to incorporate the institution's overall strategic plan or vision. But this was done more as a reaction to the media coverage and in an effort to respond to the misinformation that was being communicated. "I was totally unprepared for the unbelievable flood of media attention. All the things that happen during a crisis were happening with this situation. Also, it was like a God-given opportunity to tell our story" (LaPaille, 2010). As a result, administrators left the distinct impression of treating this situation as an isolated matter without attempting to make a direct connection to George Mason's institution-wide mission. In terms of why not, explanations range from the explosion of media attention that they were not prepared for to being captivated by the jubilation of this unique time in the institution's history. "The Final Four was in no way expected or anticipated. What happened is we were invited to play in the NCAA tournament. That was unique because it's not something we did every year. We had been in it a few times before and never won a game" (M. Scherrens, 2010). The institution's chief executive added to this perspective. "My primary reflection of it was that it was fun. And I wanted to make sure it was fun for others" (Merten, 2010).

The two common themes that emerged from these interviews in which disagreement existed had to do with perceptions on the impact of the Final Four experience and whether it truly was a transformational event. While all interviewees acknowledged that George Mason's performance in the 2006 NCAA tournament brought the institution's great attention and caused their respective workloads to escalate dramatically, they did not see eye-to-eye on its actual impact. The basic operations of the campus security office, academics, and even the chief executive office, for instance, were not altered. But administrators representing alumni operations, promotion and student life felt otherwise. These persons indicated their respective operations took on greater significance within the university as a result of the efforts they were called upon to make during this crisis. The impact, each said, was that since the 2006 NCAA tournament, their office's duties, staff size and internal reputations have increased. "My office got a new position..... Alumni feel more connected to us than ever before" (Clark-Talley, 2010). Her counterpart at Northern Illinois University also described their alumni operation as being stronger as a result of their crisis. "The way we responded really solidified us in their mind that we are an organization at NIU that they should be proud of" (Matty, 2011). Coinciding with this, there was also disagreement within the interviewees as to whether the Final Four experience was transformational in that it led to an alteration in the mission of the university (Hess & Martin, 2006). Some said it was and others said it was not. Several of the interviewees said this experience created a greater sense of unity within their office and with the publics they serve each day. One interviewee implied the Final Four experience only escalated a transformation in George Mason that was already underway (Flagel, 2010). But others insisted the Final Four experience was no where near transformational. As evidence, they said it did not result in a jump in student enrollment, nor did it bring in any significant cash donations to the university. "But because we got over excited about the experience, we thought we would have a certain yield rate

of new students the next year. Ironically, we had a smaller freshman class the next year. So, it clearly did not transform our admissions process” (Stearns, 2010).

Looking at the various points of consensus and difference, I view one key reason for this as depending upon the lens through which the interviewees viewed the matter. Specifically, interviewees looking at it from their specific office’s perspective usually said the event was transformational (Clark-Talley, LaPaille & S. Scherrens, 2010, Matty, 2011). Those looking at it from the perspective of the entire institution said otherwise. This paralleled their views on the Final Four’s impact as well.

Regarding the interviewees Northern Illinois University, four shared themes of agreement emerged versus one where disagreement existed. The points of agreement were: handling of the incident was viewed as high-risk; all exhibited a feeling of satisfaction in how they and the university handled the tragic event; administrators acted with no direct tie-in to the institution’s overall strategic plan; and interviewees readily acknowledged the incident had an impact on the institution. “So, there was a period when things were not good and people felt they were getting beat up. We took all that and urged our graduates to be successful, not for us but for themselves. And that helped turn things around” (Matty, 2011). The shared point in which disagreement was found pertained to whether the 2008 shootings were transformational to the institution. The university’s chief law enforcement officer, for instance, said it was not. “Since then, we have made very few changes simply because it has not been necessary. We are continuing to treat students and employees as partners” (Grady, 2011). But his perspective is countered by the institution’s chief academic officer. “Yes. I definitely do. Ironically, it built campus unity. There’s been a stronger sense of community since then” (Alden, 2011).

With an active gunman on campus, the question of whether the situation is a high-risk situation needs no discussion. A purpose of this paper was not to examine how Northern Illinois

University handled the scenario. Rather, when the shooting ended with the killer's suicide, other kind of high-risk challenges emerged for the university, according to the interviewees. These included providing the internal and external publics with timely and accurate information, establishing itself as being sensitive and caring to the victims and their families, providing outlets by which all students and employees indirectly affected by the incident could share their feelings and reflections, coordinating the many programs and events initiated as a result of the incident, and remaining focused on the institution's academic schedule and agenda. All needed to be done well, quickly, in a professional manner and in an atmosphere of high stress and raw emotion. If poor execution or mishandling had occurred, then concerns existed among the interviewees that public support and sympathy for the university could and would be lost and possibly replaced with feelings of frustration and anger. This did not happen. The interviewees unanimously agreed that all these challenges in the aftermath of the shootings were handled well.

A primary reason that was identified for what helped the administrators perform as well as they did under such difficult circumstances was the fact they felt well-prepared for what happened. All members of the institution's emergency management team had specific duties to perform. "We all had a role. We all knew what we had to do so there was no guessing....In fact, I believe knowing what we were supposed to do served as a source of comfort" (Buettner, 2011). This allowed them to remain focused on what needed to be done rather than on the horror of what happened. Also, those interviewed expressed gratitude at the assistance that was provided them by counterparts from Virginia Tech. This institution, of course, suffered through a much-similar tragedy less than a year before the incident in Illinois.

Once the incident occurred, all involved in the emergency response had a specific plan to which to refer. However, none whom I interviewed indicated any connection of that plan to the institution's overall strategic plan or any kind of strategic communication plan. The crisis

communication plan, they indicated, was seen as a self-contained document designed to help deal with a specific situation. "...our emergency planning had been initially focused on other events – weather events – such as tornadoes as we are a tornado-prone area" (Alden, 2011). Only one of the administrators I interviewed indicated a tie-in to Northern Illinois University's overarching vision of being seen as a student-oriented institution of higher learning. "The way we define our vision is to become the most student-centered public institution in the Midwest....Before 2008, we were student-centered and we have become even more so since then" (Buettner, 2011). But this connection, it was noted, only emerged well after the 2008 shootings had occurred and been handled. Still, this does point to a characteristic that crisis communication and strategic communication plans share: they are both products of strategic thinking.

A majority of those interviewed readily agreed as to the impact of the incident. While it brought Northern Illinois University a great deal of national and international attention, it was pointed out that its impact was not what they had necessarily anticipated. Specifically, the university did not experience an immediate upswing of any kind in enrollment or student applications. Such a response suggests an underlying concern on the public's part as to the overall safety of the DeKalb campus. Those interviewed acknowledged this particular impact and alluded to efforts to reassure prospective students and the general public of the administration's commitment to maintaining a safe campus. "Even though there was a great deal of compassion toward us because realize what happened at our campus could have happened any where, a number of potential students and even their families have told us of concern they have as to how safe NIU is" (Lagana, 2010).

The question of whether what happened was transformational elicited disagreement among the interviewees. While all interviewed said the tragedy instilled a strong sense of unity among students, faculty, staff, and alumni, none could identify tangible examples of how the

institution was transformed or altered as a result. One interviewee who viewed the incident as being transformational said it was unfortunate because of what had to happen for such feelings of closeness among the campus population to occur. “Unfortunately. By that I mean the event itself. It was terrible. But if we had responded in a weak way, then it would have damaged relations” (Matty, 2011). This is not to suggest those feelings of unity that emerged and, by all accounts, continue to exist should be treated lightly. For any organization or entity, including a college or university, to move forward in a strong and cohesive manner, this kind of attitude among its members is a key element.

In my interviews with administrators from both George Mason University and Northern Illinois University, several included those with like-positions. Specifically, these administrators included each institution’s chief communication officer, chief academic officer, chief admissions officer, chief security officer, and chief alumni officer. As part of my analysis, I believe a position-by-position comparison of comments and perspectives shared by these officers establishes another connection between the two case studies and provide further insight into the overall focus of this paper.

The principal communication officers of George Mason University and Northern Illinois University viewed their situations in similar fashion despite the fact one was celebratory and the other was a cause for shock and sadness. Specifically, the two recognized their situations as being ones of high risk and crisis; attempted to address their challenges with key messages; and carried out their duties as best they could under high pressure circumstances. At George Mason University, “It was all just shooting from the hip but based on my previous experience in dealing with crises. I remember giving out assignments to everyone to deal with what we were facing. It just evolved organically” (LaPaille, 2010). At Northern Illinois University, “It was constant

motion....for me, it was probably four months of doing nothing else but working on things related to the shootings” (Buettner, 2011).

At the least, a high risk or crisis situation poses a threat to an entity’s reputation. Further, as addressed earlier in this paper, if not handled well, then the negative fall-out could even be as extreme as threatening the existence of an entity and/or its top leaders. Both communication executives at the two case studies institutions sought to handle their situations with specific message points and the timely release of information and by countering any inaccuracies or misinformation being reported by the media. At George Mason, among the key message points that it communicated were that it was an institution committed to excellence and one that is dynamic, growing in size and student enrollment, and situated near Washington, D.C. At Northern Illinois University, the key message points included that it is a safe institution committed to the welfare and academic growth of its students. It is important to note these messages, though strategic in-concept, were in reaction and/or response to narratives first put forth by the media.

Interestingly, neither of the communication officers felt they were as successful in communicating these points as they would have liked. Misinformation about George Mason continued to be reported by various media outlets throughout the NCAA tournament despite the efforts of the institution’s media professionals. “The press loved the notion of the tiny, mediocre university coming out of nowhere to compete against these giants. They never really let go of that. To actually report us as an academic powerhouse, a university that had been to the NCAA several times before, a university that was quite large, and located at the doorstep of the nation’s capitol went against their national conversation” (LaPaille, 2010). At Northern Illinois University, the suddenness of its situation dictated that the media relations operation focused primarily on ensuring the shootings were not misreported. Thus, according to the chief communication officer,

the intense demands by the press for more information about the shootings, the shooter and the victims prevented the university from incorporating its key message points nearly as well as it wanted. Finally, both communication officers conceded their actions and decisions they made during their respective situations revolved around the situations themselves. The demands being put on them and their officers, they said, were far too hectic and even overwhelming for them to try and link what they were doing to their institutions' umbrella strategies. "This was as intense as anything in public relations I had ever experienced. It was all good and it was all happy but the need to communicate accurately and in a timely way was just as important as anything you would normally associate with during a crisis" (LaPaille, 2010).

Both of the chief academic officers at each institution exhibited a more detached reflection of their situations. At the same time, the two were moved by the Final Four experience, in the case of George Mason, and the multiple shootings, in the case of Northern Illinois University. In terms of how they and their officers actually responded to their institution's situations, there were very few similarities. My interpretation of this observation is this fundamental difference was dictated more by the specific events than anything else. At George Mason, for instance, classes were not cancelled. Thus, the chief academic officer here worked to ensure classes were carrying on as normal and was not directly involved in key logistical decisions being made by the administration. At Northern Illinois University, however, the chief academic officer was very much a key player in all decisions regarding this institution's crisis and worked tirelessly to maintain a close connection with the faculty and academic department chairs and deans. Further, both differed as to whether their respective events were transformational. George Mason's chief academic officer said it was not, while his counterpart of Northern Illinois University said the shootings were because they created a greater sense of unity among the entire campus population.

Very few similarities were found in conversations with the chief admissions officers at each institution, at least during their crises and in their immediate aftermath. At George Mason, the admissions office reacted in a very proactive way by launching into an aggressive outreach plan designed to take advantage of the institution's visibility. This was done by launching mass mailings and helping generate student support of the basketball games – all geared to enhance the school's profile. However, these efforts were not devised with any specific tie-in to plans that may have already existed. Also, there seemed only minimal attempt or even opportunity to coordinate them with what other offices, such as public relations and alumni affairs, were doing.

At Northern Illinois University, the admissions office reportedly played very little direct role in its crisis situation. The efforts of this office supposedly were more reactive to the point of seeking to carry on with their normal duties and responsibilities in the face of the turmoil the institution was facing. This is not to imply that the admissions office was not affected by the shock of the crisis, or that its officers were not part of the all-hands-on-deck activities that were going on.

Interestingly, where the two offices did coincide is that their offices experienced or observed very little “bump” in student applications or enrollments after their institution's crisis. This may have been a contributing factor, then, as to why neither chief admissions officer viewed what happened as being transformational. The officer at George Mason came the closest to this perspective by saying the Final Four experience did contribute to a transformation that was already underway at the university. “We had already been through a great deal of change when I arrived and our enrollment and recruitment was already on an upward trajectory” (Flagel, 2010).

In terms of campus security, how the chief security officers approached their respective situations was different because the nature of their situation was different. At George Mason, the

tact was also one of measured detachment. At Northern Illinois University, the tact was one of active containment. Police at George Mason purposely stayed in the background of the campus activities so as to not interfere with the ongoing celebrations. At the same time, they maintained a watchful eye on whether any of the behavior of students and basketball fans became disruptive or threatening in any way. At Northern Illinois University, the situation was much different. An active shooter was on-campus. Here, the police's strategy was direct and straight-to-the-point: initiate engagement, stop the shooter and care for the victims. Both performed very well.

Both campus security officers also viewed their situations as being high-risk as each recognized a real possibility of widespread violence and chaos. Thus, the bottom-line goal of their strategies was to ensure this did not occur. In keeping with this goal, both worked from specific crisis plans. But neither of these plans intersected or coincided with their respective institution's overall mission or strategy. Each of these officers did not necessarily see their jobs as helping directly ensure their institution's vision. "The reward for the (George Mason) police is that we did not become part of the story or even a small part of it. We were safety-oriented as opposed to enforcement-oriented by design" (Ginovsky, 2010). At Northern Illinois University, the officers' challenge revolved around prevention. "...I have been of a mind that the job of police goes beyond reacting to a situation. Instead, we need to be more about prevention. Reaction is more about containment while prevention is about stopping something either from happening or stopping it once it has started" (Grady, 2011). Both security units were actively involved in the discussions and planning of overall campus events as they related to the NCAA tournament, at George Mason, and the active shooter, at Northern Illinois University. Finally, neither security officer viewed their situations as being transformational to their operations or to their institutions (Ginovsky, 2010, Grady, 2011).

The final positions of comparison involved each institution's chief alumni officer. Both of these professionals were heavily involved in helping their institutions handle and/or cope with their respective situations. George Mason's alumni officer, for instance, had the dual challenges of overseeing the heavy volume of inquiries and comments from graduates as well as serving on an ad-hoc committee charged with devising strategies to mobilize and coordinate an array of celebratory activities and events. This person's counterpart at Northern Illinois University had a similarly heavy volume of inquiries and comments from its graduates. Additionally, the chief alumni officer worked closely with the institution's top administrators in their efforts to communicate with the general public throughout the duration of their crisis. Prior to their crisis, each of the alumni officers indicated the level of active involvement in the institutions on the part of their alums as being moderately good. But as the success of the men's basketball team at George Mason began to escalate and once the shootings occurred at Northern Illinois University, that level of active involvement by each institution's graduates escalated tremendously. Each alumni officer said these incidents triggered a much greater level of connection between the institutions and their graduates that continues to this day. George Mason University's "alumni feel more connected to us than ever before" (Clark-Talley, 2010). At Northern Illinois University, the tragedy solidified the relationship between graduates of the institutions and "our alumni constituencies. That was one positive result of what happened" (Matty, 2011). Thus, both alumni officers viewed these incidents as being transformational.

Research Questions

This research is guided by four questions. Analysis of interviews, media coverage and pertinent reports following each situation provided answers. Thus, the next step in this analytical process is to apply the collected data to this paper's driving question of whether the crisis communication and strategic communication plans of each institution should have been linked as

they faced their high-risk/high-reward situations. By focusing on the four research questions that were first identified at the beginning of this paper and then explained in greater detail later on as guideposts, it is now appropriate to take this qualitative effort to the next level.

RQ1: Did George Mason University and Northern Illinois University have a crisis communication plan and strategic communication plan at the time of their respective crisis events? If so, did the crisis communication plans of each institution, as they were enacted, include such elements of strategic communication as putting forth a mission statement, identifying target publics, specific messages, effective channels of communication, and designating ways to measure their success?

Both institutions had these plans in-place at the time of their specific situations (Appendices C, D, E & F). The crisis plans, however, did not include many of the traditional elements of a strategic communication that one would expect to find. As written, their crisis plans were geared toward containment and control of a situation rather speaking to any kind of larger mission statement, connecting with identified publics, or even achieving a set of predetermined goals or points of measurement. This is illustrated in Appendices D and F. These highlights of each institution's crisis plan focus entirely on actions that administrators should take in the event of a potentially threatening situation. There is no mention of measurement, nor any linkage to an overriding mission or strategic plan.

