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That's Not What I Heard: A Study on University Communications and Marketing Strategies Regarding COVID-19 Policies.

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That's Not What I Heard: A Study on University Communications and Marketing Strategies
Regarding COVID-19 Policies.

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Senior Honors Project

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the graduation requirements
of the Westover Honors Program**

Westover Honors Program

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Abstract

This study applies Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to the crisis responses of independent college and state flagship universities to determine what strategies most effectively reach campus audiences and influence their COVID-19 attentiveness. This study mainly looks at one institution within each of the previously mentioned categories and compares their general messages regarding COVID-19, how it fits with SCCT, and if any other methods within the SCCT could have been more effective. A subsection within this paper includes looking at public commentaries made by audiences associated with the institutions of study (i.e., parents, alumni, and students) and evaluating their comments using a sentiment analysis to gauge public opinion as positive, negative, or neutral regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings show that the small independent institution communicated less frequently than the state-flagship universities but utilized more methods of communication under the SCCT when communicating with its publics.

Introduction

In March of 2020, thousands of universities shut down the in-person operation of their classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic occurring in the United States. During the 2020-2021 academic year, when vaccines were mainly unavailable, colleges and universities needed to ensure that students, faculty and staff felt as though they were being open and honest about the path the administration would take in order to ensure that the institution can resume normal operations as quickly as possible. This study investigates how small independent institutions and state-flagship universities have communicated policies regarding the COVID-19 pandemic to parents of students, current students, and prospective students (recruits) using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory in identifying appropriate strategies necessary to guide the tactics universities put in place. This was determined by analyzing institutional task force emails, the institution's COVID-19 pages, and press releases. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the communication methods used by higher education institutions during a crisis, and to further recommend what strategies are best for reaching university audiences. Additionally, as colleges deal with smaller outbreaks of disease (such as meningitis STIs on campus) this study allows university marketing and communication departments to determine the best way to best motivate students towards a certain behavior while modifying institutional operations. The hypothesis of this study was that the small independent institution would have deployed more strategies than the state-flagship universities. The findings show that the small independent institution communicated more frequently than the state-flagship universities and used more methods of communication under the SCCT when communicating with its publics.

Literature Review

Life is filled with unexpected events, not all of which are positive. A *crisis* often refers to negative, unexpected events that could result in the loss of human life, positive social change, or pose a threat to system stability (Seeger et al. 2003). While crises are, by definition, unpredictable events, individuals who are affected by a crisis often seek to assign blame for the cause of it. This can be seen as a form of public sensemaking, as audiences seek “to share or shift blame for the crisis” (Seeger et al. 2003). Organizational crisis management focuses more on the reputational threat that a crisis could cause, as well as defining the organization's role in moving towards a solution back to normalcy; Crises have a nature of being “low probability/high consequence” events, which often “defy interpretations and impose severe demands on sensemaking (Weick, 1988).

The emergence of COVID-19 is a perfect example of a low-probability/high consequence event: A global pandemic leaving countries to shift their day-to-day operations to a remote format where they could. One of the most critical parts in preventing the spread of a disease is immunization. On college campuses, this is extremely important in preventing the spread, as campuses represent smaller social bubbles with large amounts of daily social interactions. With the pandemic, colleges need to find the best method to convince their students to get vaccinated, and if they chose not to, to follow the mask rules mandated by the campus. According to Jaffe, Graupenseperger, Blayney, Duckworth, and Stappenbeck, vaccine mandates have been met with frustration and hesitancy, and with evidence suggesting that young adults are at lower risk for the development of severe COVID-19 symptoms, young adults may believe there is less of a reason to vaccinate (2022).

Students who do get vaccinated set the attitudinal norms surrounding vaccines for the rest of their peers; Graupensperger, Abdallah, & Lee asked college students about their “perceived

importance of getting a COVID vaccination.” They found that students who thought that more of their peers would get vaccinated were more likely to have intentions of getting the COVID vaccine (2021). This is beneficial in spreading information within the college community, as students take the initiative to get vaccinated on their own, then they will be more likely to follow through with university policies regarding COVID-19 and set an example for their peers.

