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To Expel, or to Not Expel? An Analysis of James Madison University's Crisis Communication
and Response to Sexual Assault

An Honors Program Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts and Letters
James Madison University

by Julie Michelle Hirschhorn

May 2015

Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Communication Studies, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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Executive Summary

This case study will examine the sexual assault incident of a James Madison University student that took place during March of 2013, the implications of the administration's decision and fallout the following summer. Using Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), JMU's sexual assault crisis and the subsequent news cycle will be analyzed through the lens of a public relations practitioner. The review of literature examines the different types of crises and strategic responses and best practices of organizations. The analysis includes a case study of the incident itself, the university's immediate and long term responses, the reactions of important stakeholders and key publics, as well as long term implications and effects of this crisis. The project also includes public relations materials that in the author's eyes, would have been beneficial to mitigate the crisis.

Abstract

Over the past decades, there have been several communication crises domestically and internationally. The public relations team behind each company, organization or public figure handles each crisis in a unique fashion. Some crisis management techniques work to rebuild the image of the organization effected, while other strategies fail to produce the desired outcome. It is important to study the practice of crisis management and crisis communication to understand how public relations teams operate in times of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis, as well as how they improve internal and external communications with the significant affected publics. This project will focus on the different elements of a crisis and how it applies in a college setting, especially in instances of sexual assault.

Key words: Crisis communication, education, landmark cases, social media, crisis management, public relations

Review of Literature

Introduction to Crisis Communication

From the Watergate scandal in the White House, to the B.P. oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, to the Virginia Tech school shootings, communication crises can happen to anyone, anywhere. When a company, organization, or public figure's image is at stake, it is up to the public relations or communications team to respond quickly and appropriately, and foster image repair while cultivating meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships with their publics.

A crisis is defined as a “serious event that requires careful attention from management” (Coombs, 2012). Crisis communication is a subset profession of the public relations field that is designed to protect and defend a person, company, or organization facing a challenge to its image and reputation (Coombs, 2007). Communication scholars define crisis communication as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2007). This field of communication often includes employing techniques and strategies that combat reputation damage and promote preventive measures to reduce the effect of potential crises.

This case study will examine the sexual assault incident of a James Madison University student that took place during March of 2013, the implications of the administration's decision and fallout the following summer. Using Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), JMU's sexual assault crisis and the subsequent news cycle will be analyzed through the lens of a public relations practitioner. The analysis includes a case study of the

incident itself, the university's immediate and long term responses, the reactions of important stakeholders and key publics, as well as long term implications and effects of this crisis. The project also includes public relations materials that in the author's eyes, would have been beneficial to mitigate the crisis.

Crisis Management Models and Theories:

Many communication scholars have developed different models and theories for crisis and risk management. One is Benoit's Image Restoration Theory, which provides strategies for organizations or figures whose image or reputation has been tarnished. This theory postulates that communication is a goal-directed activity and that maintaining a positive reputation during a crisis is a central goal (Ferguson, Wallace, & Chandler, 2011). The organization's perception of the threat determines its response. However, when key audiences or important stakeholders believe that the organization's action is offensive and that they are responsible for the crisis, the actor or organization is likely to employ image restoration strategies.

Many communication specialists use this theory to understand personal or organizational crisis situations. Corporate apologia is a strategy used when an actor or organization needs to defend its character and uses denial, bolstering, differentiation, or transcendence to minimize the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Benoit's Image Restoration Strategies are commonly used in crisis response strategies. They include: denial and avoiding responsibility (through a scapegoat), reducing offensiveness through minimization, differentiation, or transcendence. Other strategies are corrective action and mortification, where the accused takes full responsibility of the crisis (Benoit, 1995).

Another foundational crisis communication theory is Attribution Theory. Developed by Kelley and Weiner, the theory claims that publics constantly look to assign attributions for different events, especially if they are negative or surprising (Coombs, 2007). Publics' reactions can range from emotional to stoic, and will therefore shape the response of the company or organization.

Attribution Theory formed the roots for Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Attributions that clients and other stakeholders assign to organizations are crucial to the image and reputation of organizations. They can evoke emotional (negative or positive) reactions from stakeholders, which can affect the organization's future (Coombs, 2007). If reactions are positive, then the company's reputation is safe, whereas if reactions are negative, the company will have to work to save face.

The SCCT posits that the key to determining the most effective crisis response strategy is understanding the crisis situation and the amount of threat (or the amount of damage a crisis could inflict on an organization or actor) the crisis poses (Coombs, 2007). Coombs postulates that reputational threat is influenced by three factors: initial crisis responsibility (initial crisis responsibility is how much the organization's stakeholders attribute the crisis to the organization), crisis history and the organization's reputation prior to the crisis.

In SCCT, Coombs groups crises into three categories. The first are victim crises, where the organization itself is a victim of the crisis (i.e., natural disasters or rumors). The second is the accidental crises, where the actions of the person or organization were unintentional (technical errors). The third group of crises are preventable ones, in which the organization "knowingly placed people at risk or violated a law" (Coombs, 2007). Since the way an organization communicates with its publics can shape the perception of the crisis, the communicators need to

accomplish three objectives: shape attributions of the crisis, change perceptions of the organization in crisis and reduce the negative effect generated by the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

The SCCT also has three crisis response strategies: deny, diminish, and rebuild to frame how the crisis will be perceived by the media and stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). The 'deny' strategy is useful if the organization is truly not involved in the crisis, and will therefore have an unharmed reputation. The denial category includes tactics of using a scapegoat, denials, and attacking the accuser. The diminish strategy tries to minimize the damage and help publics see the organization or actor in a more positive frame and includes excuses or justifications. Rebuilding strategies aim to win the public over through positive action and asking audiences for forgiveness. Rebuilding tactics can be reminders (telling stakeholders about past good deeds), ingratiation, or victimage (Coombs, 2007). The case study portion of this analysis will analyze the rebuilding practices that have been used in the JMU crisis.

In public relations, *how* one tells the story is almost as important as the story itself. The Narrative Paradigm Theory, proposes that all meaningful communication is a narrative, and the way that people explain or justify their actions, has more to do with telling a credible story than it does with producing evidence or constructing logical arguments (Fisher, 1985). With Fisher's Narrative, people on all sides of the issue can listen to the narrative and judge whether the story makes sense, or if people or the organization were acting uncharacteristically. As an extension of Fisher's Narrative, Heath and Millar (2004) developed a rhetorical frame in which to view crises from. It emphasizes the message itself, its development, and the presentation of it during the crisis response phase (Heath and Millar, 2004). One of the authors core claims is that an organization faces a crisis when the common organizational narrative is interrupted by a new, unexpected, and harmful narrative.

With the rise of social media and growing speed of communication, theories, theorists and models are constantly being adjusted to fit the new mediums in which a crisis might develop. Yet, a constant theme in the crisis communication theories is that honest, open communication is always the best policy.

Types of Crisis

The broadest way to categorize crises are as intentional and unintentional. Unintentional crises can include events such as natural disasters or crises where the organization is a victim. Intentional crises, however, are when the actor or organization abets a crisis with intent. More specifically, Lerbinger (1997) categorized eight types of crises that can occur. The first are natural crises, which are often natural disasters or environmental phenomena such as earthquakes, forest fires, and tsunamis. An example of a natural crisis in the United States was Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The super storm had a huge humanitarian, economic, and environmental impact on the South. The local and federal governments have been criticized for their way of dealing with the catastrophe.

Before the hurricane hit, New Orleans and most other affected areas were not equipped with updated, fully functional prevention methods. In addition, the areas that experienced the worst flooding were home to very poor, mostly African American communities, and therefore, did not have adequate government funding to maintain safety precautions (Sharkey, 2005). Then President, George W. Bush and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) were heavily criticized for their slow response rate, lack of action and unclear resolution plans. In addition, Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco were

blamed for failing to implement an evacuation plan and for ordering residents to a shelter of last resort without any provisions for food, water, security, or with sanitary conditions (United States Congress, 2005). Eventually, Bush visited New Orleans and made a speech in historic Jackson Square that was analyzed by many rhetoric scholars. Perhaps the most fatal flaw of the New Orleans' government was that emergency evacuation was postponed until 19 hours before landfall, which led to hundreds of deaths of people who (by that time) could not find any way out of the city (Congress, 2005). It seems, however, that the United States has learned their lesson about crisis preparedness for natural disasters.

In November 2013, shortly after the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Sandy, President Obama released an executive order directing federal agencies to coordinate with state and local actors to increase preparedness for the impacts of climate change and to improve the resiliency of communities and infrastructure. The order also establishes a task force, comprised of state, local and tribal officials that will advise the federal government on climate preparedness and resilience (Ladislaw, Kostro, Sanok, & Walton, 2013). Knowing how to successfully handle natural crises is imperative, because the most important stakeholders are at risk: the safety of the global population.

Technological crises occur when there is a breakdown in the system and something goes wrong. Some technological crises occur when human error causes disruptions (Coombs, 1999). People may tend to point fingers during technological crises, because unlike natural disasters, it is subject to human manipulation. An example of a technological crisis is the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989, which is considered to be one of the most devastating human-caused disasters of the 20th century.

The crisis began when Exxon Valdez, an oil tanker bound for Long Beach, California, struck Prince William Sound's Bligh Reef and spilled 260,000 to 750,000 barrels of crude oil (Bluemink, 2010). In addition to almost 300,000 deaths of marine and wildlife animals, the fall out had long-lasting environmental consequences. The company's communication with the public was subpar. Exxon's CEO waited a full two weeks before flying to Alaska to respond to the spill, illustrating to the public that Exxon did not consider the spill a national environmental problem (Bluemink, 2010). There was local and national backlash for Exxon for not addressing the problem head on, or taking blame for the company's mistake.