Even though leaders at both institutions recognized their particular situations as matters of high-risk, not all sought to deal with them via an encompassing goal or vision statement. The communication-related officers at both institutions and George Mason's admissions officer, did Thought toward this end only came after each situation was either over or had been completely contained. At George Mason, for example, the leaders viewed their situation as being highly

positive. Thus, their approach for dealing with it was almost totally reactive with the purpose of enhancing the attention George Mason was receiving. In essence, they saw the Final Four experience as an opportunity to promote the institution but not necessarily in a way that fed into the institution's overall mission. "I don't think the wording between our (crisis) plan and the university's overall strategic plan was related" (Ginovsky, 2010). Only the institution's chief communication officer and chief admissions officer recognized many of the demands being placed on the university and its media relations operation at the time as being similar to ones had a more traditional high-risk situation occurred. "Early on I felt it was like a crisis...All the things that happen during a crisis were happening with this situation. Right off the bat I figured I needed to implement some crisis management techniques that I knew from past work" (LaPaille, 2010).

The situation at Northern Illinois University was grim. Literally lives were at-risk. The active shooter represented a more traditional crisis. Thus, their leaders, especially the chief security officer, sought to do all they could to contain the event and help their internal publics get through it as best as possible. "Reaction is more about containment while prevention is about stopping something either from happening or stopping it once it has started" (Grady, 2011). At the time, the institution demonstrated little effort to tie its effort to handle the crisis with the institution's overarching strategic plans. Exceptions were the institution's communication officer and, to a lesser extent, the alumni officer. "We all had a role....We had been constantly upgrading and advancing our own emergency preparatory plans" (Buettner, 2011).

RQ2: How did George Mason University and Northern Illinois University measure the success or effectiveness of their crisis plans? Was any part of the measurement based on the level of integration between each institution's crisis and strategic communication plans? What was the impact of any possible integration?

Neither institution had concrete or tangible measurement devices in-place at the time of their situations or crisis. The closest George Mason came to measuring how well it handle its Final Four experience was by authorizing one of its faculty members to conduct an impact study (Baker, 2007). This study did not include any kind of critique of the institution. “The conversations we ended up having when the run ended revolved around our agreeing that we were not going to make any changes in who we are or start pouring millions of dollars into our athletic program. We enjoyed the ride” (M. Scherrens, 2010).

Collectively, the leaders at Northern Illinois University based their informal internal critique on feedback they received from the general public, students and their families and the media. “By promoting our product – students and alumni – it helped create greater support for our organization and for four images” (Matty, 2011). Thus, none of the informal self-measuring initiated by both institutions touched on the specific point of integration between their crisis and strategic communication plans. One administrator, however, did view the two plans as connecting indirectly. “...the crisis plan feeds the strategic plan and the strategic plan feeds the crisis plan. Before 2008, we were student-centered and we have become even more so since then” (Buettner, 2011). This was an indication of an attempt at Northern Illinois University to link messaging during the crisis with that in the overall strategic plan. Despite this, leaders at both institutions were in unanimous agreement that their university handled their situations well. This raises the question of how or why they came to these conclusions since neither institution had any concrete measurements to point to. My unscientific guess is that due to the intensity of each crisis, the key players were simply relieved to have gotten through them without any overt negative fallout.

RQ3: Did the senior administrators at George Mason University and Northern Illinois University considers their events to be transformative?

This question generated mixed results at both institutions. Interestingly, with few exceptions, the senior administrators at George Mason University and Northern Illinois University who answered this question in the affirmative were not able to base their responses on tangible data. Rather, their responses were based more on observations and feelings that staff and students were exhibiting greater unity as a result of what happened. While it is true that at George Mason, staff sizes and budgets of several offices have been increased in the aftermath of the Final Four experience, these changes have led only to minor alterations in how those offices are now meeting their responsibilities. One example of this is found the area of university relations. This unit has initiated a “comprehensive advertising campaign” valued at nearly seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars (LaPaille, 2010). Even the increase in the number of student applications, bookstore sales and attendance at various athletic events at George Mason – all welcomed – do not represent transformations, according to a number of the interviewees. “I do see the Final Four as being a tremendous accelerant. We had already been through a great deal of change when I arrived and our enrollment and recruitment was already on an upward trajectory. But I’m not sure it changed where we would have been in 2010 in any way had it not happened” (Flagel, 2010).

The institution’s top academic officer, the provost, however, did not view the Final Four experience as having a major impact on the institution other than enhancing its name recognition. “I think in the immediate aftermath there was probably a slight tendency on the part of some people to exaggerate just how important it was. It’s turned out not have done a lot for financial contributions to the university. I wish it had, but my impression was that was an opportunity where we would have expected positive results and we haven’t had any” (Stearns, 2010).

George Mason University’s president strongly disagreed with both of these perspectives. “We created a brand as a result of it. We have a story to tell that hasn’t aged at all....The pride people felt then remains to this day” (Merten, 2010).

As Northern Illinois University did not seek to collect the kind of data that George Mason did, it is difficult to pursue any further analysis of the perceptions that several of their administrators have regarding the multiple shootings being a transformative event. Nevertheless, this did not stop the interviewees from drawing conclusions from the impact of this tragic event. “There’s no question the shootings have had an impact A negative impact....a number of potential students and even their families have told us of concerns they have as to how safe NIU is” (Lagana, 2010). Another administrator echoed that sentiment. “My guess is the 2008 shootings is one of the top two or things that pop in their minds when they (media) think of us. We try hard not to let it define us, but it is a very difficult thing to overcome” (Buettner, 2011).

RQ4: To what extent did the execution of the crisis communication plans of George Mason University and Northern Illinois University at the time of each specific situation contribute to the success of each institution’s strategic communication plans?

The immediate answer to this question is “none.” No specific data was uncovered to suggest the crisis communication plans that existed and that, at least in part, were executed at the time of each institution’s specific situation had notable impact on their strategic communication plans. In fact, no specific data was uncovered to suggest a direct link between each institution’s crisis and strategic communication plans at the time of their crisis existed at all. Thus, these highly-charged events – George Mason’s Final Four experience and Northern Illinois University’s multiple shootings – happened with little to no efforts being made by either institution to bring the two plans together even in an indirect way. Therefore, no direct impact on each institution’s overall mission was observed or recorded by interviewees as a result of their handling of their crisis. None of the interviewees spoke directly of setting out to link the two communication plans at the outset of their respective crisis. It is my inference that due to the

intensity of the situations, the involved parties deemed it prudent to adhere to the protocols that had already been established prior to each crisis.

Debriefers Comments

In their review of the collected and the conclusions I drew from it, the debriefers identified my analysis as being logical and compatible with the research I set out to address. One debriefer, however, indicated that I could have made a stronger case for why an organization's crisis communication plans should be more closely linked to its strategic communication plans. In terms of themes that emerged from the data or interpretations I may have overlooked, none were suggested.

Limitations

To ensure my research is reliable, I took steps to counter each of the potential limitations of this effort. In my study, I examined only two case studies. Thus, my recommendations are geared specifically to George Mason University and Northern Illinois University. My study would need to have been more quantitative in-nature in terms of working with a much larger sample population for me to draw any general or broad conclusions. Thus, follow-up research efforts would be more apt to better serve the topic by a quantitative approach.

Another limitation is that I was unable to interview every administrator I wanted. Several of requests I made with individuals at Northern Illinois University were denied. While the prospective subjects were available, they simply did not wish to discuss what remains a painful memory. But for the interviews I did conduct, I transcribed all interviews. Because of this, no detached outside person reviewed the accuracy of the tapes. However, to counter this, all transcriptions were shared with every interviewee, thus giving each person an opportunity to review their initial comments and make whatever changes they felt necessary. To add further strength to my analysis of the interviews, three debriefers were recruited to review all collected

data, including transcripts of the interviews, and assess the logic of my conclusions and recommendations. Together, it was the role of the debriefers to assess what Cresswell termed the accuracy of the findings as described by participants in each case study (2007).

Another possible limitation is the fact I was employed in the area of university relations at George Mason University in 2006 at the time of its Final Four experience. Thus, I had a firsthand experience of this situation and the activities of the persons interviewed for this dissertation. I recognize this intimate level knowledge gives me a bias toward George Mason University that I did and do not have toward Northern Illinois University. I tried to counter this possible imbalance by interviewing an equal number of persons from each institution and collecting an equal number of resources as part of my data collecting. Also, another task of the debriefers was to assess whether any kind of imbalance in attitude on my part toward each institution might be found in the analysis. Fortunately, none were.

Recommendations

Two of the primary findings of this paper are that the challenges of George Mason University's Final Four experience and the multiple shootings at Northern Illinois University were viewed as high-risk situations, yet they were handled with little to no effort to link crisis-related actions to either institution's overall, comprehensive strategic efforts. Despite having little tangible evidence to which to refer, leaders from both institutions expressed satisfaction with their institution's performance and the unofficial public feedback they received and continue to receive. Thus, neither case study demonstrated whether such a linkage could better help an organization contend with a crisis as well as help it emerge from the experience with a stronger or enhanced reputation. However, there was one key indicator that connecting the crisis communication plan with an overarching strategic communication plan would bring benefit to an organization. In the case of George Mason, prospective students from states throughout the

country visiting the campus were disappointed in that it turned out not to be the kind of institution they were led to believe as a result of the coverage given the university. “You had announcers over and over again referring to Mason as a small, private, rural, commuter college. None of those things, of course, was true about us. They made us sound as if we were a small sports school located in the middle of nowhere. And we were never able to overcome that misinformation” (Flagel, 2010). George Mason’s admissions dean added: “They visited us but at least what some found was a university different from how the announcers had been describing us. How we really really were was not what they expected or were looking for. There was a real disconnect” (2010). Consequently, they turned away from George Mason, thus depriving the institution from valuable out-of-state tuition revenue. In the case of Northern Illinois University, a reputation of being unsafe was gained by the institution. As a result, it has experienced an enrollment drop and declines in tuition-generated revenue that continue to persist to this day. Had administrators from both universities sought to connect their present-day actions during their crises with the long-term mission goals of their institutions, it is possible the negative fall-out would have been lessened.

Given the reality of this study and its results, I make the following recommendations to the two institutions that were the focus of my research as well as to all organizations and entities that are continuing to seek ways to improve their crisis communication efforts and identify ways to maintain and/or enhance their reputations in times of crisis:.

- Safety and Public Relations Offices
 - The communication or public relations offices and safety offices of the organizations should collaborate in authoring their respective communication plans (Coombs, 2007). This would link the strategic communication plan as created by the public relations office with the crisis communication plan as created by the safety office, thus ensuring many basic elements within the

strategic communication plan are part of the crisis communication plan.

Measurement of the linkage should be reviewed and critiqued by each institution's top crisis management team.

- Table top exercises as organized by each institution's safety office should include public relations officers and other outreach officials, such as appropriate persons from the offices of admissions and alumni relations. In these exercises, the communication officers should be assigned the task of crafting messages dictated by potential high risk/high reward scenarios in ways that speak to their institution's core values and mission goals (Fearn & Banks, 2007). Measurement of the quality and effectiveness of the communication officers' input would be assessed by each institution's top crisis management team.

- Communication Education

- Communication departments within each institution should adjust the syllabus within their risk/crisis communication classes to help ensure crisis and strategic communication plans and crisis and strategic planning are more closely linked. Such teaching is important given the reality that all high risk/high reward scenarios have the potential to damage an organization's reputation and standing (Dilenschneider, 2000). Similar adjustments should be made in any other communication classes that may be appropriate. Measurement of these adjustments would be determined by the top offices within each communication department.

- Institutional Values

- Each institution's top administration councils should review their crisis communication plan as authored by the public relations and safety offices and approved by the top crisis management teams. Such measurement would service two purposes: (a) help ensure the values and core mission goals of the universities are properly reflected in this important plan; and (b) provide guidelines to create opportunities by which the institutions can address any high risk/high reward scenario they face and also incorporate their core values and mission goals (Vecchi, 2009).
- Potential Transformational Scenarios
 - Future events or circumstances may arise that have the potential to transform either institution. Examples of such scenarios would include a significant donation or gift, a major tragedy, a natural disaster, national or international success of entities within each institution, or significant academic achievement. In lieu of such occurrences, it is essential to each institution's survival that how they are handled is driven by strategic planning. Strategic plans must ensure each institution's core values and mission are preserved and communicated to the appropriate publics. Thus, it is imperative that all outreach plans devised by entities within each institution include these institutional elements. This includes crisis and strategic communication plans. Measurement of such plans should be managed by a centralized a mission/core value ombudsman that reports to each institution's top administrative officers. To avoid any dangers of one person or one office making decisions/judgments that do not reflect valuable input from all appropriate elements within the institution (Sandman, 2002)

this singular entity should be driven by a philosophy of openness, transparency and collaboration. As a result, all segments of the institution should have input into these communiqués. Such strategies as open forums and interdepartmental meetings would be examples of this.

- Future Research
 - Further research on this topic should be conducted by appropriate scholars at each institution. This could include conducting experimental crisis exercises in which an organization's crisis and strategic communication plans are interwoven. Results of those exercises should be compared with ones where the two plans are not linked. Building on the specific examples of George Mason University and Northern Illinois University, further research could explore the broad question of whether crisis and strategic communication plans should be integrated by other institutions of higher learning as well as non-education entities. This could be in the form of a national random survey of universities. Additionally, future research could focus on the leadership aspect of this topic, It could examine the relationship between a leader's personality and how crises are handled.

Proposed Approach

As an added element to the above-listed recommendations, I wish to outline how an entity's crisis communication and strategic communication plans could be directly linked to help provide guidance for how an entity could use this same situation to enhance its reputation. I will then apply this to both George Mason University and Northern Illinois University. Before focusing specifically on each institution, however, two basic understandings are necessary. First, the relationship between a crisis communication plan and a strategic communication plan must be

confirmed. As strategic communication speaks to an entity's overall mission or policy goals, it serves as an umbrella for all plans carried out in its name (Smith, 2009). Such a less encompassing effort would be a crisis communication plan. Such a plan is designed to address a specific event or circumstance being faced by the organization. This plan is geared to ensure that an ongoing dialog between an organization and its publics is maintained while its particular crisis is handled (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Secondly, the linkage between the crisis and strategic communication plans is further solidified by recognizing the common elements the two share. These are: transparency of action, ongoing flow of information, targeted publics, specific message points, and measurements of evaluation (Sandman, 1983, Smith, 2009).

The above-identified points link the crisis and strategic communication plans in theory. Giving the linkage substance are the specific message points called for in those times when a crisis occurs. Thus, in time of crisis, it is my recommendation to George Mason University and Northern Illinois University that they identify and/or create points that complement key elements found in their overall missions.

In the case of George Mason University, this institution's mission outlines such goals as educating new leaders for the twenty-first century, maintaining an international reputation, encouraging freedom of thought, providing interdisciplinary courses of study, and nurturing an entrepreneurial faculty. How could a crisis communication plan designed to address a high risk/high reward situation be geared to coincide with such mission statements? The key is in the messaging in both of what it is and how it is carried out. I recommend that the university: (1) put into place several key communication channels or vehicles that enable the university to put forward information that provides up-to-date information about the specific situation; (2) put into place timely message or talking points about the institution, its faculty, student body, notable course offerings and the institution's research strengths from which those launching a crisis

communication can draw; (3) pre-set roles of individuals to be responsible for each of these tasks; (4) establish lists of key publics to remain connected with in times of crisis; and (5) pre-determine points of measurement to assess the level of response to these outreach efforts.

In the case of Northern Illinois University, the institution's mission outlines such broad goals as encouraging the transmission and application of knowledge, contributing to the betterment of society, maintaining a diverse student body, fostering valuable research within its faculty, and increasing the intellectual competence of its students, steps similar to listed above regarding George Mason should be followed.

Obviously, the specific high risk/high reward situation would dictate the specific points of information an institute disseminates as well as the tone in which it is shared. Sound judgment would need to be exercised at such times. Such judgment, however, could be enhanced via table top exercises designed to help entities prepare for various emergencies. Crisis communication teams could help create message points that speak to specific situations and also identify other information about the organization that either directly and indirectly relates to it or does not detract from its effectiveness. Regarding both George Mason and Northern Illinois universities, the message points could be organized under such general headings as: research highlights, institutional highlights, faculty standouts, student profile, international initiatives, and institutional values. The values category could include its own sub-headings such as: diversity, entrepreneurship, knowledge enhancement and regional development.

Conclusion

This study found that during a time of crisis, George Mason University and Northern Illinois University did not link their crisis communication and strategic communication plans in the handling of their situations. Instead, the two institutions administered their specific challenges via crisis communication plans that did not attempt to speak to any of their overriding strategies

or contain key elements that comprise a strategic communication plan such as identified publics, preset goals or points of measurement. Consequently, though both universities feel they successfully implemented their crisis communication plans, neither feel this had any direct positive contribution toward ongoing strategic communication plans. Because of the positive nature of its high risk/high reward situation, only George Mason University's administrators indicated the institution's image was enhanced. Further, administrators at each university had mixed perspectives as to whether their campus wide crises were transformational. In future research, communication students, scholars and professionals need to consider ways in which an organization's crisis communication and strategic communication plans can and should be linked.

Appendix A

Interview Topic Areas for Interviewees

- Level of preparedness
- Degree of involvement/participation
- Lessons learned
- Strategies implemented
- Assessment of performance
- Feedback received
- Recollection of events
- Strategic communication plan
- Crisis communication plan
- Publics
- Transformative events

Sample of Open-ended Questions for Interviewees

- Senior Administrators (President, Admissions Officer, Vice Presidents, Athletics Directors)
 - Describe the overall experience and the role that you and your office played in it.
 - From an institutional standpoint, what were your primary challenges? What were your primary communication challenges?”