Most campuses seem to have taken the right approach in managing the COVID-19 crisis on their respective campuses in Fall 2020: In a survey by Dworkin, of a sample of parents of college students from across the country, results showed that “the majority of parents believed that their Institution was taking the right steps to handle the situation.” However, since parents are often stakeholders in their child’s education, the attitudes are likely to shift over time as the school year continues (2020).

However, even if students get vaccinated, a message campaign still needs to be implemented in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. According to Bøl, it is imperative to have a clear strategy and efficient communication in order to maintain public trust: “The population should be able to realistically understand risks and become involved in dealing with the crisis process rather than being treated as mere objects” (2021). Communication is inevitably one of the key components in determining a university’s success. Within communications, success factors include “credibility of experts, institutions and decision makers, transparency, communication of scientific uncertainty, preparedness through established communication channels, and responsiveness to the concerns and risk perception of the population” (Bøl, 2021).

Additionally, Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke found that there is a connection between the perceived severity of a situation and an organization’s reputation to identify the receptiveness of a message: “the more severe people perceive a crisis to be, the more negative are their

perceptions of the organization's reputation" (2010). Therefore, it is imperative for an organization to ensure that it approaches its respective publics (students, faculty and staff) with a clear communication strategy regarding COVID-19 on the institution's campus.

One of the first go-to strategies for communication specialists to apply in a crisis is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, or SCCT. W. Timothy Coombs, developer of the SCCT, defines a crisis as a negative event that impedes an organization's public image or internal operations. In order to appropriately deal with a crisis, Coombs advises that the priority of any organization should include the physical and psychological well being of the stakeholders, not in protecting the organizational reputation. Once that has been addressed, the organization can assess the reputational threat that a crisis poses. Reputational threat is assessed by determining where the initial crisis responsibility lies (who/what is responsible for the crisis) by determining the crisis cluster type: A crisis belongs to either a victim cluster (crises where the organization is also a victim, such as natural disasters), an accidental cluster (crises where the organization's actions unintentionally led to a crisis) , or an intentional cluster (crises where the organization knowingly acts inappropriately). Depending on the kind of crisis an organization is facing, research has proven that crisis responsibility is negatively related to organizational reputation due to limited understanding of how people respond to crises as individuals and lack of patterns in individual reactions (2007).

The application of SCCT to a situation "articulates the variables, assumptions, and relationships that should be considered in selecting crisis response strategies to protect an organization's reputation." The SCCT also views the reputation of an institution as a resource that could diminish as a result of the crisis, and using the correct crisis response strategy can minimize the crisis' impact. (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Coombs and Holladay separated

SCCT into eight crisis response strategies that range from defensive to accommodative responses: Attack, (confronting the group or person that claims a crisis exists), denial, (claiming that there is no crisis), excuse (attempting to minimize organizational responsibility for the crisis), victimization (reminding stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis as well), justification (attempting to minimize the perceived damage inflicted by the crisis) ingratiation, (praising stakeholders and reminding them of the past good works done by the organization), Corrective action, (trying to prevent a repeat of the crisis and/or repair the damage done by the crisis) and full apology (publicly accepting responsibility for the crisis and requests forgiveness from the stakeholders) (2002) .

To determine which crisis response strategy to use under SCCT, crisis responsibility needs to be identified. Additionally, the outlook that communication professionals have on the situation has an impact on the kind of strategy that is deployed to the organization's public. Ferguson, Wallace, & Chandler (2018) argued that most crisis response strategies will impact an organization negatively rather than positively, since most communication strategies are weak in their ability to fully repair a tarnished reputation or rebuild organizational trust with key publics. Additionally, in the age of social media where conversations can occur rapidly and various opinions can be published, it is difficult to prevent negative reputational outcomes due to the organization's inability to control the spread of information.