Still, companies have made mistakes when facing the crisis of an oil spill. After the incident with British Petroleum (B.P.) in 2010, the company lost credibility when it reported false information about the amount of oil spilled (Beam, 2010). It also tried to place blame elsewhere, which can be a poor communications strategy, as companies should take the fall, and then deal with logistics behind closed doors (Beam, 2010). However, it was innovative by implementing social media to help its cause. It tweeted a B.P hotline where people could report oiled wildlife (Beam, 2010). Nevertheless, for natural crises, there is never enough "over communication."

Organizational misdeeds are often split into three categories: crises of skewed management values (by industry leaders and company management), crises of deception, and crises of management misconduct. Skewed management values are caused when managers favor short-term economic gain and neglect broader social values and stakeholders other than investors. Deception occurs when management conceals or misrepresents information about itself and its products in its interactions with consumers and the public (Coombs, 2007).

Confrontation crisis occurs when groups or individuals fight businesses, government, or interest groups to gain acceptance of their demands and expectations. Common type of confrontation crisis are boycotts, sit-ins, ultimatums to those in authority, blockades or occupation of buildings, and resisting or disobeying authoritative forces. These crises are interesting, because often times, they deal with humanitarian issues and are later thought to be revolutions. Some examples include marches during the Civil Rights Movement, Tiananmen Square in 1989, and more recently, the riots in Ferguson Missouri after the conviction of Darrell Williams.

The fourth type of crisis is malevolence, which occurs when people use criminal means or other extreme tactics for the purpose of expressing hostility or anger toward, or seeking gain from, a company, country, or economic system, perhaps with the aim of destabilizing or destroying it. Sample crises include product tampering, kidnapping, malicious rumors, terrorism, and espionage (Lerbinger, 1997). An example of how a malevolent crisis was handled successfully is the case of the Johnson & Johnson Tylenol murders.

Before the crisis, Tylenol was the most successful over-the-counter product in the United States with over one hundred million users and was responsible for 19 percent of Johnson & Johnson's corporate profits (University of Oklahoma, DATE). During the fall of 1982, a person replaced Tylenol Extra-Strength capsules with cyanide-laced capsules, resealed the packages, and deposited them on the shelves of several pharmacies and markets in the Chicago area. Seven people died. The company learned about the deaths from the media, an error in crisis communication, as the company should make a statement before the media. Johnson & Johnson's immediate response was to form a crisis team. They first alerted consumers across the nation via media outlets not to consume any type of Tylenol product, making the public's safety

their first priority. In the first week of the crisis Johnson & Johnson established a 1-800 hot line for consumers to call, and the company responded to inquiries from customers concerning the safety of Tylenol. They also establish a toll-free line for news organizations to call and receive pre-taped daily messages with updated statements about the crisis (Berge, 1990). In addition, six months after the crisis, Tylenol introduced a new, triple safety seal packaging to show security and ingenuity.

Although Johnson & Johnson's communications handled the crisis incredibly well, there were some instances where Tylenol could have improved upon after the crisis. First, they did not have a proactive public affairs program in place before to prepare for potential crises; however, the crisis showed how important it is for organizations to have prepared contingency plans. In the early stages of the crisis, Tylenol was informed about what was going on from a Chicago reporter. Had internal communications been the first to release the news, the public may have had a different perception of the crisis.

Workplace violence includes incidents of sexual harassment, discrimination based on gender of ethnicity, and when an employee commits physical or emotional violence on another employee or client. In addition, rumors can be spread internally through employees and management, or externally through clients and consumers. Both can be harmful to business and external factors, as well as internal cooperation. When companies are faced with these types of crises, they may initially fire all parties involved to save face. This analysis, however, will deal with intentional crises within colleges and universities and address how the administration handles the crisis and their key stakeholders.

James (2007), a leadership professional at the University of Virginia, points out essential leadership qualities when dealing with crises, like building an environment of trust, reforming

the organization's mindset, identifying obvious and obscure vulnerabilities of the organization, making wise and rapid decisions, as well as taking courageous action, and learning from crisis to effect change (James, 2007).

In addition, there are several things managers can do to avoid all types of crises. A particularly important one is responding thoughtfully to the crisis. Responding with a carefully designed contingency plan and an image repair campaign will go a lot better than "tweeting" back at dissenters or disgruntled clients. An example of a successful response strategy is when toy company, Mattel, experienced over 28 product recalls in the summer of 2007 and the company strived to respond quickly to all inquirers and grievances. Mattel CEO Robert Eckert did 14 TV interviews on a Tuesday in August and about 20 calls with individual reporters. By the week's end, Mattel had responded to more than 300 media inquiries in the U.S. alone (Goldman & Reckard, 2007).

This literature review and subsequent analysis will study how the administration and management of James Madison University's leadership styles affected the response strategies for the sexual assault crisis, and what other practitioners may have done differently.

Crisis Response Strategies

When dealing with a crisis, there are typically three stages of crisis with accompanying strategies (Coombs, 2007). The first is pre-crisis, which is preparing for the crisis ahead of time in an effort to prevent one from occurring. The second is the actual crisis: the response to a critical event. Finally, post-crisis occurs after the crisis has been resolved and includes the efforts

by the crisis management team to understand why the crisis occurred and how to learn from the event (Coombs, 2007).

Many different strategies during each stage of crisis management may take place. During the pre-crisis stage, the communications team constantly research and assess potential crisis risks to the organization. They also create a crisis management plan (CMP). This includes making decisions about who will handle specific aspects of a crisis, if, and when, it occurs; preparing press release templates for the organization's public relations team in the event of a crisis, as well as the chain of command that all employees will follow in the dissemination of information to all publics during a crisis situation (Coombs, 2012). Here, spokespeople are identified, as well as key stakeholders that have the potential to affect the outcome of the crisis. The credibility and reputation of organizations is heavily influenced by the perception of their responses during crisis situations, thus, it is crucial that organizations have solid plans. In addition, crisis plans should regularly be assessed and re-evaluated and updated accordingly.

During the crisis phase, the issue should be clearly identified as a crisis, followed by the collection and processing of pertinent information to the crisis, so that the management team can quickly, but effectively make decisions. In addition, the dissemination of crisis messages to both internal and external publics of the organization should be organized and conducted smoothly. When the crisis first hits, communication teams must be quick, accurate, and consistent (Moyer, 2011). To be quick means for the organization to have its side of the story out first, usually within the first hour of the crisis. When an organization does not get its version of the story out first, the media has the opportunity to shape the publics' perception of the crisis. Accuracy means saying the correct thing, while consistency means ensuring all publics hear the same thing. It is also important to make sure that every member of the organization knows what to say and what

is going on. Sending out fact sheets or agenda papers about the crisis could be helpful. While organizations are under time pressure, it is imperative that their messages are accurate and consistent. Practitioners must always have a “crisis-mindset” to be able to think of worst-case scenarios while suggesting practical solutions.

Also, there are many crisis responses that a company may employ when faced with one. There are “preemptive action strategies,” which includes prebuttals: the opportunity for the organization to get their story out first (Swann, 2010). Offensive response strategies can attack the accuser if logic or facts are faulty. Seldom are embarrassment or threats used, as that may pose more problems for the company or organization’s integrity. In addition, crisis communicators incorporate defensive response strategies. These include denial of a problem, excuses, or minimizing the crisis through justification (Swann, 2010). It is advised that organizations avoid phrases such as “no comment,” as it can lead the public to believe that the organization is trying to hide something (Coombs, 2007). However, they should also be honest with publics and stakeholders when they do not know the answer to a question. When making announcements, organizations should also avoid confusing technical terms and jargon, as a lack of transparency and clarity can evoke negative responses (Coombs, 2007).

During the post-crisis stage, a comprehensive review of the crisis should be conducted. Here, successes and failures should be examined and evaluated, and the crisis management team will make any necessary changes to the organization and its practices, policies, employees, and implement these changes to prepare for future crises.

James (2005) identifies two primary types of organizational crisis: sudden crises and smoldering crises. Sudden crises occur without warning and are often beyond the institution’s control, thus, the organization’s are infrequently blamed for these. However, smoldering crises

are preventable, and may start out as minor issues, but when ignored by management, can develop into major crises (James, 2005).

To avoid smoldering crises, strong institutional leadership and internal and external communication with employees and clients is crucial. Preparation and prevention is vital. A good example of this is how the Red Cross makes it its primary mission to send supplies in advanced to prevent the escalation of a natural crisis. In addition, successful containment and damage control during and after a crisis depends on a strong leader to facilitate business recovery and seek learning opportunities from the experience.

With crisis response strategies, public relations practitioners need to come up with a multitude of strategies and tactics to handle the crisis. Today, social media is a friend to institutions, organizations, and public figures, but it can also be the biggest enemy. Organizations can openly communicate with their publics, often for free and use it as a tactic to address risks and crises. However, in turn, consumers, clients, and publics can seek intimate details about a person or institution, post and share photos, rally for or against a case, and even target companies without management having a clue (Gartner, 2011). With the rise of social media, privacy for an organization is no longer guaranteed.

Perhaps the biggest consequence of the social media boom is the need for speed. Everything moves much faster than even a few years ago. Response times have now shrunk to hours or minutes in dealing with postings and tweets (Gartner, 2011). This requires new strategies, including becoming familiar with all social media platforms (i.e Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram, etc).

Social media platforms have proved to be valuable in crisis communication. It is not only collaborative, but and participatory, too. For example, online discussions create awareness of a

situation while simultaneously soliciting audience feed back (Wendling, Radisch & Jacobzone, 2013). It can also help coordination among volunteers and emergency services in critical situations. Social media also allows companies to *listen* to their publics. A media specialist can pick up a conversation about an issue that is not expected and can give the company time to address it before becomes a major problem (Walter, 2013).