- Did you have a specific set of communication goals/objectives prior to the event?
How much of an impact did these goals/objectives have on dealing with the actual event?
- How would you define crisis? Did you ever see your situation as a crisis?
Why/why not?
- Will you discuss the feedback – formal and informal – you have received regarding your institution’s handling of this situation? Did any specific comments relate to your specific communication efforts?
- Would you assess your institution’s handling of this situation as a success? How did you measure this? What made it a success or what did not make it a success?
- If it happened again, would your communication goals and communication actions be carried out differently?
- Communication Officials (University Relations, Media Relations, Sports Information, Public Information Officer for Campus Police)
 - From a communication perspective, what were your goals? Strategies? Challenges?
 - How well do you feel you met the communication goals of your office and your institution? How did you measure your success?
 - Did you or do you see your situation as a crisis? If so, what kind of steps did you follow in dealing with your situation?
 - From your perspective, did your crisis communication plan ever relate to your institution’s strategic communication plan? Why/why not?
- Research/Reporting Officials
 - What kind of statistics do you have that reflect the impact of this situation?

- Development Officials
 - What has been the impact of this experience in terms of fund raising, donations, gift giving, etc.?
 - Did your institution make changes in fund raising strategies as a result of this experience? Can you provide a few examples?
- Alumni Officials
 - What kind of reactions did you notice from alumni during and after this experience?
- Miscellaneous (Police, Bookstore)
 - What were your communication goals during this situation?
 - Did you or do you see your situation as a crisis? Why or why not?
 - Have you noticed any kind of long-term impact on your institution as a result of this experience?

Set questions for Senior Administrators at both institutions (The specific wording will be altered slightly depending upon the institution for which each interviewee worked at time of the events.)

- Describe the overall experience and the role that you/your office played in it. How would you characterize your institution's state of readiness for this event? How would you characterize your specific office's state of readiness?
- As this situation was unfolding, how did you know what to do? How did you determine what your role would be? What did you draw from as a source of information?
- What were your primary challenges? What were the institution's primary challenges?
- What were your area's primary set of communication goals/objectives prior to the event? How much did these goals/objectives change when the event occurred? Who/what were your publics before and during the event?

- If this happened again, would your communication goals/actions be altered or carried out differently. If so, then how?
- Did you see this event as a crisis or high risk situation? Why/Why not?
- What would you say were the greatest threats or risks – if any – to your area and to your institution throughout this event? How did you deal with these threats/risks? Were you successful? How did you measure your performance?
- Did you see this event as a high reward situation to your area and to your institution? Why/Why not? What were these potential rewards? Did you and/or the university obtain them? If so, how?
- Did your handling of this high risk-high reward situation support your institution's overall strategic goals as outlined its vision statement? Do you feel your decisions/actions should have? Or, in your judgment, was this experience separate from your institution's vision statement?
- Please discuss the feedback – formal and informal – you received regarding the handling of this experience regarding your area and the overall institution.
- How would you assess your area's handling of this situation? Strengths? Weaknesses? How did you measure this? How about the institution's overall handling of the situation?
- How would you characterize or describe your institution's state of readiness for this situation? How would you characterize your specific area's state of readiness?
- Please discuss the overall impact of this experience on your institution.
- Do you consider this event to be transformational regarding your area and your institution?

Appendix B

Timeline of Interviews

- University of Memphis
 - June, 2010
- West Virginia University
 - June, 2010
- SUNY Binghamton University
 - June, 2010
- Virginia Tech
 - November and December, 2010
- George Mason University
 - November, 2010
- Northern Illinois University
 - September, 2009
 - December, 2010, and January, 2011

Appendix C

Highlights of George Mason University's Strategic Communication Plan (2005 to present)

I. New tagline and branding campaign

- a. 18-month project
- b. Research analysis/brainstorm sessions
- c. New tagline: "Where Innovation Is Tradition"
 - i. Innovative: student programs, teaching, buildings, research
 - ii. Innovation lives at Mason with our students, faculty, staff, in our facilities
 - iii. Innovation connects all stakeholders, part of university's culture

II. Stakeholders

- a. Students – innovation is encouraged
- b. Alumni – innovation gives alumni ability to succeed in workplace and in society
- c. Thought Leaders – innovation leads to success in the world. Mason graduates are positioned to succeed and make a contribution to the future of the region, state, nation and world.
- d. Parents – Mason educates children to succeed in world that values innovative thinking and learning
- e. Faculty – Mason ce

- f. Celebrates and recognizes innovation in teaching and research
- g. Staff – Mason empowers staff to make contribution to legacy of innovation
- h. Donors – Investing at Mason is an investment in innovation that fuels region

III. Implementation

- a. Smart utilization of “free” communication vehicles
- b. Integration into communication vehicles managed by university relations
- c. Innovation web site devoted to brand image stories: academics, students, campus faculty programs
- d. Print ads in university publications
- e. Partnerships and collaborating on special events and activities: awards, contests, institutional events such as Orientation and Mason Week
- f. New Mason brochure
- g. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter
- h. Existing vehicles (sample)
 - i. Mason Gazette
 - ii. Mason E-Files
 - iii. WGMU
 - iv. Broadside
 - v. Mason Spirit
 - vi. Admissions materials
 - vii. GMU-TV
 - viii. Departmental newsletters

- ix. You Tube
- x. “Ads” on all academic website

Appendix D

Highlights of Crisis Communication Plan for George Mason University's Office of Public and Media Relations

Overview

Crisis Communication Plan of Office of Media and Public Relations (OMPR) serves as addendum to the university's overall crisis plan. This plan is maintained by Office of Environmental Health and Safety. Once a primary contact from OMPR is made aware of crisis or emergency situation, either by Vice President for University Relations or by lead responding office, OMPR will initiate an appropriate, coordinated response per Standing Operation Procedures and will be in regular communication with other university offices, including University Information, Community Relations, Events Management and University Life. Handling and staging members of the media who try to cover crisis in-person will vary widely depending on the location, timing and type of incident.

Response

After one of the primary contacts of OMPR is made aware of crisis or emergency and has assessed potential media interest or public relations impact, he/she will contact the Vice President for University Relations. This senior officer will then direct the response and assign duties to Press Secretary and OMPR Director. Unless otherwise designated by the Vice President, the primary OMPR media spo

kesperson is Press Secretary. OMPR team is trained to forward all media calls to the President Secretary. He/she will share the information with Vice President and OMPR Director. In the event the President Secretary is unreachable, all media calls will be forwarded to OMPR Director.

Appendix E

Highlights of Northern Illinois University's Strategic Communication Plan

There are separate offices that handle the university's external communication efforts and internal communication efforts. The office of external affairs and economic development serves as the official liaison with state and federal governmental national organizations and economic development agencies. This office seeks to develop and maintain partnerships with funding agencies national laboratories, higher education associations and consortia and other groups and individuals representing state, regional and national interests.

The university's office of media relations and internal communications provides the university's official voice in the general public arena. This office carries out its duties by striving to tell fascinating stories of teaching, learning and discovery. Also, it produces news conference, news releases, and electronic newsletters as well as collaborates in the creation of magazine stories and multimedia productions. This office works closely with members of the media.

Appendix F

Highlights of Northern Illinois University's Crisis Communication Plan

Purpose and Philosophy

Over the course of an academic year, many crises arise that are extremely well handled by a variety of professionals within the division of student affairs and enrollment management and beyond. Often the need for significant involvement beyond simple notification and communication among multiple departments within student affairs and enrollment management (eg., the handling of a roommate disagreement) is unnecessary. However, major crises do occur, which require collaborative efforts by several departments within and beyond student affairs and enrollment management. There is no one outline that can possibly anticipate or cover the wide variety of crises that impact the university community. Ultimately, the development of these procedures should provide a framework to enhance our ability as student centered professionals to collaboratively meet the challenges presented by student crises.

In defining a crisis, a number of variables need to be considered. In addition to a situation that impacts a student's ability to meet his/he academic obligation, in this policy "crisis" is defined as including one or more of the following criteria: the incident has potential impact on the surrounding community or other individuals; the incident is likely to draw media attention; there may be legal or risk management issues involved; the incident will require continued follow-up or long-term intervention by NIU; or as a staff member, you feel somewhat uncomfortable in handling the situation without assistance.

If you answered affirmatively to any of these criteria, you are most likely dealing with a crisis. As a rule of thumb, always initiate a call if you are concerned. It is better to be too concerned than not concerned enough. The model presented is an overview of how the division of student affairs and enrollment management handles student crises.

The Crisis Response Team (CRT) chair provides central coordination in major crises (eg., student death, sexual assault, attempted suicide, etc.) response. The vice president for student affairs and enrollment management has delegated the responsibility of primary coordination for crisis response to the chair of the CRT. The CRT chair, or the chair on duty, should be contacted as soon as possible in reference to a major crisis. Upon notification, the chair will contact the vice president for student affairs and enrollment management. In the absence of the chair, the full responsibility and authority to manage a crisis will be delegated to an appropriate member of the CRT. The CRT will convene within 15 minutes after notification of a crisis.

Each department within the division of student affairs and enrollment management is responsible for coordinating its own personnel, responsibilities and procedures, given the unique nature of each unit's specialization. Each department is responsible for identifying the appropriate individual who will coordinate the individual unit's communications, consultations, and participation on the CRT within the division of student affairs and enrollment management.

After the crisis has been addressed, the chair will schedule a meeting of the CRT for debriefing. The CRT will be comprised of a representative of each department involved in the student crisis. The CRT will develop a plan of response and monitoring, as deemed appropriate. Additional debriefing sessions may be initiated and implemented, particularly when a crisis may have significant reverberations within the university community.

The unique nature of what is defined as a crisis will determine the plan of action in the division's response, including communications, individual participation, area of operation, and

the role of the CRT members. However, for most crises, there will be some standard operating procedures that will go into effect during the central coordination of a major crisis.

Appendix G

Highlights of Media Coverage of George Mason University and Northern Illinois University

George Mason University

- Kids Post, March 13, 2006, By George, Look at the Locals
- Rockymountainnews.com, March 16, 2006, Small-School Fans Have Big Basketball

Hearts

- Dayton Daily News, March 19, 2006, Small Wonders
- Richmond Times-Dispatch, March 19, 2006, GMU States its Case With Upset
- Heraldson.com, March 20, 2006, A ‘Dream Come True’ for George Mason
- The Washington Post, March 21, 2006, Overnight Success, Instant Changes at George

Mason

- Kansas.com March 21, 2006, “Shockers Catch Nation’s Eye
- The Washington Post, March 22, 2006, Larranaga’s Time Has Arrived at Last
- Detnews.com, March 22, 2006, George Mason Earns Spotlight
- The Washington Times, March 24, 2006, GMU Savors Sweet Moment
- Kids Post, March 24, 2006, A New Order on the Court
- USA Today, March 27, 2006, Hit One for the Little Guy
- Stamfordadvocate.com March 27, 2006, The Glass Slipper Fits
- The Washington Post, March 28, 2006, GMU Bandwagon at Overflow Capacity
- The Washington Post, March 28, 2006, GMU: More Than a Winning Team.

- Arlington Catholic Herald, March 30, 2006, GMU's Patriots Coach Brings Faith to Court
- The Washington Post, March 30, 2006, Mason Magic Isn't Rocket Science
- The Wall Street Journal, March 30, 2006, Educational Slam Dunk?
- USA Today, March 31, 2006, Hype for George Mason, Marketers
- The Washington Post, March 31, 2006, Coach is No. 1 With Fans
- Sports Illustrated, March 31, 2006, Coming Out Party
- Fairfax Extra, April 6, 2006, The Fervor Perseveres
- Worldmag.com, April 7, 2006, The Shoe Fits at the Big Dance
- Sports Illustrated, April 13, 2006, Cinderella Story

Northern Illinois University

- Foxnews.Com, February 14, 2008, Former Student Guns Down 5 in Attack at Northern Illinois University
- Foxnews.com, February 14, 2008, Gunman Dead: More Than a Dozen Injured at Northern Illinois University
- Chicago Tribune, February 14, 2008, NIU Shooting Leaves 6 Dead
- MSNBC.com, February 14, 2008, Gunman Opens Fire On Illinois Campus
- Associated Press, February 15, 2008, 7 Dead in Northern Illinois University Hall Shooting
- Oregonian, February 15, 2008, Run, He's Reloading the Gun"
- National Public Radio, February 15, 2008, Illinois School Gunman Named; Toll Corrected
- Daily Chronicle, February 15, 2008, Forward, Together, Forward
- DeKalb Daily Chronicle, February 15, 2008, Gunman, Identified in NIU Shootings; 6 Dead
- ABC News, February 15, 2008, Gunman Planned Shooting for at Least 6 Days

- Northern Star, February 16, 2008, A Message from NIU President John Peters
- Northwest Herald, February 16, 2008, Killer was a ‘Quiet, Smarter Kid’
- Chicago Sun Times, February 16, 2008, Gunman ‘Somewhat Erratic’
- Sports Illustrated, February 16, 2008, NIU Shooting Victims to be Honored
- Billboard, February 19, 2008, Bon Jovi Tour Begins in Shadow of Shootings
- ABC7chicago.com, February 20, 2008, Students, Families Still Mourning NIU Losses
- Chicago Sun-Times, February 20, 2008, NIU Grad Recalls Shooter as Inquisitive, Smart, Nice
- CNN.com, February 20, 2008, Girlfriend: Shooter Was Taking Cocktail of 3 Drugs
- Daily Chronicle, February 22, 2008, Listening Together: NIU and the Community Share Moments of Silence
- [Fox.news.com](http://foxnews.com), February 26, 2008, Police: northern Illinois University Gunman Destroyed Evidence to Mislead Investigators
- Jackbloodforum.com, March 10, 2008, Northern Illinois University Massacre was Yet Another Covert Op
- Northern Star, March 27, 2008, Chicago Cubs to NU Throughout Season
- Pantgraph.com, April 16, 2008, Questions Linger at NIU in Wake of Shooting
- Esquire, July 16, 2008, Portrait of the School Shooter as a Young Man
- Chicago Tribune, December 21, 2010, NIU President Honored for Leadership After 2008 Campus Shooting

Appendix H

Interview Transcripts/Highlights from interviews with subjects from following institutions of higher learning: George Mason University, Northern Illinois University, Virginia Tech, West Virginia University, Binghamton University, and University of Memphis.

George Mason University Interviews

Sandra Scherrens, Vice President, University Life, (Nov 8, 2010)

Question: Describe the overall experience and the role you and your office played during Mason's Final Four run.

Answer: I think the fun thing about the Final Four was we were flying off the seat of our pants the whole time. Nobody expected us to even be there, but then we just kept winning. We just reacted as it went along. We just pulled a group together. After the second round, we finally got a set group of people to bring together each and every time the team advanced.

Question: How did you select the members of this select group?

Answer: It was really from all across campus. At this point we were the group that everyone looked to schedule the pep rallies and various activities. We just assumed that role. Nobody assigned it to us. We called upon every department around campus that made sense to be part of this effort

Question: As this situation was unfolding, how did you know what to do? How did you determine what your role would be? What did you draw from as a source of information?

Answer: We just knew what to do. Programming is our job so we drew from our experience. Working with students is what we do. Things in our area come up unexpectedly and we react. This was something of such an unusual magnitude. The Final Four became the thing to do. So

many people wanted to be part of it. It was the cool thing. That was an interesting dynamic. So then the challenge became finding things for everyone to do. I delegated a lot of the challenges in terms of keeping people informed. But I don't believe communication was all that much of a challenge because everyone was so involved that word spread so quickly. It was all over the place.

Question: Was one possible communication challenge trying to keep people organized?

Answer: Yes. People wanted to be part of the limelight. Take credit for things. There were some egos that needed to be dealt with, but this institution has such a collaborative spirit. Most people want to be team players. Their hearts are in the right place. Our area funded just about all the activities, It got really expensive, but the funding came from the university's central fund.

Question: If this happened again, would your communication goals and actions be carried out differently? How so?

Answer: Probably not. I have nothing but praise for the staff. How we have the structure I in place that we didn't have before. The structure, you might say, was created by the Final Four.

Question: Did you see the Final Four experience as a crisis or high-risk situation? And why or why not?

Answer: It was high risk in the sense that I was always nervous the crowd would take off in a different way. We had a couple of parades. Lots of celebration. I was concerned about the drinking. Vandalism. This sort of thing has happened to other schools. The risk of a potential disaster was always on my mind. But our students were so great. We did not have one disciplinary problem. Any time you bring a mass of people together, it can always go the other way. It can bring about major major problems. But how our students behaved says so much about them. I was so proud. In fact, we received a letter of praise from the mayor of Indianapolis that praised the behavior of our students. We worked closely with the police so we would be prepared

if something negative did happen. But the planning and timing of our events helped keep things positive. Plus, we kept students involved so they had a sense of ownership of all the activities. They wanted things to go well as much as we did.

Question: How did you measure the success of your efforts?