While the eight methods of crisis communication in SCCT can present in different ways, Coombs (2007) recognized that organizations could face restraints when adapting SCCT for their own needs:

“If an organization cannot afford a particular crisis response, they can opt for the next best but less-expensive strategy. SCCT is used to determine which crisis response

strategies would be ‘ the next best ’. A crisis manager, for instance, may have to use an excuse strategy rather than the recommended apology strategy. SCCT helps the crisis manager understand his / her options. The crisis manager will realize that the use of a lesser strategy will reduce the reputational repair effectiveness of the crisis response.”

Not only do colleges and universities need to worry about keeping their community informed and calm about the situation, but institutions are also working to ensure that the information that they share with the publics at the institution (i.e. students, faculty, and staff) encourages actions that reduce the spread of COVID-19. Ghaffarzadegan (2021) speaks on research collected on a simulation conducted to control the spread of COVID-19 at universities:

“Sole implementation of some of the policies may affect results with negative consequences. For example, only relying on risk communication flattens the curve of daily cases by shifting the burden onto students rather than announcing an early closure, which can potentially lead to a higher number of total cases. However, when risk communication is implemented with more frequent and rapid testing, it improves people's responsiveness and substantially decreases cases. Such non-linear effects are common characteristics of complex systems. The implication is that a close monitoring of the system and implementing all policies are required.”

Since the sole implementation of policies may not be enough, additional efforts to ensure effective communication may apply a persuasion knowledge model to the SCCT. (Ham & Kim, 2019). The persuasion knowledge model argues that message receivers are actively aware of and interpreting subliminal messaging that was put forth by message senders. Ham & Kim introduced a version of the SCCT that can be combined with the persuasion knowledge model in order to fulfill a corporate social responsibility (CSR) in messaging. When an organization's

message is centered around meeting the needs of its publics, it increases the organization's credibility and reputation since the persuasion model states that audiences are actively aware of the hidden messages. (2019) Therefore, it is evident that a multitude of communication strategies should have been utilized on institution campuses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the organization has a responsibility to its stakeholders in guiding them through a crisis, public opinion regarding the organization's decisions also needs to be taken into account. A sentiment analysis is a form of opinion mining and a widely-used approach in communication studies to gauge public opinion by analyzing subjective text content under any given subject and sorting them as positive, negative, or neutral. Conducting a sentiment analysis allows organizations to gain customer insight on what motivates them to use a product, predict consumer behaviors, and collect customer feedback to improve an organization's product or service (Sánchez-Núñez, de las Heras-Pedrosa, & Peláez, 2020).

When analyzing text on a social media platform, the vocabulary that is used can influence how a message is interpreted, as this can affect how the opinions that are collected are interpreted, in the same way that text messages can say the same message as an oral statement, but interpreted differently by the reader. Collecting public opinions through analyzing the positive, negative, and neutral reactions allows organizations to make informed decisions on how to move forward (Peláez et al. 2020). Social media allows private opinions to be published into the public domain, and during the COVID-19 pandemic many different opinions were shared. Within the United States, the overall sentiment was negative, with the phrases Trump, Pandemic, and Death being the most common terms associated with the pandemic, with Trump being mentioned in tweets from across the globe (Abu Kausar, 2021).

Undergraduate education facilities were forced to change instructional delivery methods, with about “124,000 public and private institutions closing during the pandemic, affecting at least 55.1 million students” (Duong et al. 2020). Other than university instruction transitioning to an online format, the pandemic also affected student life at the personal level, such as the status of international students and students’ mental health (Duong et al. 2022).

Methodology

Communication materials disseminated by the university communications and marketing departments were collected from a small private independent university, which was then compared with news, articles, and campus event coverage that was published by a COVID-19 update page of the public state-flagship university. The materials were then compared to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory to see which strategies were implemented by each institution, the effects of each, and the tactics that each institution deployed through email and press releases. A sentiment analysis on comments made on three shared articles on the state flagship public institution’s Facebook Page regarding the university policies was used to observe the community interactions and acceptance of the university’s COVID-19 policies. A ‘like’, a ‘love’, ‘care’, or ‘haha’ are considered positive, and ‘sad’ or ‘angry’ are considered negative, and a ‘wow’ is considered neutral (due to its duality of how people can use the reaction, either out of shock or fascination). Facebook comments will be used as evidence to support any conclusions made about the audience’s sentiment towards COVID-19. The posts that were chosen highlight three main changes that were made to the campus experience: Tracking COVID-19 cases with the announcement of a campus-wide dashboard, changing of the mid-semester break into wellness days, and changing student activities as it relates to annual athletic events.