In addition, social media's decentralized nature allows for information to circulate quickly among key actors in a matter of seconds. With the power of technology and cyber communication continuing to grow and develop, it is essential that communications teams stay up to date on the latest social media advancements and use them to help their businesses or organizations in times of evaluation and during times of crisis.

Many universities have begun using social media tools as a platform for students to become key voices in crisis situations (McAllister, 2011). For schools and universities, official websites are ways to communicate the facts and address or diminish rumors. Websites are not only good for communicating with students, but parents and the rest of the university's community, as well (Madere, 2007). Often, it may be the only source where direct communication and official messages from the administration is provided.

Social media tools create unique opportunities for colleges and universities. With university-run social media sites like Facebook and Twitter accounts, the administration team can tell its side of the crisis first, before the media and journalists can (Jin, Lui, & Austin, 2011). The drawback, however, is the lack of control the universities have over the responses (Nicolay, Poels, & Snoeijers, 2014). On the Internet, it is easy for rumors and false information to spread, so it is imperative that university officials know how and when to use social media to get desired outcomes.

Although a crisis may start out small and seemingly low risk, social media platforms have the power to make it newsworthy. Ogrizek and Guillary (1999) noted that some crises are neither disasters nor major risk situations, but the media escalate the crisis trigger. When information about an incident is shared to thousands, or even millions in a matter of seconds, things can quickly escalate. Thus, it is becoming essential that organizations and university add social media into their crisis contingency plans (Romano, 2013).

Reputation Repair Strategies

When faced with a crisis that damages an organization's reputation, there are several strategies used to salvage the image. Common response strategies include attacking the accuser, blaming an outside group for the crisis (scapegoating), or denying the crisis (IPR, 2011). Companies may also use excuses, try to minimize the damage (justification), or claim defeasibility. Benoit (1997) identified several image restoration strategies that organizations may use if the action is seen as negative.

The first is denial. Here, the organization may shift the blame on a scapegoat or other company. They can also evade responsibility and often make excuses for their actions by practicing provocation, defeasibility, claiming the crisis was an accident, and harping on good intentions. The third strategy is to reduce the offensiveness of the event by mitigating the crisis (Benoit, 1997). They can also justify the act to make it seem less offensive. This includes bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation. Fourthly, the wrong-doer may attempt to make corrective actions to save the reputation of the company or organization. Finally, mortification, or apologies, can be used when the organization is indeed guilty of a misdeed.

Another action that many organizations do when dealing with crisis is to frequently remind their stakeholders about all the good things that the organization has done in the past, another attempt to minimize the situation. They may also offer compensation or recalls if the crisis has affected the public physically or financially. Full-fledged apologies may also be issued if the organization is truly at fault. Nevertheless, they should remind clients and stakeholders of its good intentions throughout the crisis, as the public wants to be assured that the organization can be trusted again after a crisis. Benoit's (1997) study found that mortification and corrective action were the most preferred image restoration strategies and garnered the most positive responses from the public.

While things may be bleak, crisis for a company does not necessarily have to be an end-all scenario. Studies have shown that when managers have led companies through crises with a "crisis as opportunity" mindset, the organization becomes stronger (James, 2008). Having a strong management team is imperative, as the leadership in crisis reflects the competency of an organization. Crisis response demonstrates how well the leadership structure serves the organization's goals and withstands a crisis (James, 2007).

A common misconception among leaders is that they need to solve the problem alone. However, leaders in a crisis must enlist several people to implement solutions by bringing them into their practice and asking them for help and ideas and employing corrective actions (Wall Street Journal, 2013). Organizations and companies can choose to use in-house communications specialists or hire externally. The advantage of having an external team is that they often specialize in certain types of crisis and they offer a lens of objectivity.

Crises at Universities

Institutions of higher education's methods of operation have changed dramatically in the past 50 years. As critical events hit the news, schools are under more media and public scrutiny than ever. With events ranging from shootings such as the Columbine, Sandy Hook, and the Virginia Tech Massacre, to sexual assault incidents and suicides, schools, colleges and universities are now forced to design and implement secure and effective CMPs.

Universities, like many organizations, have several important stakeholders. The primary ones being the students, as they are the most susceptible to exposure (Romano, 2013). Other stakeholders like parents, alumni and members of the college town community possess power to influence the perception of the crisis. Therefore, it is important that all messages and communication during a crisis extend to all publics. The strength of the leadership teams in the administration during a crisis is perhaps the best indicator of how the crisis will play out. Not only is the leadership teams' actions in crisis a reflection of the competency of an organization, but it also tests how well the institution's leadership structure serves the organization's goals and for them to be able to withstand crisis (James, 2005).

Some may think that an educational setting is not a typical place for a crisis to occur. However, schools and institutions of higher learning are becoming common crisis settings. In May 1970, the image of universities being a safe haven was tarnished when members of the Ohio National Guardsmen fired on student protesters at Kent State University. Four students were killed while nine were injured (Lewis & Hensley, 1998). The media wasted no time in publishing photos of dead students in major newspapers. In response to the shootings, students across the country organized strikes and protests to rally against the Vietnam War (Lewis & Hensley,

1998), while Kent State was shut down for two weeks (NPR, 2010). As this was one of the first national events of its kind, the public turned to the Federal Government for answers. The Nixon administration's response was viewed as "callous" and received gargantuan amounts of backlash (de Onis, 1970).

Other landmark crises at universities include the Virginia Tech massacre. Both incidents jeopardized the safety and security of the school's primary stakeholders: the students. In recent years, however, another type of crisis has been brought to the forefront of the news and media outlets: sexual assault. In 2006, three Duke University lacrosse players were falsely accused of raping a woman who worked as a stripper in a local Durham club. Due to the allegations, the three players were indicted and head coach, Mike Pressler, was fired. After further evidence was introduced, the charges against the lacrosse players were dropped. However, the case left a lasting effect on Duke University. During the crisis period, Duke's reputation of its students, faculty, and the university itself were called into question (Fortunato, 2008). Knowing that the media would be closely trailing their actions and responses, Duke University President, Richard Brodhead, said at a press conference, "Duke will be judged not by the events of 13 March, but by how we face and learn from those events" (Brodhead, 2006).

When the crisis broke, Duke University issued press releases, created a specific website where it directed its publics to, and Brodhead appeared on television segments such as 60 Minutes to discuss the crisis (Fortunato, 2008). While he admitted that the behavior of the students was inappropriate and urged the Duke community to cooperate with the investigation, he also made it clear that not all the facts had been presented. He also designed ad-hoc committees within the university to investigate if there had been a history of sexual assault at the university, plan the university's response, work with the Duke and Durham, North Carolina

community to address the incident, and instituted a campus culture initiative designed to investigate institutional practices and values (Fortunato, 2008). All of these were outlined in a letter addressed to the public (Brodhead, 2006).

All of the public relations activities illustrated Duke's plan to move forward from the incident and make the public see that these situations happen not only at Duke, but at other schools, too. Brodhead also pointed out that the incident was an opportunity to learn and discuss sexual assault. Jin, Park, and Len-Rios (2011) noted that when dealing with various publics, communicating key emotions is critical. Duke's strategy is considered successful, as it framed the incident in a way that led to positive and educational discourse about the future rather than dwelling on the past. By the president taking a large role in communication with internal and external publics, it reduced transparency and renewed the environment of trust for high stakeholders. The university's strategy of concession and adjustment helped them when they faced non-amicable publics, rather than being on the defensive (Jin, Park, & Len Rios, 2011).

However, the strong leadership diminished the crisis. For university crises, past case studies have shown that outcomes are more positive when high authority figures are involved in the communication process (Nicolay, Poels, & Snoeijers, 2014). This was the instance in the Duke University lacrosse case where president Brodhead took a prominent leadership role in addressing the case (Fortunato, 2008). When stakeholders have a face to communicate with, it can reduce transparency and make communication feel more accessible.

University crises can also shape students' perceptions of the school. The administration can lack transparency, and therefore, a gap is created between the students and university leadership. During a crisis, Fisher's Narrative can come into play, as the scandal is shaped by how the university narrates the situation and how involved the students become. In times of

crisis, the narrative between the administration of the university to its students and internal and external publics becomes extremely important (e.g., Heath & Millar, 2004). If the narrative is told with missing facts, inconsistent information, or not told at all, the response can be negative. This may stimulate or prolong the crisis.

While colleges and universities often face the dilemma of wanting to placate their publics and stakeholders (internal and external), they can be bound by legalities. It is in instances like these where cooperation among the various agencies at play is important (Stein, 2006). Communicating openly and honestly with all parties involved can make the public more forgiving and produce transparency.

Conclusion

Today, risks and crises can pervade many aspects of organizations, from top management, to finance, logistics, to misconduct. Several theorists and scholars suggest that the best practices for crisis communication include being fast and getting the story out first, disseminating accurate, consistent information, and being honest with the key publics and stakeholders. Image and reputation restoration depends on the perception of stakeholder groups, so communication with them should be transparent and honest.

In addition, strong leadership, especially in the cases of large companies or colleges and universities like what was seen in the crises of Tylenol and Duke University, is key to not only serve as a face to the publics, but to reassure internal employees, too. Having solid crisis management plans that are regularly reevaluated and tested can also help lessen the impact of a crisis.

For James Madison University's (JMU) sexual assault crisis, one could argue that the school held a favorable reputation among its stakeholders as a top-tier public Virginia school. Crisis history involves how the University has handled similar crisis in the past. Sexual assault incidents had occurred on the campus before, and to similar, neighboring schools, but that was before the rise of social media and when survivors rarely told their stories. In addition, how they have addressed previous crises (i.e., the riots that occurred in 2010's 'Springfest') will correlate to how well their handling of this crisis is perceived. How JMU has treated key stakeholders such as students, donors, and alumni will also play a part in whether there will be negative or positive attributions.