Answer: We didn't. We had no way to measure our success other than knowing that things went well and we received positive feedback.

Question: Did you see the Final Four experience as a high-reward situation regarding your area and to Mason? Discuss the potential rewards. Did your area and Mason obtain them?

Answer: The high reward was enormous. The whole experience created a great deal of camaraderie between students and the professional staff; a great deal of shared spirit and a lot of loyalty from both students and staff. After that, it became easier to involve students in various projects. The tangible benefits and the intangible ones were great and continue to be felt today. The pride in our school has continued.

Question: Did your handling of this high-risk/high-reward situation support Mason's overall strategic goals as outlined in the institution's vision statement? Did your area or the university obtain them?

Answer: We didn't expect the Final Four. It was after the Final Four that we shaped our vision and future planning around the results of this experience. But I feel we maximized our visibility, our presence and campus wide pride. I'm not sure we actually changed our vision, but we built on what we had achieved to enhance it.

Question: How would you assess your areas handling of this situation? Strengths and weaknesses? How did you measure this? And how about the overall university's handling of the experience?

Answer: Strengths? The bragging part of this revolves around my staff. They were great. They were always looking ahead. Always planning. Always strategizing. Always thinking of the student experience and how they can enhance that. They really are smart about programming. Nobody asked them to take the lead. They put their whole souls into it. The Final Four became their life as they took it very seriously. Their hearts were and are really in the right place. You have other people in other departments that have egos and want to credit for things. That's foreign to the people in university life. Any changes or weaknesses? Maybe some small things about logistics But overall – no. Part of the fun of this whole thing was the spontaneity of the whole experience. None of us had done this sort of thing before. That was part of the charm of it all. The fun part. I think that's why so many people from around the country responded to Mason the way they did.

Question: Do you consider this event to have been transformational regarding your area and the university?

Answer: Absolutely. If you look at pre-Final Four versus post-Final Four, then you'll see student engagement is at an all-time high right now. It really started to build after the Final Four experience. A pride among our students came out of the Final Four. People learned they can work well together. We just saw a whole different side of our students. A bond was created as a result of this. It's just hard to put into words. I still talk with students about it. It was magical and stays in your heart. University life puts emotion and feelings into things. They take hold of people. And that's what happened with the Final Four.

Christine Clark-Talley, Director, Alumni Relations (Nov. 11, 2010)

Question: Describe the overall Final Four experience and the role that you and your office played in it.

Answer: Things were coming at us right and left. It was very hectic. I've known for years the policy of turning over any media inquiries to media relations. I don't particularly enjoy being called out of the blue, talking with media and knowing I'm going to be quoted. So I knew on one level we were going to need to be working with other offices, particularly media relations. However, things were so fast and furious there really wasn't any way to check out everything, so I divided the calls into different categories. If a radio station, say, from Minnesota called asking about whether a graduate went to school here, then that was fine. But some things were actually set up media relations, such as more formal interviews. I generally set myself as the lead in this office in terms of talking with reporters. Things got forwarded to me and I could then decide what the next step should be. That was the media. But one of the other experiences I had was working with an internal group designed to build community, arrange activities, reach out to alumni, and build school spirit within the campus community. We had been meeting toward the end of the regular season. As the regular season came to an end, we already knew that our team going to the CAA (Colonial Athletic Association) tournament and there was a possibility of winning, so plans for the tournament were already in motion. The group was made up of excellent people from many offices throughout the university that are committed to community and helping build school spirit. They generated great ideas with an amazing can-do spirit. Once Mason was invited to the NCAA tournament, we came together to talk about that first game and what we might to generate support. Of course, our team kept winning. After that, the committee decided we should meet more regularly to plan our various scenarios. For instance, if we win, then we need to plan some type of pep rally for the next game. If we lose, then we need to do something else on behalf of the team. But we didn't know we were going to keep carrying on. Lots of folks were giving us ideas. In the meantime, we had to spend money, make plans, and help carry them out. Because we already had this group, we had this infrastructure in place before the team's regular season was

even over. This group is even still living today. The committee wasn't a result of the Final Four.

It was thankfully already in place before all that started. It gave us a great advantage to be able to capitalize on the incredible experience. And the pep rallies and welcome home parties and the eventually town parade were huge successes that came out of this extraordinary team effort.

Question: As the situation was unfolding, how did you know what to do? How did you determine what your role would be?

Answer: With that committee we were able to get things done though lots of people and offices were scrambling around. Information was constantly flowing to this group via email and regular meetings. We started making greater use of our web site than ever before. Our main goals were to inform and to engage people in the celebration. One thing we did not want to happen was to have people out there who were disengaged and uninformed about how to participate in any of the celebrations of the team's success. Externally, we found that many people made a lot of assumptions about George Mason that were wrong. I call it myth busting. We had the chance to talk about our size and scope and accomplishments in a way we never had been able to in the past. We got on a lot of folks' radar screens – including alumni. Our objective was to talk to our alumni but also to tell the general public about whom we are and what our strengths are. We really did get calls from people from all over the world. Building school pride is a huge part of building ties with various publics. As the tournament started I felt I knew what our main talking points were because of my years at Mason before 2006, so I don't remember getting any guidance from media relations. I don't remember getting my specific talking points. I knew there was a great deal of help from the way Coach Larranaga was talking about Mason beyond the efforts of the basketball team. We all knew that this experience was a great marketing opportunity for the university as a whole.

Question: Did you see the Final Four experience as a crisis or high-risk situation?

Answer: There were incredible risks just as there were incredible opportunities. We represented the institution so well. Being humble and well spoken while articulating our strengths left a strong positive impression. When you have the spotlight on you, you might not remember everything you are supposed to say and do. But everyone did well. We could have done something stupid: given out incorrect information, behaved badly, our players could have behaved in an improper way. Or our fans and students could have acted out at the games. With that spotlight on us we all had to especially good. And over and over again the Mason community projected a positive image. We did a lot of things right. I honestly think, since then, Mason has become more conservative in how it presents itself. We still love the upstart image and being seen as entrepreneurial. But once as created this image we didn't want to blow it. I think we are doing all we can to hang onto it. If there's any spotlight on George Mason, then we want to present our best side. Our kids were so gracious and the university itself handled everything very well. In terms of measurement, there have been several reports done measuring things like bookstore sales, publicity, ticket sales, and money raised. My office got a new position. The bookstore's sales increased, but then leveled off at a plateau higher than what it was before the Final Four. It's hard to measure the pride factor. But from my perspective, it has increased a great deal. It was the start of "Mason Nation." I call it the "t-shirt effect." People had to buy one so they could wear it and be more closely associated with Mason. People even started putting up their diplomas on their office walls. And the conversations began. People would say, "I didn't know you worked at or went to or graduated from Mason!" The most fun thing was the some people who had been basketball fans for years got out their old ratty t-shirts and began wearing them to show they'd been in the team's corner before the Final Four. The old t-shirt effect. Externally, it shined a lot of light on us and internally it was a great source of pride.

Question: Did your handling of this high-risk/high reward situation support Mason's overall strategic goals as outlined in the university's overall vision statement?

Answer: After the tournament, a committee was formed by the president: a legacy committee. On it were a lot of chiefs and few Indians. Its challenge was to determine how we were going to capitalize on this fame. A lot of ideas were tossed around. The committee itself was a great idea. But because of the way the committee was structured – so many chiefs – getting things done actually didn't happen. The committee met a few times and then just stopped. Now, four years later I think we missed some good opportunities. We did a little bit but we ended up getting distracted as life returned to normal and other priorities came up. We had a corner to turn as a result of the Final Four and I'm not sure we did completely.

Question: Do you consider this event to be transformational regarding your area and Mason?

Answer: It's still a critical part of who we are now. But it was absolutely a transformational event. A milestone. Something extraordinary will need to happen to trump it. This is especially true of the alumni office. Alumni feel more connected to us than ever before. What we accomplished in that short period of time would probably take our office another twenty years to achieve. We didn't go into this thinking knowing that we were going to go as we did. But we found that sports can be so unifying. It was and is a very important connection.

Peter Stearns, Provost (Nov. 12, 2010)

Question: Describe the overall Final Four experience and the role that you and your office played in it. What are your recollections?

Answer: First of all, it was a lot of fun. While it was happening I couldn't personally go to Indianapolis for the games. I had to do some traveling to different parts of the country, so I wasn't able to personally enjoy the activities as much as I would have liked. I feel bad about that. But it good seeing so many different kinds of students excited and wearing various Mason gear and

colors. This was a community building exercise that was very timely for us and that has had some good after effects. Obviously, the coach outdid himself in terms of representing the university. He made it clear that we were an academic institution that happened to have a good basketball team. He did a terrific job. He helped himself a lot. And he helped the university a lot. I thought it was interesting and slightly off-putting that in some publicity one student was quoted as saying for the first time they felt like they were at a real university. That didn't sit well with me. But overall we did maintain a proper set of values as an institution and didn't convey too much over-emphasis on sports. I thought the balance we struck was handled pretty well. The Final Four did help our national and even international name recognition. In a way, you have to say you don't know why it's sports that do this as opposed to other contributions. But facts are facts. We still get comments from colleagues around the world about the Final Four. We are a university trying to move up and getting name recognition is very salutary. I think in the immediate aftermath there was probably a slight tendency on the part of some people to exaggerate just how important this was. It's turned out not to have done a lot for financial contributions to the university. I wish it had, but my impression was that was an opportunity where we would have expected positive results and we haven't had any. I don't mean any, but no break-through. You would have thought we would have at least seen an uptick in contributions to the athletic program but we haven't seen any. That was disappointing. In terms of the exaggerated expectations, we did have an uptick in terms of admissions applications and that, I gather, is pretty standard for a school breaking into this kind of level for the first time. But because we got over excited about the experience, we thought we would have a certain yield rate of new students the next year. Ironically, we had a smaller freshman class the next year. But when you think about kids that apply to college based on the success of the school's basketball team, these are not necessarily students you would want. They reacted to the heat of the moment. So, it clearly did not transform our admissions process.

But we have continued to grow in terms of out-of-state students. It was terrific fun at the time. We had some good community consequences at the time, some of which we have been able to build on but it was not a transformational event. It wasn't. My final area of concern is I worry we're going to refer to the Final Four too often. It's not what we want to be known for now. We're still doing that a little too much.

Question: As the Final Four unfolded, please talk about the role of your office.

Answer: I wasn't very involved and there was no reason for me to be. Some proposals came up about canceling classes. We didn't do that, which was the right decision. But there was no big fight about it. The immediate stuff didn't have any academic consequences so I wasn't directly involved.

Question: Did you get many complaints from faculty about students missing or skipping classes?

Answer: No. I don't recall that. Of course, the coach set a good tone when the team lost and he said the students now had to get back to class. He helped.

Question: If this were to happen again, would you change your actions in any way?

Answer: No, I don't think my role would be any different if it were to happen again. If anything, I would probably need to make a greater effort to help keep things in perspective so we don't get over excited about whether this is going to have consequences beyond its length. I would urge people to take it a little more in stride and not to pretend this is a dramatic change in the university's standing when it wasn't. If we were to have this type of success again, then we would take the position that we are delighted and happy but otherwise it's pretty much business as usual. Don't get me wrong. I would love to have it happen again. It is fun. But it is not what we are all about. We would just to be clearer on that the next time.

Question: Did you see the Final Four experience as a high-risk situation? If so, what were the risks?

Answer: The only potential risk is student misbehavior. We had none of that. We expected student leaders to help make clear the difference between giddiness and destructive behavior. And our students were well behaved. I don't see any risks to our academic mission. Out of the Final Four came some increased investment on the university's part in men's basketball. Some faculty complained about that but if we had continued down that path then I would be worried. I don't think it's clearly out of balance at the present.

Question: How about the potential for high-reward? Can you talk a bit more about that?

Answer: Visibility was a high reward. One thing that didn't happen that I would have welcomed was getting local stores to display and sell our items. That did not actually happen. We still have stores right here in our neighborhood selling stuff from other universities but not anything related to Mason. That would have been healthy.

Question: Can you connect the dot between our handling of the Final Four experience with the university's overall strategic vision regarding our academics?

Answer: The coach himself did a good job. He helped. We did a little bit but nothing too elaborate. I don't think we had to do that to maintain our efforts. We do have a sense of a strategic plan. In the aftermath, we ended up mentioning the Final Four a bit too much. Perhaps it was inevitable but I don't think it was all that harmful. We just didn't quite maintain a proper perspective but that's from an academic stand point. I remember using the opportunity to try and correct some of the images of the university such as our being a commuter school and perhaps we didn't do that as well as we should have. And that's the challenge.

Question: Can you share some more of your thoughts on the fact you feel the Final Four was not a transformative event at Mason?

Answer: If you look at specific areas on campus, then it is possible individuals areas might consider this to be transformational. But overall I do not believe it transformed the university.

Clearly the success has helped the coach recruit players but in terms of other areas I don't believe it was.

George Ginovsky, Major, University Police, (Nov., 15, 2010)

Question: Describe the overall Final Four experience and the role that your office and department played in it.

Answer: I had been involved with the University of Maryland's Final Four experience and the memories from that were not so good because of the riots that followed. Here in the police department, we had trained and prepared for the possibility for some type of riot taking place on campus at Mason or in the city of Fairfax. Frankly, we did not think it was very likely because of the nature of our campus with most of the students being commuter and having a large off campus colony. But we were prepared along with the city police. What happened was a genuine celebration. There was a fireworks display after Mason won the right to compete in the Final Four. The team came back to campus. We were not in riot gear but we were ready. People were just happy. There was no celebratory vandalism. Anything that did happen was minor. Our perimeter road around campus was backed up with traffic. People would lean out of their cars and yell. And that was how it was. It was really wonderful. The city police reported the same thing. People would step outside the bars and make some noise – yelled and cheered – and then go back inside and finally they went home. Also, the good memories came from the run-up to the Final Four. I really appreciated the way the university included us in the planning of their events. Going up to the Final Four, the planning was not all enforcement. Mainly, they were asking for police support. It was a very positive experience for us. Our orientation to events like this is to help make the event a success. A big part of that is enforcing the law and making sure people are safe from a public safety and public standpoint. But unless it becomes a really extreme situation, the story is about the team and the university and not about a lot of people getting arrested or bad

things happening. In the end, it turned out to be just that – entirely about the Cinderella aspect of Mason's success. At the University of Maryland, there was a strong negative aspect of their overall story.

Question: The police were on call throughout the whole process. You had to deal with the fact that any aspect or event could set off a chain reaction of negative and destructive activity.

Answer: We were on full alert. Full staffing. We were prepared for a rapid reinforcement if we were needed. Fortunately, we weren't.

Question: How did you know what to do?

Answer: The possibility of serious rioting was not seen as being very high. We were prepared for that contingency but did not see it as a probability. So, we were self contained in our training.

Question: I'm guessing you recognized the basketball team's success as a potential danger. Is this true?

Answer: Yes. Perhaps simply because I was a veteran of this sort of thing at the University of Maryland, I felt it was important we be ready. If you don't have a plan or you don't have resources in place, then you're playing catch-up. Things can get disorganized. People can get hurt. It's vital that you have the proper training and leadership. Things can quickly spin out of control.

Question: As this was evolving, what kind of communication plan did you have in-place?

Answer: Looking back, we had almost no communication going with the students. I don't think we should have either. If we had, then a story may have come out that the police were warning students about rioting. But there was a lot of communication between us and the stakeholders involved: the athletic department, alumni affairs, university life, etc. We kicked around a lot of situations and talked about what might be coming up. We were doing liaison work with the local police and fire departments as well.

Question: Talk about the high-reward aspects of this situation.

Answer: It was very good that things worked out the way they did. It was not our intent to write lots of tickets or make lots of arrests. Our goal for the whole experience was to be prepared. Win or lose, the potential was there that a riot would break out. The reward for the police is that we did not become part of the story or even a small part of it. We were safety-oriented as opposed to enforcement-oriented by design. It turned out to be win-win for us. We went into it of a mind not to do anything that would reflect badly on the team, the students and the university; not do anything that would do harm to Mason's reputation.

Question: That would be the ideal goal? Would you make any changes or adjustments if you had to do it over?

Answer: When we cover high profile events our goal is to be in the background. We work to and achieve that. We had a lot of cooperation. But our goal is to not be noticed. Looking back, there may have been a few things we might tweak, but I don't think we would make any changes.

There's no big thing that we would do differently.

Question: Would you characterize this as a transformational event from your perspective?

Answer: No. I don't think so. We had been through a couple of earlier events such as Mason Day where we did have problems that we had to address. We had to arrest students and make sure some were taken to the hospital. But that wasn't the case with the Final Four.

Question: Looking back at your plan, how would you relate it – if at all – to the university's overall strategic plan?

Answer: I don't think the wording between our plan and the university's overall strategic plan was related, but we did have a realization that we did not want to be part of the story. We did not want to ruin a good thing, but could possibly do that – give the university a black eye in the media – if we overreacted in some way. Our planning for Mason's final night in the tournament,

for instance, was to be ready but not in an overt way. We had riot gear to put on if needed, but even with the loss it was a celebratory event. We did not want to take away from the cache of this positive experience. Our plan was to do what was necessary to enforce the law but hopefully not in a way that detracted from the celebration. Fortunately, this is how it turned out.