Whether it is a natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina, or a human error like the Watergate Scandal, crisis happens more often than not. In an era where news spirals rapidly, companies must be ready to respond to any type of crisis immediately. Having an excellent in house or external public relations team is crucial to help combat any crisis or product backlash. Nevertheless, all literature suggests that planning in advance, and having a solid contingency plan is the best way to save face and deal with crisis successfully.

Case Study & Analysis

About James Madison University

James Madison University was founded in Harrisonburg, Virginia in 1908 as the State Normal and Industrial School for Women. Under the first president, Julian Ashby Burrus, there was an initial enrollment of 209 students and a faculty of 15. In 1946, men were allowed to enroll as students under second president, Samuel Page Duke. During third president G. Tyler Miller's administration from 1949 to 1970, the campus grew by more than 240 acres and the University began master's programs. JMU's mission is, "We are a community committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives," and their vision statement is, "To be the national model for the engaged university: engaged with ideas and the world."

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

SCCT is rooted in Attribution Theory. Attribution Theory, which posits that people assign negative or positive attributions to events, garnering a negative or positive response (Kelley, 1967). SCCT expands the theory and predicts the reputational threat a crisis poses and designates crisis response strategies to protect the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2007). SCCT examines if the crisis was a result of outside factors or something the organization could have prevented. In addition, the SCCT posits that crisis managers should match strategic crisis

responses to the level of crisis responsibility and reputational threat posed by a crisis (Coombs, 2007). SCCT involves studying three factors to assess reputational threat: (1) initial crisis responsibility, (2) crisis history and (3) prior relational reputation. These factors will be taken into consideration and applied during this analysis to study the implications and effects of the sexual assault crisis at JMU.

Background and Overview

In June 2014, James Madison University (JMU) and four other Virginia schools appeared on a public list of 63 colleges and universities who were under investigation for their handling of sexual assault cases. Under this investigation, which was made public on June 4, 2014, the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights began to investigate each institution's gender equity Title IX policies. Title IX is a federal law that prohibits gender discrimination at colleges and universities that receive federal money (JMU, 2014). The policy requires colleges to respond appropriately to incidents of sexual assault and harassment on campus and all university property.

Over the past few decades, sexual assault on college campuses have come to the forefront of national attention. A new part of the equation, however, is the examination of universities' responses, or in some cases, lack thereof. In March of 2013, JMU sophomore, Sarah Butters, was vacationing in Panama City, Florida for spring break. During the trip, she was sexually assaulted after she and three male friends had been drinking. Unknown to Butters at the time, the men filmed the assault.

Upon their return to JMU, Butters discovered that the video had been distributed to many students. When she confronted the men, they denied it. However, she soon saw the video herself. The video shows Butters topless and being groped, while the men laugh and pull her onto their laps, trying to remove the bottom of her bathing suit. It includes audio of Butters saying, "This isn't okay, this isn't a good idea" (Kingkade, 2014).

According to WHSV, the local Harrisonburg news station, Butters discussed what actions she could pursue with her father, who is a police officer. Instead of going to Panama City Beach authorities, where the assault occurred, she went to JMU administration. JMU received a copy of the video and was told if the Code of Conduct was clearly violated, the case would move forward with or without her.

While she returned to school after break, the case did not move forward until late fall of 2013. In an interview with WHSV, she said, "It just seemed like they were trying to say that the video wasn't that bad at first because they didn't want to acknowledge it. They just wanted to avoid the situation all together" (Kingkade, 2014).

The last Butters heard from JMU's Office of Judicial Affairs (now the Office of Student Accountability and Restorative Practices) came via email. Titled "Final Decision in your Case," it explained that the three students, Mike Lunney, Jay Dertzbaugh and Nick Scallion, all members of the Sigma Chi Fraternity, were responsible for sexual assault and harassment. However, they would only be expelled upon graduation (Kingkade, 2014). This means that they would not be able to step foot on campus for any reason, attend alumni events on campus, or walk at graduation. However, the three would still be able to continue their studies until then. Butters was dissatisfied with this decision and took the news to media outlets.

Soon after, Butter's story went viral. Posts began pouring into news feeds on Facebook and #StandWithButters was trending on Twitter. According to a Twitter feed list compiled at JMU, at least 150 Tweets about the Butters case were published from the period of June 23 to August 24, 2014. Later that week, an online petition at Change.org calling for reform at JMU had collected more than 3,100 signatures. Many of the signatures came from people located in Virginia.

Here is a timeline of major events that took place:

- May 1, 2014- The Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights releases a list of schools under investigation for their Title IX policies.
- June 14, 2014- JMU is named as one of the schools on the Department of Education's list, as reported by the *Washington Post*.
- June 18, 2014- The *Huffington Post* publishes an article discussing JMU's decision to expel the alleged assaulters of Sarah Butters after graduation. Butters is interviewed in the article, which soon goes viral, with various media outlets soon commenting on the decision.
- June 19, 2014- The university issues an official statement regarding the media rumors.
- June 2014- JMU's Office of Judicial Affairs changes its name to the Office of Student Accountability and Restorative Practices (OSARP).
- June 25, 2014- Political Pundit, Jon Stewart, makes a segment about JMU titled, "The Fault in Our Schools," about JMU's decision. This pushes the crisis to a national level of attention.
- June 28, 2014- The president of JMU, Jonathan Alger, issues a statement regarding student safety.
- July 31, 2014- JMU's Office of Residence releases a video of import members of JMU's administration dedicating themselves to preventing sexual assault on campus.

- August 20, 2014- The University issues another statement detailing developing programs aimed at sexual assault prevention and awareness.
- August 26, 2014- At the start of the 2014-2015 school year, the University Health Center launches a new online program for sexual assault awareness and prevention.
- November 19, 2014- *The Rolling Stone* magazine comes out with a graphic expose about sexual assault at the University of Virginia, a neighboring school.
- March 6, 2015- Sarah Butters files a civil lawsuit against the JMU.

The Sexual Assault Problem on College Campuses

For some students, the college or university they attend may seem like a safe environment. However, that is not always the case. According to the National Institute of Justice, for every 1,000 women attending a college or university, there are 35 incidents of rape each academic year. In addition, studies show that off-campus sexual victimization is much more common than on-campus victimization among college women. Also, less than 5% of completed or attempted rapes against college women were reported to law enforcement. However, in two-thirds of the incidents, the victim told another person that was not family or school officials (Cullen, Fisher, and Turner, 2000). These statistics emphasize the importance of sexual assault and harassment response on college campuses.

At many schools, students have the option to file a formal complaint with the university, or file an informal complaint and confront their attackers directly. However, many choose to not say anything. Many campuses offer resources for students to use if they have been assaulted or

know someone who has experienced an incident. JMU's Student Handbook provides sexual assault and harassment definitions as follows (JMU, 2014):

- Sexual assault - Engaging or attempting to engage in any sexual intercourse or penetration, however slight, with any object or body part upon another individual without consent.
- Non-consensual sexual contact – Intentional touching, either of the victim or when the victim is forced to touch, of a body part in a sexual manner without consent, however slight, direct, or indirect (e.g. through clothing).
- Sexual exploitation - Taking sexual advantage of another person without consent.
- Sexual harassment – Unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that seriously and/or repeatedly affects an employee's or student's performance or creates a hostile work or study environment.
- Relational violence – Relationally motivated physical assault(s), or serious threat(s) of bodily harm, including, but not limited to domestic violence and dating violence.
- Consent - Words or actions that show a knowing and voluntary agreement to engage in mutually agreed-upon sexual activity.
- Incapacitation - Physical and/or mental inability to make informed, rational judgments.

Previous Crisis at JMU

A main factor SCCT takes into account when understanding reputational damage from a crisis, is how the organization has handled them previously. In April 2010, JMU faced a relatively large crisis in the community when an annual spring celebration at an off-campus

housing complex transformed into a riot. During that year's 'SpringFest,' public property was defaced and several people were injured and sent to the hospital over the course of the 8,000 person riot (that in previous years had only been attended by about 2,000 individuals). The situation was almost immediately addressed by the university and reported by media outlets.

Then President Linwood H. Rose addressed students in an email to the campus community saying, "Your collective behavior was an embarrassment to your university and a discredit to our reputation" (Johnson, 2010). Local newspapers and media labeled the event a "war zone." It was later revealed that many attendees had no affiliation with JMU and came from other institutions and towns (Johnson, 2010). To ensure something like this was unlikely to happen again, the university created the event, Madipalooza, a substance free event to take place annually in the spring to illustrate their efforts of preventing another riot from occurring. While they acknowledged that other parties were involved, the administration took full responsibility for the students who attended, rather than blaming external forces. JMU's reputation as the National Model for the Engaged University has stood since then, and subsequent events and accolades mitigated the long-term impact of the SpringFest crisis.

The Response and Silence

One might argue that the Butters case became a crisis when political commentator, Jon Stewart, made a jab at JMU's decision, while alerting his audience about the disparities among men and women when it comes to sexual assault. Titled "The Fault in Our Schools," (a play on the popular young adult novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*) Stewart showed a picture of the campus and said, "[JMU] the classic Virginia safety school is no longer safe." Stewart was incredulous

about the punishment issued by Judicial Affairs and used the JMU case as a segue to discuss rape and sexual assault culture. Comedienne Jessica Williams then addressed the double standards that women face in regards to sexual assault.

The *Daily Show* clip brought the JMU crisis to the forefront of the nation's sexual assault discussion and evoked a response from the university. However, the media did not show the university in a positive light. The 'media-as-ally' tactic requires that organizations treat the media as allies and use them to develop opportunities and communicate with publics (Smith, 2013). As JMU was not initially forthcoming with information because the media reported the incident first, there was some hostility among the media and stakeholder relations.

On June 28, 2014, shortly after the *Daily Show* clip aired, JMU's Office of Public Affairs released a statement addressing the stories and comments about the Butters incident circulating throughout various media outlets. Their response capitalized that while the students remained the university's most important stakeholders, there were still topics that administration could not discuss due to legal boundaries. The statement also talked about how the school will be compliant with Title XI policies and the OCR investigation. The Office of Public Affairs ended the statement by affirming its dedication to providing a safe environment for the JMU community and listing resources on campus available to students facing sexual assault-related issues. Readers were left with a closing remark about promises to review university policies and procedures. Many were unhappy with this statement, as it did not provide concrete information or the apology for the decision that many supporters of Butters were seeking.

Although the crisis broke over the summer, the university may have garnered a more positive response if it had treated it as if the crisis happened during the school year with constant communication. Per the students' opinions (see appendix F), not enough information

was disseminated throughout the summer to satisfy the students or publics' questions or concerns. The university was perceived as using a hush-hush tactic by not sending potentially relevant information to faculty and professors, and thus, did not generate a favorable reaction from their most important stakeholders: students and their parents.

When a major crisis hits, full disclosure is crucial. Even when there are unknown facts and details that the organization cannot share, they should disseminate as much information as possible for the sake of honesty and transparency. In this instance, silence and strategic ambiguity in the acute stage of the crisis did not work in the university's favor and, per SCCT, did not positively influence the public's perception of the crisis.

It is also worth rhetorically and critically analyzing the statements and actions that JMU did make following the Butters case. Using the theories discussed in the literature review, statements and actions can be analyzed in a variety of ways. For this case's purpose, William Benoit's Image Restoration Theory, which provides strategies for organizations or companies whose image or reputation has been tarnished, is used (Benoit, 1997). Image restoration strategies used include: denial, avoiding responsibility (through scapegoating and defeasibility), bolstering, reducing offensiveness through minimization, differentiation, or transcendence. Other strategies are corrective action and mortification (apology), where the accused takes full responsibility (Benoit, 1995).

JMU's first statement by the Office of Public Affairs statement goes straight into a defeasibility strategy when they say, "Due to legal / privacy requirements, there are limitations to what we can say publicly about a pending matter of this type" (James Madison University, 2014). They do this again when they say, "it is important to note that the media has reported allegations of inappropriate touching that occurred on a spring break trip in Florida."

Defeasibility is a risky tactic. Sometimes it works and other times it does not. For this instance, one would argue that the tactic failed, as people's focus was not on where the assault occurred and how administration could reveal very little, but about the punishment and why it was given. The press release omitted any reference to OSAARP's decision. They frequently used bolstering to express how their first priority is the students and mention efforts students are currently taking against sexual assault (i.e. a trip to the White House) and campus resources, which is important to share. However, the statement skirted around the main concerns students may have had about sex offenders walking around campus.

It was later revealed that the university already had several sexual assault awareness initiatives in place before the crisis struck. These included the "Dukes Step Up" program during 1787 Orientation and the Red Flag Campaign to raise awareness and increase prevention. However, these were not mentioned in the first press releases and statements, and therefore, the students did not see the school's good intentions.

As the crisis peaked over the orientation period, I created three separate materials to mitigate the crisis. The first was an agenda to be sent out to all university faculty and staff with information about the crisis and talking points for them to go off of if prospective students and parents had questions (see appendix D). This was important because when the crisis hit, faculty and staff had no information. As a key public in the crisis, it is important that all university employees or affiliates are receiving and repeating a consistent and concise message.

One of the most important stakeholders of the university are parents and guardians of students. Therefore, I created a PowerPoint presentation that was to be given to those chaperoning their children during Summer Springboard (see appendix H). The presentation has important information, such as a clear definition and description of the Title IX policy, a

breakdown of the school's judicial proceedings and key numbers and offices for sexual assault information. Parents had just as many, if not more, questions about the crisis and their fears needed to be addressed in a transparent, informative manner.

The third public relations material for orientation was a flyer to be given to incoming freshmen by their First Year Orientation Guides (FrOGs) (see appendix I). New students probably had many questions regarding the media's messages and rumors, and it would have been beneficial for the university to address the students directly with ways that they can be safe on campus, especially in regards to sexual assault. Later on in the year, this happened with direct communication from Alger and campus groups via email and digital platforms, but this communication was truly needed during the first few weeks of the crisis. Also created were press releases explaining changes the administration would be making to the sexual assault policy and information from OSAARP about their judicial hearings and procedures and responses to media rumors and *The Daily Show* clip (see appendices A, B and C).

Leadership

Upon further analysis of the case, there was a perceived absence in leadership during the crisis. In the successfully handled Duke University Lacrosse crisis, the president of the university, Richard Brodhead, was at the forefront of interviews, reports, and plans to move forward. Likewise, with the Tylenol Murder case, the CEO of Johnson and Johnson made himself available for interviews and questioning. However, JMU's president, Jonathan Alger (who has been in his position for a two years), remained relatively quiet on the matter. While he did a few interviews (one with the JMU student-run newspaper), he did not make many

appearances to discuss the incident during the immediate acute crisis phase. According to the JMU student handbook, Alger has the ultimate authority to issue sanctions (JMU, 2014).

One of the key functions of crisis management leadership is to ensure that everything is consistent and that everyone is on the same page. However, JMU faculty, including professors, did not receive any word from administration about the Butters crisis. They did not receive a talking point sheet like I designed in my plan, nor were they given guidelines on how they should respond to questions. This happened at a crucial time over the summer when campus experienced many visitors, including key stakeholders such as potential students, parents, and current students taking summer classes.

Due to the ambiguity surrounding the crisis situation, I drafted letters that were to be sent to JMU faculty and students from the Office of the President about a week after the crisis hit (See appendices F and G). It discussed what had happened (with as much detail as the administration could provide at the time) and what steps the school was taking to respond to the allegations. Although President Alger sent out updates and messages near the end of the semester, it was imperative that a letter similar to those should have been sent around the start of the year, rather than the end of the fall semester as a way to diminish the crisis. Nevertheless, later in the year by framing the incident in a way so that it was seen as an opportunity to learn and discuss sexual assault, the administration did a solid job at urging the JMU community to move forward and made clear that they would not be known for their handling of sexual assault.

Silence

Legally, JMU was bound to keep quiet on anything relating to the Sarah Butters case under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). FERPA is a Federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. The law applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education (United States Department of Education, 2014). The university may be frustrated with this and wish to share information with their publics, or they may find FERPA to be a convenient excuse to remain quiet on the matter.

Since the Butters crisis, some offices involved in the case have responded indirectly. The Office of Student Accountability and Restorative Practices (OSARP), formerly known as the office of Judicial Affairs, is JMU's arm that is in charge of handling student judicial cases and hearings. With a "New Name, New Website, and New Location" tactic, OSARP tried to change their image and possibly dissociate themselves from the Butters case. They also changed the jargon associated with their hearing and appeals processes to reflect a more educational standpoint rather than a legal one. However, the actual appeals and hearing processes are the same as before. Nevertheless, one might argue that the tactic worked, because the JMU community rarely refers to OSAARP as Judicial Affairs anymore, and new students do not know the significance of the office's old title. From a public relations perspective, however, the "restorative image" can do some good, but it can also be deceiving, as students might not realize that the judicial processes are still largely the same.

In a public meeting of the Student Government Association, Chris Erhart, Assistant Director of Community Outreach and Restorative Practices, from OSAARP briefly discussed

sexual assault education. While their office provides educational classes for substance and alcohol abusers, he said that they had not developed any type of sexual assault awareness and prevention courses. While sexual assault may not be part of OSAARP's umbrella, they should inform students who may be charged with it about how they can prevent it from happening again.

JMU may have realized that the strategic ambiguity response was ineffective, so as the year progressed, they became more proactive about sexual assault by publishing literature, starting media campaigns and getting several student organizations involved with awareness. However, this push should have begun before and during the crisis to enhance credibility and dispel negative images.

Another faction of the university that stayed relatively silent was the office of Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL), particularly the Sigma Chi fraternity, whose members were part of the case. While they had to abide by university policy, a sexual assault awareness project or public event on campus would have expressed empathy and willingness to move on from the incident surrounding them. I created a program advertising a week where FSL would partner with the University Health Center and C.A.R.E to promote sexual assault prevention at the beginning of the fall semester (see appendix J).

On March 9, 2015, *The Huffington Post* reported that a lawsuit would be filed against the university in response to the expulsion after graduation punishment. In an official statement, the university said, "To date the university has been prevented from sharing its side of the story due to the constraints of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Now that the plaintiff has filed a civil lawsuit, the university will be at liberty to share the facts and circumstances in the case through the normal channels of litigation in due course. As the

university already stated, rest assured that as this process unfolds and is resolved, you will see that JMU handles such serious matters with integrity and compassion” (JMU, 2015). Time will tell what information the university reveals and how it will impact the evaluation and long-term effects of the crisis.

Impact

The crisis at JMU had a national effect on other colleges and universities: it has caused several other sexual assault survivors from colleges across the country to speak out against their schools’ mistreatment of them after they reported their assault. Kairos, in short, is defined as “good timing.” Much like the Virginia Tech shootings raised debates about gun control and student safety; JMU’s case introduced a forum for sexual assault awareness and prevention. For example, *TIME* magazine reported that college junior, Emma Sulkowicz, is one of 23 Columbia and Barnard University students who filed a federal Title IX complaint alleging that the university mishandled sexual assault cases. Sulkowicz’s rapist was not expelled, so she carries around her dorm room mattress until he is given a suitable punishment, in her opinion, of expulsion (TIME, 2014).