Andrew Flagel, Dean of Admissions, (Nov. 17, 2010)

Question: Describe the overall experience of the Final Four and the role that you and your office played in it.

Answer: It's interesting because I talk about the Final Four – even now – in a lot of venues. It's often with a mixed set of emotions. It was one of the coolest things I've ever participated in but I'm not sure I'd ever want to do it again. In the particular way we did it, it was so encompassing and so draining because it went on and on. At the time, we were so ill-equipped, yet we were able to do a lot during that time with really mixed success because of our structure.

Question: What were some of the demands placed upon your office?

Answer: You know, in terms of demands: none. The institution didn't ask us to do anything. Everything we did was entirely independent or as a result of asking permission to do stuff. But we weren't asked to do a thing. There wasn't a single request of us to try and leverage the impact of what our participation in the NCAA tournament would be.

Question: As the team's success evolved, I'm guessing your awareness of the potential impact on the university must have evolved as well

Answer: Right. There were kind of three parts to it: What should we be doing to leverage this exposure? What's the impact of this exposure going to be on the upcoming fall class? What's the longer term impact going to be on our marketing for future enrollment? On the leveraging opportunity, let me back up a bit and say when we had prior opportunities we did not do an effective enough job in leveraging them. Mason had been in the NCAA tournament before even

though we had been eliminated in the first or early rounds. But in student outreach, we really hadn't made much of that even though they brought us nice exposure. So, one of the things I had argued with folks here about was bringing bus loads of students to our tournament games and trying to establish a stronger Mason presence. But in 2006, when we broke into the Sweet Sixteen, immediately I realized this changed everything. It created a frenzy we had not seen before. In some ways it created a kind of Keystone Kops routine. But at the same time it was such a gift, especially when the games shifted to D.C. A few years before in the admissions office we had adopted a leveraging plan. I had been at other institutions that had gained national exposure as a result of the successes of their athletic teams and seen up close how those admissions offices had reacted. When I came to Mason, I wrote a ten to fifteen point plan that tried to outline specific steps we should take if the university achieved something spectacular like find a cure for cancer or even win a Nobel Prize – all situations that would generate major exposure and interest. These steps included buying one hundred thousand names of students to try and reach out to, do a massive mailing, or quickly build a website. When Mason actually reached the Sweet Sixteen, our office kicked into gear. We had a plan. We took some of those steps, including putting together interactive videos and organizing a phone calling night to potential students. Everything we could do we did to reach out to targeted populations and maximize the exposure our team was generating to garner a positive response rate. At the same time, there was this totally unexpected directly to the exposure about the university; totally inaccurate depictions of the institution. On a positive note, Coach Larranaga was great. No admission dean could love a coach more. Every time he was on camera he talked about the university and not so much about the team. I remember having dinner with the coach and his wife before the first big tournament game and we talked about the major points the admissions office was trying to drive home. The next day when he started doing press interviews, the Coach mentioned everyone one of those points. It was great.

But at the same time, you had announcers over and over again referring to Mason as a small, private, rural, commuter college. None of those things, of course, was true about us. They made us sound as if we were a small sports school located in the middle of nowhere. And we were never able to overcome that misinformation. Knowing what I know now, everything we would have done as the team progressed would have addressed those misstatements. Even mocked them. Instead, we tried to get information out to the media but it didn't work. So, even leading up to the Final Four we were trying to deal with this misinformation. We had twenty-two per cent more applications – a massive outreach effort – after the tournament but our yield rate – the number of students who accepted our offer for admission – was low. This was despite the fact the university had been on an upward trajectory in new students and was doing so well in the NCAA tournament. We had a surge of interest from students all over the country. They visited us but at least what some found was a university different from how the announcers had been describing us. How we really were was not what they expected or were looking for. There was a real disconnect. So, the overall strategy of admissions worked in terms of getting the applicants but did not work as well when it came to enrollment. Even with the Final Four, we did not make as much progress as we might have. The incoming freshmen class in 2007 – the year after the Final Four – turned out to be one of our smallest in a decade, although other factors, particularly the Virginia Tech incident, also contributed to that enrollment. At the same time, we maintained our trajectory on profile, so while smaller than 2005 and 2006, it was still the most competitive class in Mason's history to that point.

Question: In the time you have been at Mason as the head of the admissions office, the university has, in fact, won the Nobel Prize. Can you compare the reaction to that to what happened as a result of the Final Four?

Answer: The Nobel Prize brought us very little media exposure. We got some hay out of it, but there wasn't much television. Compared to a sporting event, our office did not do anything like we did for the Final Four situation because the exposure wasn't there. The Nobel, of course, added substance to our institution and greatly enhanced its academic reputation, but its impact was totally different in terms of exposure. The name recognition Mason received after the Final Four generated a tremendous amount of interest in us from potential students. As a result, I describe it as an enormous accelerant to our trajectory that was already underway.

Question: Looking back, it sounds as if no one in the administration sat down with you and admissions and said, in essence, this is what you should do.

Answer: That's right. No one even asked. Actually, we went in and requested permission for funding to enable us to do things. The administration supported us,. Mason was very nimble. I think my office was the only one that came in with funding requests at that level to take specific steps to take advantage of the exposure we were receiving. There did not seem to be that sense of urgency until several days into the cycle when the news frenzy was underway. For admissions, however, we had deadlines to meet because potential students had to get their applications in not too far after the NCAA tournament would be over. The admissions office is constantly working on a cycle. Our office had a plan. I spent eighty-thousand dollars in two weeks, but we made it back in future classes. But maybe the university could have spent a half million dollars in that same time period and unlocked donations and support and gotten out ahead of the story. But we just weren't structurally prepared the way we are today as an institution – several key offices were in the midst of restructuring. In terms of admissions, however, I don't think anyone on the team slept the whole time because we were constantly working. Perhaps if Mason had had a "how do you respond to opportunity" plan in place, then we could have leveraged the Final Four much more than we did. I do not see this as a failing on any individual's part. It speaks to the structure

we had at the time. At other universities I had been to, I had seen schools get this same kind of exposure and not take advantage of it. This led to my decision that we in admissions needed to be prepared if a similar opportunity came Mason's way. I'm not sure there were many folks at Mason who had seen what a frenzy the Sweet Sixteen or Final Four could generate. In terms of exposure, the Final Four was off the charts. It was amazing.

Question: What were the risks that came with the Final Four?

Answer: One of the things I kept saying that I'm not sure people appreciated was that we had to do everything we could to leverage the exposure that came when the team reached the Sweet Sixteen because that doesn't come along very often. When we hit the Final Four, it became even more so, but only when you win and that was by taking advantage of the team's success as it happened. After the tournament was over, there was a lot of discussion as to what we could do to leverage the exposure. But once the dust had settled, there wasn't a whole lot that could be done. It's over. You try to leverage the exposure while it's happening or in the days immediately after it's happened. Four months later you are irrelevant. Sure you are referred to, but the idea you can leverage that a year after the fact is unlikely. The other risk comes when you are trying to move really fast to keep up with what is going on and you become careless about what you are communicating. For instance, you could either mispend money or do something really stupid and send out incorrect information and make dumb errors such as misspellings or grammatical errors in your messages. I was in real fear that something like that would happen. I am sure I drove my staff crazy about making sure that everything we did was double checked and reviewed. We had to be perfect. But we had to be fast. The focus on Mason was so great that we could not afford to send out anything inappropriate. I felt we had to be as good and dedicated as the players themselves. While we did not necessarily have the infrastructure in-place at the time, I must say

people across the entire university were very responsive and supportive. Our office tried to be equally supportive and available.

Question: During this situation, I'm sure you had to keep your sights on the university's overall mission and efforts to achieve that as much as you do when things are more quiet and routine.

Answer: Mason is extremely decentralized as much of our mission derives out of the efforts of the various academic units. When I came here, I was told we wanted to maintain our diversity, have a higher profile, recruit more out-of-state students, and increase enrollment. In the midst of the Final Four, I don't think our efforts were terribly different than they were when I first arrived. Interestingly, I think we have been able to do all of those things pretty consistently. So, was there a particular vision regarding being a regional or national institution? I'm not sure that factored into our particular response to the Final Four.

Question: Was the Final Four a transformational event from an admissions perspective?

Answer: I would not call it transformational. I find that term difficult. But I do see the Final Four as being a tremendous accelerant. We had already been through a great deal of change when I arrived and our enrollment and recruitment was already on an upward trajectory. But did it alter that change or that trajectory? Clearly it did in the basketball program. But I'm not sure it changed where we would have been here in 2010 in any way had it not happened. The administrative teams, staffs and professionals that we had at the time this came along were already in-place. The senior officers at Mason haven't changed since the Final Four. What's exciting is that this team has remained in-place and is working to build on what happened.

Christine LaPaille, Vice President, University Relations (Nov. 19, 2010)

Question: In general, describe the overall Final Four experience and the role that you and your office played in it.

Answer: Early on I felt it was like a crisis. I was totally unprepared for the unbelievable flood of media attention. I was new to the university – been here less than a year – and did not expect the national and even international media attention that a Final Four experience would generate. The media calls. People coming to campus. Our phone system crashing. All the things that happen during a crisis were happening with this situation. Right off the bat I figured I needed to implement some crisis management techniques that I knew from past work. This felt as intense as anything in public relations I had ever experienced. It was all good and it was all happy but the need to communicate accurately and in a timely way was just as important as anything you would normally associate with during a crisis. Also, it was like a God-given opportunity to tell our story. When I went through my interview process for my position here, people kept telling me what a great place this is and what a great story we have to tell, but no one knows it. I kept thinking what a great PR opportunity there was at Mason. Then, the basketball team went to the NCAA tournament and started to win. The first stories coming out of the games were about some small liberal arts college from a sleepy little town. I remember thinking: “This is terrible. If everyone says this about us, then we’re in trouble because this is not our story and not who we are.” I felt we had to implement tactics to pump out the correct information. Tell our story.

Question: Did anyone sit down with you and give you instructions as to what university relations needed to do?

Answer: No. It was all just shooting from the hip but based on my previous experience in dealing with crises. We were all expected to know what to do. Like in a crisis, people had to pitch in and do what was necessary. I remember giving out assignments to everyone to deal with what we were facing. It just evolved organically.

Question: Talk a bit more about trying to deal with the misinformation that was being reported about Mason.

Answer: We had a number of tactics. We prepared specific messages about the university. I know I did a one-pager – a fact sheet. We put together a data base on whom and what were writing about us. It wasn't just sports reporters but news and feature writers as well. They were producing all kinds of Cinderella-type stories that went far beyond the sports page. I had standing orders whenever a reporter wrote about us to send that person materials about the university to make sure they had accurate information about us. There was no way for me to anticipate who was going to be writing about us – other than the sports writers – so we had to be ready. I'd say we were proactive in a reactive way. I trained Coach Larranaga and the basketball team on the right messages, sending them information and talking points as they were heading out to Michigan and to other locations. I said, "You guys need to be able to talk about the university and not just about the games."

Question: You identified the coach as one of Mason's primary spokespeople"

Answer: Yes. And the president was one, too. This is similar to a crisis where you identify a primary point person or two. The president, of course, was over the moon. He was thrilled. But I decided when the team to Indianapolis that we was going to be the main person. That was going to be his job. I set him up on radio shows, television talk shows, with newspapers and with other outlets. We were the only school there that was utilizing its president that way. No one knew George Mason University at that time so it was a perfect opportunity to take advantage of the team's success and implement our strategic goal and use the president to help us do that; not to just talk about sports but the overall university and its academic strengths.

Question: Who were your publics?

Answer: I was looking at the whole nation. In my mind, I saw this as a way of generating national attention. It was clear that people beyond sports fans were captivated by us. We were the

underdog. I felt out alumni were also an important targeted audience, too. Give them a sense of pride. Help them become more engaged.

Question: Did you work closely with other key areas at the university such as alumni and development to reach out to specific audiences?

Answer: We did work closely with alumni to help organize all those watch-parties around the country. The alumni office did it but the idea itself came out of a big committee that was created by the university as the team started becoming more and more successful and interest in us grew. We met almost daily. We would brainstorm visibility ideas. I tried to get media coverage for those parties as another way of generating interest in Mason.

Question: Was there any conversation about other publics such as legislators?

Answer: Not that I recall. I believe Dr. Merten took care of that group. I know when we went to the final games there was a lot conversation about legislators or other special guests and who would be invited to travel with us.

Question: If you had the Final Four to do over again, what kind of changes would you make?

Answer: I would definitely formalize the outreach process. If we do this sort of thing again, I would have at the ready interesting fact sheets to send out. It would be an amazing opportunity to tell our transformational story which is one of four strategic goals right now. But I would be prepared. Back then, we were producing materials on the fly. I know I would be prepared to tell the story I want to tell in the context of a basketball team that is generating a lot of attention.

Question: Many of the individuals who were so key to Mason in 2006 – the president, the coach, key administrators – all are still here. There have been no changes in that regard. I'm guessing you might want to utilize them in a similar way.

Answer: Yeah. Only this time we would be more experienced. Our going to the tournament again would enable us to say we weren't such a flash in the pan. Our team's success was a natural

outcome of the hard work of the coach in carrying out his vision and the players themselves. This is a story we would work to tout. Looking back, it was not such a magical happening but rather the result of planning and hard work. The same holds true for the university itself. We would work hard to tell this story. Promote the program itself.

Question: Was there any kind of debate between promoting the team versus Mason as a vibrant academic institution that happens to have a strong team?

Answer: Coach Larranga took care of that for us. In one of his early interviews he began using the phrase from Aristotle, I believe, “habit of excellence.” He applied that not just to the team but to George Mason University as well. I read that in a newspaper and thought, “Bingo. That is so perfect.” We then created the “habit of excellence” tag line. Put it on ads, on stationary, most everywhere. We turned what he said into a mini-campaign. More internal than external. A campaign building pride. Some people today are still using it. In fact, we may keep it as part of our internal brand. I understand a successful sports team is a doorway into the overall institution. That’s why universities all want successful teams. It enables them to showcase their entire institution and their strongest academic programs. I do think some faculty may have gotten tired of hearing all about the Final Four but no one said to stop. And the fans in the stands kept cheering and coming out.

Question: Was this a high-risk situation? What kept you up at night during this whole experience?

Answer: I’m not sure if we ever truly overcame that misinformation that was being reported about us. The press loved the notion of the tiny, mediocre university coming out of nowhere to compete against these giants. They never really let go of that. To actually report us as an academic powerhouse, a university that had been to the NCAA several times before, a university that was quite large, and located at the doorstep of the nation’s capital went against their national conversation. We did our best to counter it, but we were playing defense. And just like in a crisis

you are often playing defense. Not offense. So, in a crisis communication plan, we all have to determine how you react when something happens, it is hard to get out in front of the situation. We never really got out ahead of it. That's why if we were in this same situation now, we would be ready and take steps to get out ahead of the story. Be proactive.

Question: Any other risks that you recognized in this non-stop frenzy that went on?

Answer: I did not know the university all that well and remember feeling not as comfortable with the facts and university story as I would have liked. I remember being nervous about that. And because I was still new, I had not worked all that closely with many people here before. The risk of the athletic folks not liking being ordered around by someone in the administration was something I had to deal with. I understood that. I had to build bridges with them after it was over. It was nothing serious. But at the time I felt they and we were not as prepared as we needed to be. I worked hard to try and organize them so we could be more visible and better promote the university. To the media, I was the point person as to where our mascot was, for instance. Where were the cheerleaders? I didn't know. But I had to get our people to get them to certain media events and opportunities often right away. To me, there was a personal risk that I had to work through and then deal with when it was over. But it needed to be done. Someone had to be in-charge of this piece of the media situation. The people in athletics, of course, were working so hard and were so swamped in carrying out their own responsibilities. But there were other aspects that had to be dealt with and that a person had to oversee. That was me. If this happened again, then all of us would meet before hand and plan things out better. We would work together to help address the misinformation.

Question: It may seem obvious, but talk a bit about the high reward aspect of this experience.

Answer: There was a huge reward for the university. Before, if we called the Los Angeles Times about a possible story on Mason, they probably would not pick up the phone. But as a result of

the Final Four, they would definitely hear us out and be more open to working with us. It's a simple thing, but those games made a real impact. The reward for the university, particularly from a public relations perspective, was invaluable. To me, personally, I received a lot of credit – some of it not deserved – for what I was doing. But it helped me establish credibility with much of the internal university when they saw someone swing into action. Now, if a crisis did occur again, I am so confident in my ability to deal with it and work closely with my colleagues here. They would see there is a professional science that goes with crisis management that I know. For me personally, it was really a great experience. I recognize it was just circumstances, But I had to handle it. The professionalism was there in dealing with how the media was reacting and what needed to be done to keep up with them.

Question: Was there any connection between dealing with this situation and Mason's overall strategic plan and its institutional vision or mission?