Only a few years ago, it was relatively unheard of for a rape or sexual assault survivor from prestigious universities to share their stories with the public. With social media and the relationship between media and politics radically changing, it is now becoming the norm to point fingers at assailants. Occidental College sociologist, Danielle Dirks, calls it, “An atrocity tale about how poorly you were treated by the people you pay \$62,000 a year to protect you” (Grigoriadas, 2014). Now, Sulkowicz, along with hundreds of other students from Swarthmore,

Brandeis, JMU, the University of North Carolina, and many others, have begun a sexual assault revolution on campuses (Grigoriadas, 2014).

Sexual assault incidents have also hit close to home in the Shenandoah Valley. In November 2014, the *Rolling Stone* Magazine published an article about an alleged gang rape on the University of Virginia's campus. The story went into graphic, explicit detail about the night a girl named "Jackie" was raped by several fraternity brothers at their house and the subsequent backlash she faced. Initially, the article caused an uproar among the public about the mishandling of sexual assault incidents, and as a response, the president of UVA disbanded fraternity activities until the new year. While the truthfulness of the entire article was later questioned, it pressured administrations at universities across the nation to take concrete action against campus sexual assault. It also presented a distraction of sorts to mitigate the JMU crisis by putting the sexual assault attention on another institution. A partnership or alliance tactic could have formed between the two Virginia schools to take action against sexual assault on campus.

A positive outcome of this case, however, is potential legislation to combat sexual assault on college campuses, particularly in Virginia. Many universities (JMU included) do not report or collect accurate information about the number of rapes in their schools and students may be indirectly encouraged not to report them. JMU does not conduct any sexual assault surveys, University Health Center Assistant Director, Liz Howley, told JMU's Student Government Association, and that JMU instead uses the national statistic, which states that one in four women are sexually assaulted (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007). She reported that they have not distributed a school-wide survey because the questions may be too sensitive and there is no sure method to guarantee honest responses.

On the congressional field, due to the vast amount of oversights and discrepancies, Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri released an extensive report that revealed the poor handling of campus sexual assaults. McCaskill found in her report that “institutions failed to comply with laws regarding handling sexual violence on campus in various ways, including failing to have a Title IX coordinator, not knowing the scope of the problem on their campuses, not responding to students’ reports of sexual violence, not training students, faculty, and staff on preventing and responding to rape, and having biased or harmful procedures for adjudicating sexual crimes.”

This legislation and the like have caused colleges and universities to adapt more proactive strategies to combat sexual assault, rather than be on the reactive. Although sexual assault occurring in college was already a national issue, the incidents at schools across the country have kept it on the national front burner. The White House Task Force on Sexual Assault, which was established in April 2014, has continued to research and identify best practices for addressing sexual assault. While the immediate crisis is over for JMU, I predict that it will flare up again, like with the ongoing lawsuit the university is currently facing. Crises go in cycles, and JMU’s sexual assault case is considered a slow-burning crisis, as there was some foreshadowing of events to come.

In this project, I recommended that JMU should have had clear and transparent communication with all audiences from the onset of the crisis, and that administration should have made themselves as available as legal boundaries allowed them to be. In addition, the university should have reached out to their own staff and students to make sure their concerns were answered properly, first. They also needed to take into consideration new contingency

plans before the crisis hit, and now, enact the new legislation into their policies when evaluating their stance on sexual assault and prevention.

Clear, concise and transparent communication with their publics so every stakeholder is on the same page will be crucial over the next few months. Nevertheless, this is an issue that has caught the globe's attention and continue to need the help of efficient and effective public relations teams to ensure the safety and security of important stakeholders and publics.

Appendix A

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY RESPONDS TO STUDENT AND MEDIA COMPLAINTS

HARRISONBURG- June 26, 2014- Recently, a former James Madison University (JMU) student filed a complaint with the University's judicial process for an incident involving sexual assault and harassment. The incident was also filed with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). Since then, there has been much debate amongst the media, and the JMU community. Sexual assault is a serious issue that the University does not take lightly, and will continue this important discourse surrounding cases of sexual assault.

Colleges and universities across the country are affected by sexual assault. In light of recent events, the University is currently reviewing all of its policies and procedures with the help of the OCR. We will strive to maintain effective and transparent communication with all students and faculty to address questions and concerns about our sexual assault policies, as well as raise discussions on how we can better prevent future incidents of sexual harassment and assault.

Additionally, we will be implementing new training programs for faculty, staff and students this coming academic year. It is imperative that all members of the JMU community be prepared and knowledgeable about these sensitive issues. We recently sent a group of students to the White House to be involved in President Obama's White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault. We are eager to research and implement new resources and guidelines that will increase students' comfort and awareness for help after experiencing or learning of sexual assault incidents.

As a University, we are dedicated to fostering a safe, inclusive atmosphere for every person who steps foot on campus. We will continually strive to protect all students from sexual harassment and assault, as well as provide them with the resources to cultivate a safe learning environment.

James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, is a top-tier, middle sized institution for higher education. We are a community committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives. For more information, please visit jmu.edu

-End-

Appendix B

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY RESPONDS TO MEDIA PARODY OF SEXUAL ASSAULT INVESTIGATION

HARRISONBURG- June 26, 2014- In recent weeks, James Madison University has been researching their policies regarding sexual assault. While it is an issue across schools in the United States, the University strives to provide a safe learning environment for all of its students.

Recently, various media outlets have been discussing the issue of sexual assault on college campuses. The University appreciates the discourse and encourages all members of the JMU community to participate in the discussion of how to better prevent and raise awareness about sexual harassment and abuse. While some forms of media can be amusing and entertaining, the public should be aware that these outlets may not have all of the information or correct facts about recent incidents.

This week marks the beginning of our Summer Springboard Orientation for the Class of 2018, an exciting time for past, present, and future Dukes. We strive to protect all of our students from sexual harassment and assault. Our first priority will always be the safety and security of our students. We will support this through implementing new sexual assault training programs for students and faculty. We will also support this mission by increasing the number of resources for students who have experienced sexual assault or are affected by it.

The University appreciates your support in dispelling rumors and innuendos. We must continue to communicate openly with our publics and will share more information as it becomes available.

James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, is a top-tier, middle-sized institution for higher education. We are a community committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives. For the latest information, please visit jmu.edu.

-End-

Appendix C



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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jmu.edu

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY RESPONDS TO JUDICIAL DECISION IN SEXUAL ASSAULT INVESTIGATION

HARRISONBURG- June 26, 2014- Recently, a former James Madison University (JMU) student filed a complaint with the University's Judicial Affairs (now the Office of Student Accountability and Restorative Practices) department about an alleged sexual assault incident that occurred in Florida last March. Subsequently, there has been some concern about the the university's choice of consequence for the involved students. The University is one of 62 educational institutions currently being investigated by the United States Department of Education for how they handle reports of sexual assault.

"James Madison University takes very seriously any allegation of sexual assault and is committed to providing a safe and inclusive environment for every member of the JMU community," said University Spokesperson, Don Egle.

The University will fully cooperate with the Department of Education on this matter, but would like to clarify some aspects of this issue:

- The incident occurred on a spring break trip in Florida. Even though the alleged assault did not take place on campus property, it will continue to be investigated by the university with utmost importance.
- Our Judicial Affairs team includes students, faculty, and staff. The process of filing a complaint involves levels of appeals and both the filer and accused are protected under the rights of due process.

- The imposed sanctions are designed to reflect the incident as best as they can be determined. Due to legal limitations, however, there are restrictions on we can publicly announce about this particular case.

In light of recent events, the University is reviewing their regulations and policies with guidance from the Department of Education. We strive to uphold honest and transparent communication about issues related to sexual assault with all members of the JMU community.

James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, is a top-tier, middle sized institution for higher education. We are a community committed to preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens who lead productive and meaningful lives. For more information, please visit jmu.edu.

-End-

Appendix D

Title IX Investigation and Future Plans for James Madison University

As a university home to over 20,000 students, we strive to create a comfortable, safe, enjoyable environment for all members of our community. To uphold this, we are conducting a comprehensive review of our policies and procedures relating to sexual harassment and assault. We will also be enhancing supportive resources and implementing new training programs for faculty, staff, and students. While this review began long before recent media reports, we are taking federal insight on this subject to ensure that we are adapting the best practices for our students.

- Mandatory for all incoming students (freshmen and transfer), a segment about sexual assault awareness will be developed for fall 2015 Orientation.
- All faculty and staff members will be re-trained with new sexual assault programs that includes eliminating the “bystander effect.”
- All Resident Advisors and Hall Directors will be trained and given guidance by professional counselors and Harrisonburg Public Safety on sexual assault to ensure that they are ready to help all residents.
- Inclusive campaigns and initiatives to promote awareness about sexual assault will continue to occur on campus throughout the year.
- A public forum with administrators from other Virginia universities will occur to share and discuss different sexual assault policies and procedures and their effectiveness.

We are dedicated to leading a fostering a community where students feel safe and secure at their home away from home. Please help encourage the discussion about sexual assault to promote awareness and student safety.

For more information, please contact your department head or administrator and visit jmu.edu for the latest updates.

Appendix E



Monday, June 30, 2014

James Madison University to Hold Sexual Assault Workshop

On Monday, July 7, 2014, The James Madison University Center for Counseling and Development will be holding a sexual harassment and assault workshop. The event is free and open to all JMU staff, faculty, and students. It will take place at 10:00 a.m. in the Festival Ballroom.

Due to recent discussions raised by the Department of Education's Title IX investigation, the University is reviewing its sexual assault policies and would appreciate input from the JMU community. The safety and security of students is JMU's first priority and will strive to foster a safe, comfortable academic and social environments.

The workshop will consist of an over view of the university's current sexual assault policies and research about policies at other state institutions, followed by breakout sessions to come up with ideas for how to address the rape culture and continue the discourse on sexual assault.

Please contact event liasion, Julie Hirschhorn at hirschjm@jmu.edu with any questions.

-End-

Appendix F

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

August 2014

Dear JMU faculty and staff,

As we embark on a new academic term, I wanted to provide an update about our ongoing efforts at James Madison University with regard to the issue of sexual assault. Our extended campus community needs to share a clear and mutual understanding of the University's ongoing efforts to confront this serious problem.

The core of this message is that there is no place for sexual assault at James Madison University. As a community, we must all do everything we possibly can to work towards preventing sexual assault, punishing perpetrators and supporting survivors. The administration is deeply committed to these efforts, and we have also benefited from the cooperation and leadership of students and student organizations on this front. We continue to share ideas and best practices with our colleagues across the Commonwealth through the Council of Presidents of Virginia's Public Colleges and Universities, and the Governor's Task Force on Combating Campus Sexual Violence.

I listed some of our new initiatives in a message I shared with the campus recently. In order to help provide coordination for our efforts, in July 2014 I compiled a task force to take a comprehensive look at all we are doing. The group has accomplished a lot over the past several months, and a full listing of their work can be found at www.jmu.edu/titleIX/title-ix-task-force. Much remains to be done, but I know that we are up to the challenge and can move past this, together.

We will continue to provide updates on our ongoing efforts in this area. I appreciate the time and attention of all of our community members on these issues, and believe that we can make great progress by working together.

Sincerely,

Jonathan R. Alger, President, James Madison University

Appendix G

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

August 2014

Dear JMU students,

I hope you have all enjoyed your summer breaks and are ready to begin the fall semester! As we prepare to embark on a new academic term, I wanted to provide an update about our ongoing efforts at James Madison University with regard to the issue of sexual assault and what we are currently doing to move forward. Our extended campus community needs to share a clear and mutual understanding of the University's ongoing efforts to confront this serious problem.

The core of this message is that there is no place for sexual assault at James Madison University. As a community, we must all do everything we possibly can to work towards preventing sexual assault, effectively punishing perpetrators and supporting survivors. As students, your safety is the top priority. The administration is deeply committed to these efforts, and we have benefited from the cooperation and leadership of many students and campus organizations on this front, such as C.A.R.E and the Campus Coalition Against Sexual Assault. We continue to share ideas and best practices with our colleagues across the Commonwealth through the Council of Presidents of Virginia's Public Colleges and Universities, and the Governor's Task Force on Combating Campus Sexual Violence.

I listed some of our new initiatives in a message recently shared with faculty and staff. To provide coordination for our efforts, in July 2014 I compiled a task force to take a comprehensive look at all we are doing. The group has accomplished a lot over the past several months, and a full listing of their work can be found at www.jmu.edu/titleIX/title-ix-task-force. We will continue to provide updates on our ongoing efforts in this area. I appreciate the time and attention of all of our community members on these issues, and believe that we can make great progress by working together and move forward.

Sincerely,

Jonathan R. Alger

President, James Madison University

Appendix H



YOUR GUIDE TO SAFETY AT JMU

WELCOME TO JMU!

We are so excited to have you as an official Duke! This university prides itself on fostering a safe and secure learning environment for all members of the JMU community. As your OPA shows you our beautiful campus, please be aware of the sexual assault programs and resources available. Enjoy your day and start wearing purple!

RESOURCES

- **THE CAMPUS COALITION AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT** is a group composed of faculty, staff, and students who hope to stimulate dialogue in our community around issues of sexual violence.
- Aside from check-ups and doctor's appointments, the **UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER** provides programming and services rooted in prevention of sexual and intimate partner violence.
- **THE COUNSELING AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT CENTER** helps with crisis assistance and offers sexual trauma empowerment programs (STEP) for individuals and groups. Individual counseling is provided with flexible hours to fit students' schedules. The CSDC also has support groups for survivors of sexual trauma guided by counselors.
- The counseling center also can provide medical, judicial, and legal referrals to survivors of sexual assault.
- **CAMPUS ASSAULT RESPONSE (CARE)** is a student run organization that addresses the issue of sexual assault and prevention on campus. They have a free helpline that assists students who have been affected by sexual assault.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO STAY SAFE?

- Use the Buddy System. While campus is a safe place at night, if you are walking back to campus or traveling off, take a friend with you.
- Use JMU resources such as **SAFERIDES** (the number is on the back of your JAC!) to get yourself and others home safely. FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT WWW.JMU.EDU/HEALTHCENTER

HOW DO YOU STAY SAFE?

James Madison University's Sigma Chi Fraternity, partnered with the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life, Campus Coalition Against Sexual Assault, and the University Health Center welcome you to join "Stay Safe: a Week of Sexual Assault Awareness" during the week of October 20-24, 2014.



October 20: Stop by the Commons to Sign Sigma Chi's petition to prevent sexual assault at JMU. Then, join us in TDU for a panel featuring sexual assault survivors who will share their stories.

October 21: Keynote address will be given by President Alger at 7:00p.m. in the Wilson Auditorium.

October 22: Come to Grafton-Stovall Theater at 4:00 p.m. to hear University Health Center Assistant Director, Liz Howley, discuss how we can raise awareness about sexual assault.

60% of sexual assault cases will remain unreported and **1 in 6** American women will be a victim of sexual assault. Let's fight the statistics.

October 23: Do you know somebody who has been sexually assaulted? Counselors from Varner House will be speaking at 7:30 p.m. in the Festival Ballroom to talk about dealing with sensitive issues.

October 24: To raise awareness about sexual assault in the Harrisonburg community, join us as we walk downtown with Eastern Menonite University and Bridgewater College. Handmade signs are encouraged!

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Reflective Essay

For years I've known that I would not be happy in my future career sitting in a desk. As a critical thinker, problem solver and writer, I knew that I need jobs and projects that would keep me thinking on my feet and active. The public relations industry combines all of those things, along with my passion for making long-lasting connections with individuals and is thus what I want my post-graduate career to relate to.

For my senior honors project, I wanted to incorporate my passion for public relations, while challenging myself in a rigorous academic environment that JMU provides. After years of watching political TV dramas, I became interested in the crisis management and image repair side of PR. Originally, I wanted to conduct my own crisis management simulation. However, after talking to some advisors, I realized conducting a whole campaign may be a bit tedious (and something that I would already do in my Public Relations Campaigns senior capstone course). Instead, I decided to track a communications crisis and evaluate the crisis through a case study and developing my own PR materials.

To experience a sense of "real-world" application, my advisor and I decided that I wouldn't know when the crisis was coming, and that over the summer, he would give me PR assignments to mitigate the crisis as the real PR team was trying to do the same simultaneously. When the JMU and Sarah Butters crisis hit, my advisors and I knew that this was the crisis to do, and on June 18, 2014, the project officially began. What followed was a crazy summer of press releases, tracking articles and tweets with the hashtag #JMU or #StandWithButters and writing my response to the crisis all at once. It was challenging, but showed me a process very akin to the real public relations industry.

I started this project in the middle of my junior year, and my first step, as with any public relations campaign, was research. I poured over the library catalogues and textbooks researching crises. From Watergate to Enron, to Hurricane Katrina, I learned about different types of crises and appropriate response strategies. I studied the difference between proactive and reactive strategies and which worked better, especially in cases of crisis in a college setting. I also learned a lot about how the rise and popularity of social media can make or brake a brand. Once my official crisis began, I was able to apply the theories and strategies I learned about through my research and courses to my own tactics I implemented.

While there was a lot of sweat and even some tears, the educational impact of completing this project has been invaluable. This project taught me lessons in organization, multitasking, time management and objectivity. I've written long papers before, but the moment I looked down at my page count and realized it was past 60, it was kind of amazing. To know that I was able to push myself academically and intellectually to complete an important project was incredibly rewarding.

Although there was never a time where I considered quitting this project, it was never unchallenging. From my literature review and case study and analysis, I now know so much about crisis communication. I'm not just talking about theory and definitions, but how practitioners need to be *always* thinking ahead, evaluating, and making hard decisions that can either positively or negatively affect their publics.

Perhaps the most difficult part of this project was learning a lesson in objectivity and neutrality. As a public relations practitioner, you have to be very neutral for the sake of the client and the publics. For the Sarah Butters case, it was *very* hard for me to remain objective and unbiased. As a student and a female, I certainly had my own views, and extremely critical of

JMU's responses. I understood that the administration was limited by FERPA, but during the first few days of the crisis, there was little to no communication. Unlike SpringFest where former President Linwood Rose addressed the students and community *that night*, there was silence. The most important stakeholders, current students, parents, and alumni, needed to know that they were safe and transparent, constant communication is the way to do that, not strategic ambiguity.

In addition, while there were tactics and events in place before the crisis broke to address sexual assault, they were not revealed until the beginning of the school year. Those needed to be mentioned immediately, as a way to still address the crisis without violating FERPA, and encourage the community to come together and move on. Some tactics worked (like the re-branding of OSAARP to dissociate themselves from Judicial Affairs and the crisis). However, the message that this is a safe, warm community who puts students first at all costs, needed to be disseminated down all avenues, because the opposite message was received in the original decision.

This project was also a lesson in academic rigor and time management. A year and a half seems like a long time to complete a project, but I initially did not realize how much work truly goes into this. Looking back, I think it has all paid off and I am excited to present the finished project. I know that I have talked about this process on job interviews and with underclassmen who will soon embark on the same journey. I hope that in the future, I can use the skills that I learned from this experience and apply them towards other endeavors and accomplishments. I would not have been able to do this without the support of my fellow senior friends in the honors program, my advisors and readers. This has been the pinnacle of my JMU academic career and I cannot wait to see where it takes me.