Answer: We created interesting and clever promotional materials triggered by the Final Four. These were strategic steps. One important result of the Final Four experience was a major advertising campaign. When I came here I developed a plan to build a strong media campaign and then put together a comprehensive advertising plan to support the media efforts. When the Final Four was over I asked for money to build an advertising campaign. I made several presentations before the budget committee on how we needed to take advantage of the Final Four and our Cinderella image. I was given seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars for advertising. With that money we highlighted the university's newfound fame and started highlighting much of the research being conducted by our faculty. We probably never would have gotten that kind of money without the Final Four. But it was part of my plan before the team's great success. It was part of building the university's reputation. Even a horrible event such as what happened at

Virginia Tech gives you a chance to promote your brand and the strengths of your institution; things that you are proud of. They did that.

Question: From your perspective in university relations and then from an institutional perspective, do you see the Final Four as being transformational?

Answer: Definitely. It was for the university. It was the beginning of what has become a vibrant campus life. For university relations, it raised our visibility internally. They saw for the first time what it means to deal with the media and in a really aggressive way. I was able to show them what having a good team can do. We were given more money and were able to increase the size of the staff. I got support every step of the way. It was amazing. This would have happened but not to the extent it did and not as quickly.

Maurice Scherrens, Senior Vice President, (Nov. 22, 2010)

Question: Describe the overall Final Four experience and the role you and your office played in it.

Answer: The Final Four was in no way expected or anticipated. Any one saying this was something we were planning for or expected would be less than accurate. What happened is we were invited to play in the NCAA tournament. That was unique to us because it's not something that we did every year. We had been in it a few times before and never won a game. So, this time there was a fair amount of excitement from the students and staff. When we went to Dayton, we had our first game. For most people, to win that first game would have been beyond our capacity. The important thing is George Mason was already established in terms of the role of athletics within the overall institution. Athletics is not a program or activity that is given a position of stature that exceeds anything else at the university. It helps facilitate the university in terms of helping us reach our overall goals. There was one incident near the end of our regular season – just before the tournament began – in which one of our star players had behaved in an

inappropriate way. We had no second thoughts or hesitation to suspend him from play for one game. That one game was the first game of the tournament for us. But at the time, making that decision could have affected our even being invited to participate in the NCAA tournament. That could have been one of the repercussions because this involved one of our best players. Our decision to do that established Mason as an institution grounded in the philosophy of maintaining a responsible balance between the relationship of athletics and academics. Our invitation to participate in the tournament was exciting for all of us, of course. But the performance and success of the team and the way the players conducted themselves throughout the whole experience reflected well-balanced students and a well-balanced institution. The players came across as students first and athletics second. It doesn't mean we don't have our issues – all programs do – but the students were great. And our coach came across as an ordinary guy – a great coach – who was well-grounded as well. We came across as being consistent with our strategic plan. Athletics is not the be-all when it comes to our institution. I loved the fact that we were depicted in the media as being an institution that spent about one-fourth of what other institutions spend on their teams and athletic programs. Because of that balance, I think there was such great support from the faculty. They knew we were the underdogs yet here we were competing.

Question: When Mason won that first game – big surprise – how did you know what role your office should be playing in this situation? What kind of conversations happened at the top levels of the administration?

Answer: The one thing we planned was to try and take the visibility the program was giving us and leverage it in a way to build our institutional reputation. University relations played a key role in that, of course. But other than that, I'm not sure we did anything extraordinary. Our coach talked about the team but also about the institution. Our students talked about the university and

their own programs and how strong their teachers were. And this led the faculty to talk about how proud they were of the students. It's like there was no big debate over "Ok. How are we going to act now?" The conversations we ended up having when the run ended revolved around our agreeing that we were not going to make any changes in who we are or start pouring millions of dollars into our athletic program. We enjoyed the ride. But we wanted to make sure we were going to stay on the right track. In a sense, we were unmarked before the tournament. We came out of that as a marked opponent. We could no longer sneak up on someone. I give credit to the athletic department and to the president. The fact we had been to the Final Four was not going to change who we are over something that can't be that successful on a regular basis.

Question: Can you talk more about the overriding challenges you and your office faced?

Answer: The people who deserve all of the credit as far as I'm concerned are those in the athletic department. They are the ones that had to figure out the logistics of everything. Everyone wanted to talk with the team and so many people wanted to attend the games and get tickets. Everything was short term and so fast moving; not just getting the team where it needed to be but supporters as well. These challenges were new to us yet people knew what to do. They were energized by the positivity of the situation.

Question: This must have generated expenses the university did not anticipate. I'm guessing that must have created some important challenges.

Answer: Sure it did. But what happens when something like this occurs is for us to make it clear to staff that our job is to facilitate this. To make it happen. The budget office and finance people in athletics were going to help make funds available but be reasonable about it. We knew we would eventually be reimbursed by the NCAA or the income generated by our involvement in the tournament. The key was to make decisions on a game-by-game basis. We knew if we came up with a reasonable approach, then we would find the funds.

Question: Could this be likened to a heavy snow storm? Obviously, it must be dealt with and obviously the university must be able to carry on. At the same time, doing that requires switching around funds you may not have anticipated allocating.

Answer: Absolutely. Whether it's a snow storm or a final four or the president of the United States coming to campus. This is what you have institutional reserves for. They help you facilitate the unexpected so you can get through them alright. You figure out the best way to deal with a situation and in a way that is most reasonable. The president got real involved in this process. But the president had people who were used to dealing with challenging logistics and they pulled it off really well.

Question: Was this a high-risk situation? If so, what were the risks?

Answer: We did not close school. That would have been the wrong thing to do and send the wrong message. We were certainly asked to. So what we did was make sure people had access to television. Closing school would have been inconsistent with our core. This was a great run for us, of course, so we made the resources available to give people access. For me, the biggest risk for us would have been losing focus. I believe we did not do that. I believe we took advantage of our higher visibility due, in large part, to the Final Four. Look at the athletic department's budget since then and you'll see it has not changed in any way disproportionate to the rest of the university. On the flip side, it would have been a lost opportunity if we had not leveraged the opportunity that was made available to us by the Final Four. As you know, we increased our marketing and our public relations. Not doing that would have been a risk. The result is we have much better students than ever before and we are operating at a higher profile.

Question: What kind of feedback – formal and informal – did you receive after it was all over in terms of the university's handling of this exciting event? Any second guessing?

Answer: What was nice was that we were up for an ESPY after that. We did not win but that was a nice recognition for us. Now when there are various sports events and an upset occurs, people often liken it to George Mason's Final Four appearance. That sort of thing keeps the moment alive. And that's special. Probably the only thing we have proven the critics right about is that we made it then but this was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. We won't be coming back. Critics say don't look for Mason to be coming back. Our dream came true in 2006. It would be nice to come back. But it's not a big downside that we haven't. There are some things that happen only once.

Question: Would you characterize the Final Four experience as being a transformational event?

Answer: There's no other PR that could have taken us and made such a quantum leap for us than that Final Four run. Athletics is something that gets your name in front of the public quicker than anything else. Our brand name and recognition went up dramatically. It allows you to bring in better students. Better faculty. Our expectations are higher. The acceptance of George Mason University's graduating students is higher. People are prouder of us. In that sense, it was transformational. But we stayed true to ourselves. Many things for us were already in motion before the NCAA tournament. This helped embellish our reputation. However, transformational, I might pause on that. But when it comes to reputation and brand name recognition – absolutely.

Alan Merten, President, (Nov. 29, 2010)

Question: Describe the overall Final Four experience and, if you would, please share some of your reflections on it.

Answer: My primary reflection of it was that was fun. And I wanted to make sure it was fun for others. I wanted to take advantage of it both for personal enjoyment and for institutional benefit. I remember the great pride I had in the coach and his staff and the young men in the basketball program. And then there was the pride I felt in what others were feeling and experiencing. And, lastly, I remember how grateful I was in the fact we had a good story to tell. I have talked with

other university presidents about how with that much media attention it is vital to have a good story to tell about your institution. If you don't have a good story to tell, then the media may tell not-to-good stories about you.

Question: How did you know what to do as the president of Mason during this time?

Answer: I, of course, had never experienced this sort of thing before. But I think what happened with me is this turned out be an extension of what I feel has been my style as president. As president, it is important to be visible and important to promote the university. What happened at that time was this was an extension of being with more groups and to do more than that. I had an opportunity to promote our entire package: our academics, our basketball team and the many people who are part of it.

Question: Did any high-level strategy sessions occur in terms of dealing with the Final Four experience as sit was unfolding?

Answer: There were groups we established designed to leverage the attention we were receiving. Were we doing all we could to leverage this kind of intense interest in us? Are we taking advantage of the fact people are interested in learning about us?

Question: Did Mason?

Answer: It's the gift that keeps on giving. Here we are nearly five years later and it's still a topic of conversation among groups directly connected to us and even not directly tied to us. The other day I was at an event in South Carolina and a person approached me, "Are you the president of George Mason University?" He approached because of the team's success years before. In sports, whenever there's an underdog, the question arises: "Are they the George Mason University of this particular sport?" We have become branded in that sense. So, did we take as much advantage of it as we could have? I can't think of anything we could have done differently. There was so much going on that was beyond our control. I remember commenting to some of the basketball

players from that time about the tournament and how they conducted themselves. And one of them said, “You do know that at the beginning of the season Coach Larranaga had us go through media training sessions?” This was an example of how our players and the university were complemented about something that had happened at the time of the tournament but actually had taken place months before. So, there are certain things I look back at that were the result of what had happened before.

Question: Is this something the Coach just did on his own or was it part of a specific strategy session?

Answer: I think in Jim Larranga’s case, Jim was interested in the university. He enjoyed and enjoys talking as much about the university as he does the basketball program. Leadership is important in everything. Jim’s leadership of the team goes on and off the court.

Question: I’m guessing if Mason had had a different coach, then that would have changed the entire dynamic as to how the university itself and this experience.

Answer: Yeah. I can’t imagine having the same fun and pride we had if we had had a different coach.

Question: Would you talk a bit more about this situation? Were there risks that the university faced regarding the Final Four?

Answer: If we had this success four years earlier, for instance, then there would have been a downside. Our academic program was still evolving at that time. We had our academic house in order by 2006 and then the team’s success happened. I have thought about the fact that had our academics not been as strong as they were in 2006, then the tone of the articles about us would probably have been negative. Instead, they were positive. For instance, we had three seniors on the team who were set to graduate. At some schools, it is not uncommon to not know when the star athletes are going to be earning their diplomas.

Question: Any other potential problems or risks that kept you up at night?

Answer: One concern I had was whether we were making the benefits of this situation available to the students. Were we making enough tickets to the games available to students? It was our decision that if we were going to err in that regard, then it would be in the students' favor. My office was besieged with ticket requests. We did have one interesting problem. In the tournament, each school has to guarantee it will utilize a specific number of hotel rooms. But one of our tournament games was held in the District of Columbia – our own backyard – so many of our people stayed home because they live so close to D.C. But that was an example of something we couldn't control.

Question: During this time with other administrators, did you discuss a connection between the university's overall mission or strategic plan and the way in which the university handled the Final Four situation?

Answer: The biggest part of our strategy was to increase the visibility of all aspects of the university. We wanted to communicate that we had a reputation much better than what people may have thought. When I came to George Mason in 1996, part of my challenge was to increase the quality of the institution as well as its reputation. In that sense, we took advantage of the basketball team's success to increase our reputation. We also sought to involve the alumni in the life of the university. What happened during the tournament experience was just that. What happened around the country was that many types of alum organized themselves by putting together various watch parties. This happened everywhere. So, one of our goals was to increase alumni pride and awareness and what we did worked.

Question: If Mason's team were to return to the NCAA tournament and repeat the success it had in 2006, would you do anything differently in terms of overall strategy?

Answer: I don't think so. We have been continually asked since then, given our success in basketball, would we now consider starting a football program. My response is, "No. Our success is in basketball. In a sense, we don't need football." And, of course, starting a football program would be very costly. But in subsequent interviews people have asked how would or will we change as a result. My point is we have been successful doing it one way, so why should we change? Again, it comes back to the confidence that our athletic director and our basketball and I have in each other. To me, this goes back to the incident in Mason's game against Hofstra University at the end of the regular season before we had been invited to the NCAA tournament. One of our players hit a player from the other team. We lost that game. I remember an hour or two after the game the athletic director told me the coach had decided to suspend our player for one game. The coach made that decision without first contacting the athletic director and the athletic director concurred without first checking with me because they knew we would all be in agreement. It was the right thing to do. The coach made that decision knowing it would jeopardize our getting invited to the NCAA tournament. Around the country, a number of prominent coaches were asked if they would have made that decision. Many said they would not have. Our first game in the tournament, the suspended player was on the bench in a suit. That sent a message that the team, the player and the university were being very professional about this. I can't think of anything I would change. But I will say I would be very scared if we did this again without a coach like Jim Larranga an athletic director like Tom O'Connor. Both of them were unbelievable.

Question: Did the Final Four experience change your job any?

Answer: I think what it did was remind me of how important it is for me to be visible among the students. In many ways, of course, I am the symbol of the university. But it also helps instill an

appreciation within the students of how much it means to them to see their president being part of things. Since then, it increased my awareness of the importance of being visible.

Question: Would you describe this experience as being transformative?

Answer: Definitely. Without a doubt. In George Mason's history we have had three – perhaps four – transformational events. In 1986, there was Jim Buchanan winning the Nobel Prize; in 2002, Vernon Smith winning the Nobel Prize; the run to the Final Four in 2006; and U.S. News and World Report magazine naming Mason as the most up and coming university in the nation. We created a brand as a result of it. We have a story to tell that hasn't aged at all. People got so excited about what happened. I have a friend in the media who is very prominent. I saw him several months ago and he talked about the tournament. He followed it closely and talked about how so very proud he was of the players and the university during that time. The players were articulate and humble. For one month, he said he watched them and he was so proud of them and proud of his connection to Mason. He personalized the ups and downs of the team, the players' overall behavior, and the whole experience. The question I get most often pertains to the faculty. People ask if the faculty was ever offended by the fact so much attention was being given to non-academic sports. I do not recall any conversation with any faculty member where they were not massively positive about what was going on and how the university was handling it. Our faculty was and is smart and savvy enough to realize that the success of the team is based on the success of the players as students and that the players' success bring attention to the work of the faculty. To do this day, people can't believe the attention we received. The pride people felt then remains to this day.

Northern Illinois University Interviews

Melanie Magara, Assistant Vice President for Public Affairs (September 15, 2009)

Question: What was the emergency preparedness thinking like at the university prior to the shootings?

Answer: We had not really thought as much as we should have about emergency planning until 9/11 happened. At that our point, our president said we needed to do something and assigned our office with the task of working on this. The, the shootings at Virginia Tech occurred and that really hit home with us.

Question: Can you talk a bit about the actual day of the tragedy?

Answer: Our office did not even know what was going on until we received a call from a local newspaper asking us about a campus shooting. We had to check with the president's office before we could even confirm something like that had happened. But everyone in our office knew what to do. We all had assigned tasks. Getting information out and taking incoming calls became our only focus.

Question: Is that how you primarily communicated to your publics what was going on?

Answer: No. For us, the campus website was the primary vehicle for keeping people up to date on what was going on. Our office was updating everyone as to the basics of what happened, but we felt the president was the best one to convey how concerned we were for the victims and the safety of all of our students.

Question: Anything you might change as to how your office reacted at the time?

Answer: One thing we did not anticipate was that the size of our staff was not adequate. If we have to do it over again, then we will make sure we have a system in place to get people from other offices to volunteer their services to us. But even with that we had no trouble with the media even though we had hundreds of them – reporters - to deal with. Mainly, they were interested in the specifics of things.

Sheri Dizito, student (September 28, 2009)

Question: When did you first hear of the campus shootings?

Answer: I just had gotten out of a class and was walking with a friend when we saw a bunch of people talking. We didn't know what had happened until they told us.

Question: What did you do? What was that time like?

Answer: I talked with other students and then eventually got more information on my computer. I think the university did a good job of keeping everyone up to date on the latest information.

Question: Were you frightened? Did you ever feel unsafe?

Answer: No, I didn't. There was never a time when I felt unsafe or like I was in danger. We knew pretty quickly that the incident had been contained. But maybe one of the things the university could have done was give us some help in what we could be doing. I don't feel they were real helpful in that way.

Brandan Lagana, Director of Admissions (December 28, 2010)

Question: I understand you are a relative newcomer at Northern Illinois University. When did you start working there?

Answer: Yes. I was hired in 2009, over a year after the campus shootings.

Question: Can you talk about the enrollment trends you inherited at the institution up to your arrival?

Answer: Our peak time was in the mid-1990s when we had over 25,400 students. Generally, since then we have experienced ups and downs in enrollment trends. Most recently, however, the trend has been upward. Enrollment has been increasing.

Question: Does this upward trend include the fall semesters immediately following the 2008 shootings?

Answer: No. Since then, we have experienced declines.

Question: Would you say there's a direct correlation between the shootings and the enrollment declines?

Answer: There's no question the shootings have had an impact. A negative impact. Even though there was a great deal of compassion toward us because people realize what happened at our campus could have happened any where, a number of potential students and even their families have told us of concerns they have as to how safe NIU is.

Question: How has your office addressed those concerns?