Honor's Project Journal

3/2/14

I thought for a long time about what I wanted to do for my senior honors project. I knew I wanted the subject to be applicable to a potential career in public relations, but also doable with a busy schedule. After years of watching political TV dramas, I became interested in the crisis management and image repair side of PR. Originally, I wanted to conduct my own crisis management simulation. However, after talking to some advisors, I realized conducting a whole campaign may be a bit tedious. Thus, I have decided to, instead, track a communications crisis.

During this, I will log a journal about what I would do, while tracking the communications team for the company or organization. In addition, I will do an analysis of the short and long-term effects of the company's decisions and study strategies they used. I will compare and contrast the campaign to previous communications crisis in a comprehensive research study. To prepare for my project, I plan to research what crisis *is* and the different ways communications teams handle them globally.

3/12/14

I have begun research for my literature review. First, I will be investigating what exactly crisis communication entails, the different types of crisis, and contingency plans a company uses to conduct successful public relations with target audiences. In addition, I will be studying landmark crisis communication issues, such as the Tylenol Murders, the 2004 Tsunami, and

several others. This research will help me better understand the foundations of crisis communication and management, and how Public Relations practitioners and their clients handle difficult situations. I am continuing to meet with Dr. Hickerson to discuss plans.

3/30/14

I am continuing to work on my literature review. I have lately been working on gathering information on social media's role in crises. With the rise of Facebook, Twitter, and other sites, information spreads like wildfire in a matter of seconds and a few taps on a keyboard or phone. Today, social media is a friend to institutions, organizations, and public figures, but it can also be the biggest enemy. Organizations can openly communicate with their publics, often for free. However, in turn, consumers, clients, and publics can seek intimate details about a person or institution, post and share photos, rally for or against a case, and even target companies without management having a clue.

4/10/14

I have met with Dr. Hickerson this week, and we have started to plan out the timeline of my project. The "crisis" will take place over the summer and I will be creating PR materials as well as tracking the organization's responses via social media (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) and whatever news articles mention the topic. I will also be studying everything being said about the crisis in the media and use that in my analysis of the crisis.

5/1/14

I am continuing to have bimonthly meetings with Dr. Hickerson to talk about potential crisis topics. Rather than doing something along the lines of a natural disaster, I want to focus on a political figure or major organization, as that is what I am interested in. We have agreed that the crisis period will begin in July, pending when the crisis actually happens. I am still compiling research for my literature review about crisis leadership, as well as models and theories. There is an abundance of information out there and all of the information is truly fascinating

5/22

Proposal is approved! Hooray! I am continuing to work on my literature review. I am in London studying abroad, so research has been put on hold until my June return. I am a little anxious to take on this project, but I know I can handle the work load and I am excited to embark on this academic journey.

6/23/14

The crisis is here. I will be tracking JMU's sexual assault case regarding former student, Sarah Butters, and the decision to expel her assaulters after graduation. The story was made public by the *Huffington Post*, followed by *The Washington Post*. The story is now viral. It is ALL over social media and national news. I am waiting for an official university response, but I have

already started planning “my” responses. I have crafted three separate press releases from the perspectives of the University, Judicial Affairs, and the general media team.

6/26/14

The JMU crisis has taken a huge turn. And not for the better. Last night, political comedian, Jon Stewart, publicized the event by claiming that, “The classic Virginia safety school is no longer safe.” He has a large audience base, so millions of viewers now know about the event, and their perception is most likely negative. The segment also features comedienne, Jessica Williams, talking about the common misperceptions of sexual assault for college females, as well as the double standards they face. This video clip has since gone viral and has the whole nation is now talking about sexual assault on college campuses, and more importantly, JMU’s decision for expulsion after graduation. There is a huge amount of backlash towards JMU all over the internet and social media outlets. #StandWithButters is trending all over Facebook and Twitter, and many members inside and outside of the JMU community are speaking their mind. In response, I have created more PR materials including media alerts, press releases, and agenda sheets.

7/5/14

I am keeping busy tracking the crisis and creating my own public relations materials. This crisis couldn’t have come at a more critical time for JMU, as freshman and their families are all over campus for Summer Springboard Orientation. The parents, I am sure, will have many

questions about the safety and security of their children for the administration. For my materials, I have created a PowerPoint geared towards the parents about sexual assault on campus, as well as a handout for the orientation guides to give to future students.

The University also just issued their official response to the media reports. However, looking at student feed back, the response to it is not positive. People want more information and do not like feeling left in the dark. It will be interesting to see how the university will handle this. It is also a bit difficult for me, as a woman and a female, to write objectively, as I clearly have my own opinions. However, a public relations specialist cannot be biased and must serve their client regardless of their own opinion.

However, so far from a PR practitioner's standpoint, I am disagreeing with the way the university is handling the crisis. For one, I am concerned with the lack of transparency between the administration and the students. Many of them are asking questions and are not getting adequate answers, despite the university issued response. It appears that they are implementing a hush-hush tactic.

8/1/14

I am still at work tracking responses to the crisis. The University has remained silent on many things. I understand that there are certain things they will never be able to tell us due to legalities, but more information may look better from a PR standpoint. Also, there has been little word or contingency plans on how JMU is planning to overcome this incident. Will there be a sexual assault component to orientation? Special training for Office of Residence Life (ORL) employees? I am also disappointed in the lack of responsibility President Alger has taken. I

believe this would have been a great opportunity for him to step up and truly establish himself as a compassionate, proactive president.

As the immediate crisis has subsided a little, I am going back to my literature review to add information and research about crisis in a university setting. I am particularly studying the Duke University lacrosse team scandal and studying how that crisis affected the university in a short term and long term way. I also plan on writing about Penn State's scandal with Jerry Sandusky and his child molestation cases. I am also noting how JMU's crisis went viral through social media, something that would not have happened.

8/29/14

School is back in session. I am very interested to see what the university will do now that all the students are back. Will they do more campaigns against sexual assault? What will FSL do for image restoration, especially the Sigma Chi fraternity? I hope all these questions get answered, because from a public relations standpoint, they should. Many of my peers are talking about what happened over the summer, and a lot of them harbor anger towards the administration for not taking a harsher stance.

As a student, I tend to agree, but I have to maintain an objective stance for this project. When they ask me what I think, I address the issue in association with the theories I'm writing about in my thesis. For example, "the University may have tarnished its reputation, because according to Timothy Coombs' SCCT theory, the organization did not perceive the crisis as damaging, when in fact, it can be.

I am also really happy that I did the bulk of this project over the summer. I have a heavy course load this semester and it is a relief knowing that I do not have to do this project in a semester. Dr. Hickerson has been a great advisor and has given me a lot of helpful guidance. I know he will keep me updated during the year.

9/20

I have met with Dr. H and have received more literature review comments from my readers. I will continue to work on organization and clarity while beginning work on my analysis case study portion of the project. This crisis has produced a very interesting trend: other sexual assault victims from other colleges and universities are coming forward and sharing how they were mistreated by their schools' administration. Students from Columbia University, Hobart Williams College, UNC Chapel Hill, and several others are giving sound bites to the media about how they were mistreated and their assaulters continue to walk around campus with them.

I am also studying legislation and national laws that are related to sexual assault. President Obama has launched the "It's On Us" campaign to combat sexual assault on college campuses and has sent a task force to many schools to urge them into action. In addition, California has enacted a "Yes means Yes" law to reduce ambiguity in consent issues. JMU is still keeping relatively mum, but are just now starting to jump in on these sexual assault projects.

10/14

Chris Erhart from the Office of Student Accountability and Restorative Practices (OSARP) (formerly Judicial Affairs) came to speak at a public Student Government meeting. Their spiel mainly focused on alcohol and substance abuse, and skirted around the assault subject. I asked him if the office was planning on any sexual assault prevention programs, and Erhart immediately jumped to defending the office for its decision regarding the Butters case. I think it's interesting how Judicial Affairs became OSARP right after the Butters case broke. They tried a classic re-imaging tactic but it is too soon to tell if it has worked. They may seem different, but their processes are actually very similar. Again, it is too soon to tell if this tactic will be successful.

12/20/15

As I am creating more materials for my project, it is interesting to see how much my project has impacted my ability to see things in a less biased manner. I knew it would be a challenge from the beginning to write a narrative about the JMU crisis from a neutral standpoint, but I am finding that it is possible. Research is so critical and I am glad that this project is letting me hone in on these skills. One thing that I have really enjoyed doing during this project is studying the University's media strategies. The way they present themselves on social media is quite different than how they appear to the average student at the moment. Everything seems hunky dory, but in reality it isn't like that, as students have a lot of feelings of animosity in regards to the judicial decisions and sanctions (or lack thereof). I am really enjoying the process of getting a sense of

the feelings these publics share and relating them to messages, strategies, and tactics of my own making.

1/15/15

I've reached the home stretch! All of my physical materials are close to completion and all that is left to do is finish my analysis portion and present at a conference. I believe I will showcase my work at the Communication Conference, and I am really excited because I've never presented at one before. Also, I've reached the point in my college career where the number of students who remain in honors and are finishing their thesis are dwindling. I'm really proud that I have made it this far and equally proud of my friends who are still trucking a long with me. The thesis project definitely creates a bond that not many other students have. I'm thankful for the rewarding experience and knowledge that this hard work has given me, and hope I can apply some skills that I learned in my future endeavors.

3/10

I am officially presenting at the communication conference. I am a little nervous because I am not exactly showcasing the university in the best light, but it will be exciting to present the project that I worked so hard on. I am glad that I will have friends also presenting the fruits of their labor that day with me. I am now working on formatting a presentation plan to present this objectively as possible, as I would be mortified if I offended administration.

4/1

Had an almost panic attack today because I was terrified that I would not finish my project in time for the deadline. There is still much to do, but I know it will be completed. I worked on editing and revising for four hours at work today, so it slowly but surely coming together. After meeting with my advisor, I know that I am very close to completion. I hope to be sending my first draft (a little belated) off to the honors program office very soon! As in tomorrow.