Answer: We worked closely with the university relations office to develop talking points to assure people as best we can. There was also much communication between NIU and people from Virginia Tech to help us move forward. We have amazing and fine people at NIU that have worked so hard at helping not just us in admissions and but other offices as well.

Question: Has there been any or many changes in your staff since the 2008 tragedy?

Answer: No. Nothing significant. Overall, there are approximately 105 people who are part of our admissions team. This has not changed to any extent for a number of years now.

Question: What are your enrollment prospects for fall 2011?

Answer: Right now we are projecting an enrollment increase. But we are going to have to work hard to make that happen.

Donald Grady, Chief of Police (January 6, 2011)

Question: Thank you for agreeing to talk with me. To begin, would you reflect a bit on February 14, 2008, and impact the incident that happened at your campus had on your office and operation?

Answer: People often ask what, if anything, we would or could have done differently on that day when the shootings occurred. What changes or corrections would we make? Often this comes in the context of Virginia Tech and what happened to them a year earlier. When I came to NIU in

2002 as the police chief, our police force began preparing for this kind of scenario. In my years of law enforcement I have been of a mind that the job of police goes beyond reacting to a situation. Instead, we need to be more about prevention. Reaction is more about containment while prevention is about stopping something either from happening or stopping it once it has started. In terms of preparing for an active shooter scenario, we did this in several ways. Let me explain. A number of the people who died at Virginia Tech died from the wounds and injuries they sustained from Cho's attack. They did not die immediately. But emergency management technicians were not able to get onto the actual scene to treat them in time and to provide emergency care and keep them alive. In preparing for this kind of scenario, I had every one of my officers trained to provide emergency care so they have the capability of treating victims before medical experts can arrive. Because of this training, there were at least people who were shot on our campus that day who would have died had our officers not been present or prepared to tend to them right away. Our training is that we don't wait for the scene to be declared officially safe. The same holds true with the active engagement of our officers when something like this occurs. At Virginia Tech, for instance, on the news you saw a number of officers with their high powered rifles moving up to the building where Cho was – where he was shooting people. They were positioned outside the building behind bushes and parked cars ready to fire. For us, we are trained that when we hear gunfire, we are to immediately head toward the noise where there is gunfire and screaming and stop it. Back-up is on the way. Our officers do not wait. We do not contain but engage. I know this goes against conventional thinking. I had to some fighting with our people on this when I first arrived. As police officers, our job is to protect the people. Stop the crime. We do this more effectively by active engagement. You cannot completely prevent something like this from happening, but we can stop it from getting worse. Anything can happen when someone opens fire on a crowd of people. But by anticipating the worse case scenarios – even if the chances of their

happening are remote – and by preparing to take the necessary and immediate action to stop them, the number of casualties can be reduced. In some cases, it might even prevent something terrible like this from happening at all. Since then, I have observed that more and more units throughout the country are taking this posture. I have been in law enforcement for over 30 years. The essence of what police do is protect people. I have believed for years that it is essential to take preventative steps, not simply focus on reacting to something.

Question: How many officers do you have in the department now?

Answer: Sixty-two.

Question: How many did you have before the February, 2008, shootings?

Answer: Fifty-two.

Question: So, your budget was increased for you to hire ten additional officers as a result of the shootings. That is one tangible change that came out of this incident.

Answer: One question is: Did we need these additional officers? What did we do in handling what happened that warranted adding an additional number of officers? Could the results have been better if we had those additional officers at the time of the incident? My answer is “no.” We were given more money as a knee-jerk reaction to what happened. It was more of a feel-good act to make people feel better about things. Make them feel safer. You see this sort of action being taken throughout the country whenever something bad happens. If you really want to fight crime – prevent illegal behavior – then you need to work closely with people and make them feel like they are your partners. We do this with our students and employees at the university. We educate them as to steps they can take to discourage criminal. Remove whatever motivation the bad guys might have.

Question: Communication is an important element when it comes to dealing with a high-risk situation.

Answer: No question about it. I'm not a high-tech kind of guy. The day of the shootings we worked closely with the university relations office to let as many people as possible know as quickly as possible what was going. We have a campus alert system. But the trouble is the messages do not get out as quickly as you might think to even if you are texting or emailing or even using the web. You have to use both high-tech and low-tech methods. There needs to be a balance. Tools such as bullhorns and speakers can be quite helpful at times like this.

Communication during an emergency is still evolving at NIU. We're still working on this.

Question: It goes without saying this was a high-risk situation. Besides the obvious reality of having a shooter on campus, what areas were their other risks?

Answer: It goes back to communication and taking action to stop the shootings. As I indicated, one important risk was getting the word out to people on campus what was going on and what they should do. The other was simply in stopping the shooter's behavior. Had we sought to simply contain the situation, the more people would possibly have died.

Question: Would you say this tragic incident was a transformational event at NIU?

Answer: No. I say that because changes or adjustments we made in how we handled this type of scenario were implemented before it happened. That's where the transformation occurred. Even then, it was a matter of implementing a new way of thinking, new steps to take, and upgrading the skills of our officers. Since then, I would say we have made very few changes simply because it has not been necessary. We are continuing to treat students and employees as partners. And we are continuing to view our main job as being one of prevention and not reaction. It is not my intent to criticize Virginia Tech or any other institution faced with this kind of terrible incident, but I believe we did a good job in handling what happened.

Joseph Matty, Assistant Vice President of University Advancement and Executive Director of Northern Illinois University Alumni Association (January 20, 2011)

Question: If you would, please share your memories of that terrible day when the shootings occurred in February, 2008.

Answer: To say it was a shock would be an understatement. Personally, I was born and raised in Chicago. I am a traditional alum in the sense I went to grade school and high school in the Chicago area. I grew up very close to Northern Illinois University and that is very typical of most of our graduates. You never think that an institution would have something like this happen to it. You never think something like this would happen in the far western suburbs of Chicago. The only thing that still sticks in my mind is when I was pulling up to a meeting with the president and his senior advisors on the Sunday evening after that day. I had walked past the building where it happened many many times before. But I distinctly remember that first going past the building after the shootings as feeling very eerie. You can't believe it happened. You can't understand why.

Question: Do you still feel that way?

Answer: No. Not at all. But I still think about that Sunday – a flashback. It was a sense that NIU had changed a little bit.

Question: Talk about the alumni office on that day and in the aftermath. What role did it play in the university's response to the shootings? And how did you know and the office know what to do? Was there a plan in-place?

Answer: My colleague at Virginia Tech – Tom Tillar – and I talked shortly after what happened at their institution. He said we needed to be open and forthcoming and not be a silo. So, we went on the offense when our tragedy occurred. The alumni office was the place where all external were going to be made to the graduates. It came through us. Right away we created a condolence book. We had a blog to give people a place to share their thoughts and feelings and information. Post pictures. All that stuff. Then, we had stuff posted on you tube. We sent out a blast email to

all alumni. We have over 220,000 alumni so we provided them with information, including our president's comments. We worked closely with the Chicago Tribune and Chicago Times. They are major newspapers in our area. We took out full page ads in them that said we are united, we are supported, and we are one. This tragedy was not going to define us. We have over 180,000 alums who live in the Chicago area, so that's basically who we are. We got out there. We did a follow-up with more ads. We had information on our website. Lots of correspondence. A lot was going on. We also cancelled all events for a month and then took time to decide how we would approach the events over the following year knowing whatever they were they were going to be first ones after the tragedy. We wanted to be appropriate in how we presented ourselves. We started doing more pr and marketing of our events, not in the sense of publicizing them or getting people to feel sorry for us, but to tell people we are stronger and we are one. I have a talented team and talented alumni board. All of us came together as a collective group and came up with these various strategies. We put everything out there together. We did not have a plan to work from or time to bring in an outside consultant.

Question: You must have been swamped with calls and requests for more information?

Answer: Right. But we had people posting information and their thoughts. That helped. There were so many people who reached out to us and many of them were the parents of our students who go here. Our alumni told us this event was not going to define them or the institution. For us, it was pretty telling.

Question: It sounds as if you had good relations with the alumni prior to the shootings. Did that relationship change?

Answer: What it really did was solidify our position with the university and with our alumni constituencies. Looking back, the way we responded and the way we got information out really solidified us in their mind that we are an organization at NIU that they should be proud of. This

was one positive result of what happened. It really galvanized people's opinion of the institution, of our office, and of their being part of that family. They learned what we are all about. The year before the 2008 shootings, the stock market crashed. A lot of people were affected by that. So, you can look at it from our perspective: people lost money – a tangible thing – and then the next year the shootings occurred and this was another shock. Another loss. So, there was a period when things were not good and people felt they were getting beat up. We took all that and urged our graduates to be successful, not for us but for themselves. And that helped turn things around. By promoting our product – students and alumni – it helped create greater support for our organization and for our image.

Question: From the perspective of your office, did you see this as a high-risk situation? Was there a risk?

Answer: We had a lot riding on this. We knew that. In the aftermath of the shootings, we knew if there was one slip-up on our part, then we could have turned people off of our office as well as the overall institution. How we talked with our graduates. How we interacted with them in the aftermath of the tragedy was extremely important. What we communicated and how we communicated were very important. We knew everything we did was going to be criticized and second-guessed. People were going to have opinions on all of our actions. Why is the president going to a fund raiser? Why is the president even traveling? We had to be ready to justify everything we did. I worked closely with the president and head of our alumni board on this. We knew people could be offended or turned-off to the institution if we did not handle things well.

Question: Do you now feel as if you are not quite on eggshells any longer?

Answer: In our realm, every year we have a large awards program. In 2009, we honored the first-responders – the agencies that initially responded to our crisis. For us, that was the final chapter

in terms of coming full circle. We felt as if we were able to move forward after that terrible day. It took about 18 months for us to get to that point.

Question: What about measurement? What helped you determine whether what you did was successful?

Answer: The feedback we received from alumni and the general public. President Peters and even the public relations office were recognized for how well they responded to the crisis.

Question: Do you feel you have a stronger alumni operation now?

Answer: Yes. But I don't necessarily attribute to the shootings and our handling of it. You can't make a direct correlation because a number of people on our staff now weren't even here when the shootings occurred. Our staff growth, for instance, was in already in-motion.

Question: Do you believe what happened was a transformational event for your office and operation?

Answer: I think so. Unfortunately. By that I mean the event itself. It was terrible. But if we had responded in a weak way, then it would have damaged relations.

Raymond Alden, Executive Vice President and Provost (January 21, 2011)

Question: To begin, what are some of your reflections on that day in February, 2008, and the impact it had on your office?

Answer: How many hours do you have? I have given a number of presentations on this and even written about it. Part of my memory is the work we did with people from Virginia Tech. As you know, they suffered a terrible tragedy the previous year and were an enormous help to us and to our response to the shooting. Some of my reflections, even though this is the most horrible event an administrator could face, relative to Virginia Tech, we were more prepared because they went first. We had a chance to prepare. Before Virginia Tech, our emergency planning had been initially focused on other events – weather events – such as tornados as we are a tornado-prone

area. At the time, we started our first emergency plans addressing things like the Avian flu. That was among the issues. We have a major railroad going out of Chicago to the west that runs literally a half block from campus. Emergencies dealing with those sorts of things were the primary things we focused us. Something like shootings were not a major focus. Our chief of police is very much a police-military expert and is very big on preparedness. We also had started training students in the residence halls. We had police officers stationed in each residence hall. Things we tried to be ready for were campus safety, burglaries, and drug preparedness. But after Virginia Tech, our president said we had to prepare for that kind of scenario as well. We started communicating our plans for communicating with the campus. It was a comprehensive communication outline. We had an emergency response team that was charged with overseeing this effort. They compared our plan with other plans such as one created by our governor. We probably made close to 150 changes in our plan as a result of that. In retrospect, we came to consider 2008 as a year of emergencies for us. In January, a month before the shootings, we suffered the worst flood in over 100 years. A third of our campus was under water. That required a major response. Then, the next month the shootings happened. And at the end of the spring semester there was a graffiti incident involving serious internet chatter that required us to shut down campus for one day. It referenced Virginia Tech, maps of our campus, hand-written locations and even notice of when a shooting would occur. Our system was tested pretty strongly. But because our system was in-place after Virginia Tech we were prepared. We had a number of simulations as part of that effort. But the shootings were a horrific event that I would not wish on anybody. But we were about as well-planned as anybody could be.

Question: Putting aside the obvious dangers created by the shooter, from your perspective, what were some of the risks involved facing NIU?

Answer: There were a number of issues that came up at the immediate time. At the time of the shootings, police arrived on the scene in less than two minutes. We responded quickly. The incident ended when the shooter saw the police were there. He took his own life. Campus safety was an issue even though this is not something we could have seen coming. Real lessons we learned involved communication. Our cell phone service, for instance, went down in the first 15 minutes and stayed down for eight hours. That was problematic. Fortunately, we had other communication strategies in-place so it was good we had beefed up the redundancy. In terms of the overall response effort, there was some discussion as to how long to close down the campus. We decided to close down the campus for a full week. That was a decision by the emergency response group but I was a major voice in that. This was important for the healing of our faculty and students. Also, closing the building where the shootings occurred was necessary because it was a crime scene, of course, and people just didn't want to go in it. This building was basically two large classrooms, side-by-side. That meant relocating courses, sections of classes. Over 200 met in that building during a semester. Rescheduling them was a major challenge. It's not as if we have an abundance of space on our campuses so that was difficult. Plus, we had over 80 hours of counseling for faculty and front-line staff to help them get over the tragedy as well as be prepared to work with students in their healing. We had over 500 grief counselors come in the week we reopened. They all had to be coordinated and oriented. The first two days of classes we had a grief counselor in each class. We had the right amount of focus on the tragedy. Students were told the grief counselors were available to them. These were the kind of things – challenges – that we had to face and do well. We had fewer deaths than Virginia Tech, but more victims. There were about 250 people in the building at the time of the shootings. They were all declared victims because of that by the department of justice. This required starting a whole new office on campus. They were all assigned a counselor and academic advisor. All of this had to be coordinated in a

week to ten days time. We had a very comprehensive hotline system. Twenty operators were on-hand talking with families, media and others telling them what was going on. Another lesson learned was that you think you are prepared, but even that can be challenged.

Question: How did you balance the reality that people were upset by what happened and needed time to process this tragedy with the other reality that you had a university to run, classes to hold, etc.? You wanted to be sensitive to what everyone was feeling, of course. But there was also the need to get back on track.

Answer: Exactly. That was one of the challenges. It was immediate outreach where we held workshops for faculty and staff – almost 90 per cent turn out for them – to work with students to help them get back to their studies. Even graduate assistants pitched in. Don't dwell on the grief but be sensitive to people. Some people got over this rather quickly and others needed more time. A sense of unity evolved from this. People seemed to draw strength from the large numbers from campus and even from the region that came together over what happened. Even today there are a few people still sensitive to this.

Question: Right after this event, did you have emergency meetings with deans and department heads as to how you were going to proceed?

Answer: Oh yes. Right away. Ironically, the day this happen half of our deans were in California at a major fund raising event. I, myself, was on an airplane. As soon as I got off the plane I turned right around and headed back. We told the deans on the West Coast to stay there and meet with our alums because we knew they were going to be concerned and then get back as soon as possible. Within the first 24 hours we met with the deans who were on campus and let them know we were closing, providing counselors, etc. I met with the department where the student had taken classes. They all knew the student. Counselors were there for a kind of group therapy. After

the first ten days or so I had an event at my house for the deans that was a kind of group therapy session. It was as complex situation as you can imagine.

Question: Would you consider this event to have been transformational regarding the university?

Answer: Yes. I definitely do. Ironically, it built campus unity. There's been a stronger sense of community since then. I have always considered our school fight song to be kind of antiquated, but it had a tagline in it that talks of moving forward together. That became our motto. We overcome this we can overcome anything. Lessons learned can only be learned when you go through something like this. You go forward and pay forward. We have worked with other schools since then giving them guidance on what they might need to be ready for. This is what we consider paying forward. We spent over eight million dollars in this response. Money was not all that good then, but the department of defense was helpful to us. We benefitted so much from Virginia Tech and others. Over 550 counselors came to our campus within days of the shootings. They reached out to us in a big way.

Kathryn Buettner, Vice President, University Relations (January 24, 2011)

Question: Let's begin with my asking you to share some of your memories of February 14, 2008, and the role you and your office played in helping handle it.

Answer: I was in a different role at the university the day of the tragedy. At that time, I was vice president of external affairs. At that time, the media relations aspect of the institution did not fall under me. But having said that, I was intimately involved in the communications effort of the university as it handled the tragedy. In the summer of 2009, we had a reorganization and, as a result, now all of our communication functions, including media relations, report to me. But when something like the shootings occur, it doesn't really matter what people's responsibilities might be. Everyone pitches in and does everything. So, at the time while I was technically responsible for economic development and state and federal relations and board of trustees relations, I was

involved with the overall crisis communications efforts. Part of that was keeping our state and federal representative and our board members informed about what the university was doing, decisions that were being made and related activities that were going on on campus. Because it was such a high profile situation, it was imperative that we keep them very much in the loop. They all wanted to know. So, I was doing that or overseeing the efforts that were being made to keep them up-to-date. But in addition, we all pitched in and I was part of the emergency communication team. I was part of that group then and still am today. That included message crafting and timing of the messaging. Also, I ended up being responsible for preparing the memorial service the university had for the victims ten days after the tragedy. It was held February 25, the day before the university reopened classes. That was huge. It was broadcast live by CNN and the Congressional delegation was involved along with the families and students. We worked closely with them all, including The White House. We asked specifically that the president not come because we lacked the capacity to handle the President or a senior member of the administration.

Question: Did The White House actually offer to come?

Answer: Yes. It was a very diplomatic issue. They offered to send the vice president or the secretary of state. I explained to them how stretch we were and what a small town we are in. We literally could not handle the security that would go with a senior advisor visit along with all the crowds. It turned out the secretary of education ended up coming and representing the President. That worked out just fine. Our communication team was meeting three or four times every day and working our way through these kinds of behind-the-scenes matters.

Question: Talk about the actual day. Where were you when it happened? How did you find out?

Answer: I was in my office. It was a little after 3. I had just finished chatting with our president. We had just finished a humorous conversation. Then, our chief operating officer came running

into the president's suite and said there had been a shooting and there were injuries. He told me to assemble the emergency communications team. And then he left to the scene. I then told the president and we started bringing all the key players together. Within moments, it seemed, an emergency broadcast email flashed across our computers. We did not have an emergency text message system at the time.

Question: When the emergency team convened, how did you know what to do?

Answer: We all had a role. We all knew what we had to do so there was no guessing. That was important. Since the 9/11 terrorists attack against the United States, our president had been very concerned that our campus needed to be ready for some kind of destructive act, some kind of major emergency. Of course, Virginia Tech happened about eight months before our situation. So, over the past few years leading up to our tragedy, we had been constantly upgrading and advancing our own emergency preparatory plans. All of that work had been done before February 14. Everyone knew what their roles at their level were. So, there was no panic. In fact, I believe knowing what we were supposed to do served as a source of comfort. But it didn't mean we didn't do other things that weren't on our initial to-do lists. My responsibility was to make sure our board of trustees and our congressional delegations knew what was going on at all times. Another team member handled the university's budget, so it was job monies were made available to allow the university to do what needed to be done. Our chief of police was part of the team and, obviously, he had a particular role to play. Our general counsel knew what he was supposed to do. No one was there who didn't have a specific function. One challenge was relocated classes from that building. That was quite a task.

Question: How long did the crisis last? When did it stop?

Answer: Unfortunately, I wish I could say it ended right away. The shooter shot himself minutes after he did what he did. So, from that perspective, it ended pretty quickly. Within minutes. But

the ramifications of what he easily lasted another two to three weeks. I know I worked 23 days straight about 17 hours a day without going home. We had so many decisions and issues and actions points to take during the weeks after the shootings. I would say those first few weeks were critical. It was constant motion. Probably around the third week things started to slow. At that point, we really started focusing on the student reaction and helping them get back on track. Getting back to business was a slow process for the university. Thinking back, for me, it was probably four months of doing nothing else but working on things related to the shootings. That's all I did. Talking to agencies at the federal and state level and trying to get their programs together to help us work with families and students was a major challenge. But I'd say we were definitely in crisis mode for at least three weeks.

Question: What about the media?

Answer: They descended on us. Within two hours there were so many satellite trucks on campus. And they never left for days. There was media from all over the world. All the national press, of course. It was mind boggling. It was overwhelming. All they needed to be fed and a warm place to do their work. We had to keep our buildings open and provide them with wireless hook-ups, access to food. It was so cold at that time of year. They literally lived with us for around five days and then slowly leaving. And then returned for our memorial service and stayed for a few days after classes went back in-session. It was really mind-boggling.

Question: What was the one of their stories?

Answer: At first, it was the hard news coverage. The basic stuff of who, what, when – that sort of thing. But then they started doing more color stories, focusing on fleshing out the stories. Who were the victims? What about mental health? Were campuses safe enough? The university made every effort then and even to this day not to get involved in any policy debates such as guns on

campus. The university did not want to get overshadowed in using that incident as any kind of political statement. We just provide the facts and let the policy makers make their decisions.

Question: What were the risks or challenges that you had to watch out for in the aftermath of the incident?

Answer: A couple of things that could be summed up in two words: communication and responsiveness. We are a big place and we constantly had to be on guard that we were doing our best about communicating exactly what we were dealing with. We had a responsibility to the families of students who died and the families of the students who were upset over what happened. We had the media to deal with. We tried to be as transparent as possible. But we also had to make sure whatever we were saying was absolutely accurate. Any one who has been involved in a crisis will tell you that the initial set of facts that come in are not always true. It takes time to sort that out. We constantly struggled with over the issue of deciding when to release information because we wanted to make sure it was completely accurate. And there was the matter of being responsive to the families of victims – giving them love and support – and helping make sure all their needs were being met. Some of the students who were injured did not have health insurance, so we had to work with them and their families to try and get them help by working with the local hospitals so they wouldn't be stuck with the bills. That was an example of a behind-the-scenes issue you wouldn't think of. Even helping some of the families that did not have the resources and needed help in properly burying their children is something we worked on. Obviously, we had legal obligations but morale ones, too. We made sure a senior member of the university attended every wake for every victim. That was logistic challenge. Plus, there were 21 injuries, some serious and some not. We visited each of them in the hospitals and stayed in regular contact. All of this was arranged before hand, so when the actual crisis occurred it was a matter of implementing it. We had a group of people who were trained to work with families.

Question: Did you have what I would call a shooter-scenario in your crisis plan?

Answer: No. It wasn't that specific. We tried to be ready if a student death occurred such as from inclement weather or an accident of some sort. But after Virginia Tech happened, our president told us that we had to be ready for this sort of thing. He made it a top priority. He wanted everything thought through. So our challenges or risks were in the carrying out of these matters. People from Virginia Tech were very helpful to us. We were so concerned with the welfare of the families of the victims.

Question: How did you measure your institution's performance?

Answer: In several ways. Did we do everything possible in making the campus safe? We have asked ourselves that a million times. In our case, this shooter was an A student who was not taking classes with us at the time. We had no warning signs. We came on campus carrying his weapon in a guitar case. We have a music school so no one paid attention to that. It was not odd. So, we couldn't have done anything differently. But our police were on-site within seconds of the shootings. The second way to evaluate our performance was through the eyes of the media. I feel like they viewed us as being as responsive as we could possibly be. They gave us very positive feedback. We tried to be as honest and transparent as we could. And, finally, the families and students gave us feedback. It was important for us to listen to their voices. We have not heard anything negative from them. I think they have been very appreciative. Most of the people injured and survivors returned. Our incident lasted minutes. What happened at Virginia Tech was spread out over several hours. So, I think you have to look at our measurement in a collective way. We have really tried hard to be responsive.

Question: Who was the university's public face?

Answer: We had one spokesperson at the time who talked with the media. Our media relations person. We also made our president very available to the media. Every time we talked with the

media we gave them as much time as they needed. We made sure all their questions were answered. Our president talked quite openly with all of them. We gave all of the media opportunities to talk with our president one-on-one. That helped a lot. They knew we were trained to be responsive and they appreciated that.

Question: Did your president get to a point where he said he was done talking with the media?

Answer: I don't remember that. What he might have said is something like, "What more do you want me to say? I have nothing more to say." I remember ABC news wanted to make President Peters "the person of the week." He said he didn't want that, so, instead, ABC made the families of the victims the persons of the week. We feel we did the best we could with the media. What happened changed everyone's life.

Question: What was the impact of this tragedy?

Answer: This is a wonderful wonderful campus. The shootings caste a shadow over the campus. You never want to be known for something like this. If you're a university, you want to be known for your academic rigor or for a sports team or something like that. But not a terrible tragedy. We have fought very hard that while we will never forget what happened or try to minimize it, we want to make sure the focus on the university is on the fact we are continuing to move forward and that we are focusing on our future. We have tried very hard. This thing brought us closer together because we are so much apart of our community. It brought everybody's perspective back to what is really important in life much like all tragedies do. But we fought very not to let this define the university. Generally, we have a very hard time getting the Chicago media to focus on something that is very good that might happen here. But yet when something of significance does happen, it always seems the media focuses on the negative. I guess it's the nature of the news business. Just recently – this past fall - we had an incident where one of our students disappeared and was later found to have been killed violently. When the media covered this, the

first thing they said was “Another tragedy has occurred at Northern Illinois University.....” and then went on to recap the 2008 tragedy. Finally, I had to speak at a news conference with the DeKalb police over this most recent incident where we were being criticized by the media for not being about information over this student’s disappearance and ultimate death. That situation and what happened in 2008 were two different incidents. One went on for an extended period of time and the other was over in minutes. We tried to be as forthcoming with that most recent tragedy as we were back in 2008. We took a lot more lumps then than we did in 2008.

Question: Was what happened in 2008 transformational?

Answer: Yes. I would say it was transformative. Despite the fact we at the university refuse to let what happened define NIU. It has transformed the university in a good ways and bad. We have pulled together. We are much tighter-knit. That was a positive thing. But while we refuse to let it define us, I can’t say some of the Chicago media don’t equate what happens with that tragedy. My guess is the 2008 shootings is one of the top two or things that pop in their minds when they think about us. We try hard not to let it define us, but it is a very difficult thing to overcome.

Question: I know NIU has a strategic plan just as all institutions do. Did your crisis plan speak to the strategic plan? Or was the crisis plan designed to handle a specific situation?

Answer: Both. For us, I would say the crisis plan feeds the strategic plan and the strategic plans feeds the crisis plan. It’s a circular process. The way we define our vision is to become the most student-centered public institution in the Midwest. That is a very good characterization of what we are, particularly based on what has happened over the past few years. Before 2008, we were student-centered and we have become even more so since then. Dealing with the media in times of a crisis takes a personal toll. It is mind-boggling. It’s extremely emotional and draining. No plan, no matter how detailed, can prepare you for a crisis like that. When push comes to shove, it’s all about reflex and good common sense.

West Virginia University Interviews

Christine Martin, Vice President, University Relations (June 3, 2010)

Question: The success of your university's basketball team must have a very exciting for you and your office.

Answer: Of course. All of us had a lot of fun then. But we viewed what was happening more as a pivotal moment for the university rather than anything that was transforming our institution.

There's no question what went us with us was similar to a crisis in that in dealing with all the hoopla we had to make sure we were getting out accurate information in a timely and consistent manner. We had to work hard at avoiding any mistakes. They could have hurt our image, particularly since so many people were focusing on us

Question: People were focusing on you. What were you focusing on?

Answer: Interesting. Since we had so much attention being given us, we tried to use the opportunity to showcase such things as our new biometrics program and bolster our fundraising and alumni relations efforts. These strategies tied in directly with our overall strategies. It's still too early to tell just how successful we were in terms of generating any kind of meaningful results. We'll probably be conducting some focus groups, looking closely at future donations and press clippings, and analyzing sales of university items from the bookstore.

Binghamton University Interview

Gail Glover, Senior Director of Media and Public Relations June 15, 2010)

Question: What a terrible thing it was to have a faculty member murdered on your campus.

Answer: Yes. It was a crisis. We had to work hard at gathering information as to what exactly happened because these kinds of events generate all kinds of rumors.

Question: What was your biggest challenge?

Answer: It all had to do with information. What we released had to be accurate and people wanted it right away. Mainly, we wanted to assure everyone that the Binghamton campus is a safe environment where students can get a good education without worry of being harmed. This message is one of our important strategic goals

Question: How successful would you say your office was in its efforts?

Answer: I believe we did well. But, no, we have not tried to take any kind of scientific measure of that.

University of Memphis Interview

L. Chance, Director of Sports Information (June, 4, 2010)

Question: Memphis' most recent trip to the NCAA tournament must have been quite an experience for your office.

Answer: No question about it. It was a lot of fun. This was a busy time for us but I feel like we pretty much handled the media well. Mainly we scheduled the interviews and media requests around the practice session of the team and after their games. The coach kept telling us to enjoy the moment and that's what we did. But we did not make any effort to tie in what the players and coach were saying in their interviews with any larger message from the university. We felt the focus should be on the team and its success.

Question: So, you did not try and utilize the team's great success and national exposure to, say, bring attention to some of your academic programs or even the institution's overall mission?

Answer: No. Our focus was on the team and helping make their ride as enjoyable and smooth as possible.

Virginia Tech Interviews

Larry Hincker, Associate Vice President, University Relations, (December 10 and 13, 2010)

Question: I wanted to check in and see where things are with my interviewing other prominent administrators at Tech regarding the 2007 incident. I'd be happy to reach out to some of them myself.

Answer: I've not had a chance to speak with lawyers or the president about this. Our problem, of course, is the continuing litigation.

Answer: I've spoken with the chief counsel. In this instance, she (chief counsel) has asked us not to participate in any discussions about actions on the morning of April 16. And it appears that most of your questions speak not only to that time, but also what we might have done differently, if anything. That gets to the heart of the facts in the lawsuit. Alas, none of us here will be able to work with you on your questions/interviews.

Thomas Tillar, Vice President, Alumni Relations, (December 3, 2010)

Question: Describe the overall experience of the tragedy at Virginia Tech and the role you and your office played during that time.

Answer: Certainly it was a time like we have never seen or known before. It truly was a situation. The reaction was overwhelming. For my office, it wasn't a matter of helping get information out about what happened because people had plenty of access to the latest information. We did not receive many phone calls but we did receive many emails. Our alumni building, which is situated on the edge of the campus, was used as a central gathering place for the media. Consequently, I was present at many of the media interviews and briefings that went on. It was also where our president did his interviews with the national news shows. It was important for him to be visible and he certainly was. I was present at all of them.

Question: As the situation unfolded in the days following the shooting, how did you determine the role your office should play?

Answer: What happened had a deep effect on everyone. The attention and response we received from everyone, including the president of the United States, was tremendous. Our country had never seen anything like this. The 9/11 attacks where obviously more people lost their lives was possibly the only comparable event in recent times. I felt it important that our office do what it could to maintain connections with our alumni. At the outset, we did not really need to be proactive because everyone was already doing what they could to find out more about the shootings. Available information was everywhere. But in the aftermath, I felt it was important for us – the university and the students - to be seen as coming together and that people continue to be aware of our resilience. At the time, Tech had nearly one-hundred and ninety thousand living alumni. Our office worked hard at communicating the ongoing efforts on campus to our alumni. This included the amazing progress on the memorial that we built.

Question: What would you say were your primary challenges?

Answer: Trying to keep up with the volume of comments and requests for information we were receiving. Everyone was touched by what happened. Virginia Tech received about ten million dollars in unsolicited donations from supporters as a result of the tragedy. This included a one million dollar gift from the /New York Yankees. The memorial service right after the shootings and then the dedication of the memorial itself just before classes began in the fall generated a great deal of interest. They became points of great focus. It was important for us to communicate our own community on them.

Question: Were their risks involved in what your office was trying to do in terms of maintaining lines of communication with alumni and the public?

Answer: Our community is very much a college town. Everyone is tied to the university, so there was a tremendous amount of unity, a great sense of loss that all of us shared. I think it was

important for us to give people that opportunity to show their support, share their grief and be part of dealing with what happened.

Question: Would you say what happened was a transformative event for Virginia Tech?

Answer: Oh yes. What happened remains part of who we are to this day. Our entire campus was horrified by what happened. Yet we are unified by it as well. I feel the university recognized how important it was to help people get through the shock of the tragedy and then give people a sense of dealing with it. The memorial service right after the event and the dedication of the memorial were the best things we did. These events went far beyond the alumni office. 9/11 was the worst of tragedies. What happened at Tech was probably the next level below that. In many ways, it brought out the best in a lot of people.

Appendix I

Comments from Debriefers

Elizabeth Johnson (February 7, 2011)

I read the introduction, reviewed the middle chapters and really focused on the conclusions as they applied to the research questions and points raised at the beginning. I think your conclusions are very logical and I was able to follow your line of reasoning, as well as see how you reached your conclusion in the examples that you provided. The subject matter as a whole was particularly interesting to me in the way it related to crisis communication being used for both positive and negative events. I'm not sure I ever learned that in my undergraduate program or in the real world. I see that as being a very thought-provoking element.

Katherine Lampel (February 16, 2011)

Thank you for letting me review your dissertation. How refreshing to read a scholarly paper and enjoy it for once. But more than that, I feel your conclusions and analysis were very logical. You seemed to make a good connection between your questions, the data, particularly from the interviews, and the conclusions.

Catherine Ferraro (February 27, 2011)

My overall impression is I think it looks good. I didn't see any discrepancies in the evidence/information you gathered from university administrators and the conclusions/recommendations you gave at the end of the paper. Everything seemed to come together nicely and I didn't see anything worth addressing. One thing I kept waiting to read about, and maybe I missed this, was why it is important to incorporate a crisis communication plan into

the overall strategic communication plan. Obviously, you talk about both separately throughout the paper and mention bringing them together, but I don't think you were quite as clear about the advantages, benefits, drawbacks, disadvantages, etc. of actually bringing the two plans together. Maybe this is because, as you mention in the paper, there is not enough evidence to talk about this issue. But I think it would have been helpful to have some information about this, even if it is only your opinion, about the positive or negative aspects of merging the two plans.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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