Results

From the data collected, the hypothesis was supported; Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech), a large public state-flagship institution, communicated with its students regarding COVID-19 policies and resources more often than the University of Lynchburg, a small private independent institution, but the University of Lynchburg utilized more of the strategies presented by SCCT. As research was conducted, one of the possible reasons for Virginia Tech's over-communicative strategy became apparent: Virginia Tech has multiple campuses across the state, and depending on the state of COVID-19 in the area of each campus, the COVID-19 policies were adjusted to meet the needs of each individual campus. Another possible reason may be the number of students that Virginia Tech has; with a large student body spread across multiple campuses, it is always a better idea to over-communicate an organization's plans during a crisis rather than under-communicate and have the student body left with questions or concerns. By covering the different aspects of student life that COVID-19 affected, Virginia Tech allowed students to be a part of the policy process through the use of town halls in order to give students a supportive environment during the unprecedented times.

University of Lynchburg

The University of Lynchburg first communicated with its publics regarding the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020, where the institution announced that spring break would be extended for a week, and that classes would be moved online for the remainder of the semester. Once the threat of COVID-19 was made apparent, the University of Lynchburg announced its plans to move students off campus and on March 18, 2020. On March 22, 2020, President

Kenneth Garren sent an email to the University of Lynchburg Community that serves as the institution classifying the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis under the victim cluster (crises where the organization is also a victim) and used the victimage response strategy of the SCCT. The University of Lynchburg deployed messaging to show that the organization is a victim of the crisis as well. Some of the phrasing in the email included:

“Faculty and staff have been working tirelessly to move instruction online and to provide support services to ensure our students’ success. We have had to keep the University's long-term well-being in the heart of making some incredibly difficult decisions in laying off some of our non-exempt staff. We are trying to support our colleagues in continuing to fully pay their healthcare, allowing them to continue with their degrees here free of charge, and encouraging them to seek additional support through the Lynchburg Cares Fund. We are also looking for additional ways to increase the support available through this fund. We hope when this crisis passes that they will be able to rejoin us ... I know that families appreciate their round-the-clock support in these difficult days. In closing, please know that we are in this together and, by staying together as the Lynchburg Family, we will get through this difficult time.”

This message was directed to members of the university community, informing them that the University of Lynchburg was not responsible for the crisis at hand. The underlined portions serve as examples of response strategies that support classifying the school’s response strategy as victimization, as the school states that “*we are in this together*” and that “*we will get through this difficult time.*” The university indicates to its audiences that the organization was also affected by the pandemic by referring to themselves in the second person in the response to the school.

Additionally, the email addresses some of the negative results of the pandemic, laying off staff in order to keep the school operating.

Before the University of Lynchburg reopened for Fall 2020, the school was transparent in what kind of conditions would need to be met to cause the school to shut down entirely, which included if the University of Lynchburg could not meet or provide essential functions (such as safety, shelter, food service, cleaning/sanitation), could not actively quarantine or isolate 3% of the student population on campus, could no longer deliver courses (hybrid and in-person) safely, and if there was a level of quarantined/isolated students that could not be adequately served by the University's Student Health Center staff. The only external factor in managing the crisis at the University of Lynchburg was the greater Lynchburg community: If the surrounding community surpassed the university public in infections of COVID-19, the school would need to reconsider the method of delivery or school operations (Mike Jones, personal communications, March 22, 2020).

As students began to return to campus in early August 2020, the university emphasized that "all students are expected to familiarize themselves with [the school's] Public Health Plan and to follow safety protocols," placing the responsibility for understanding the importance of following the COVID-19 protocols on the students. Two weeks into the academic year, on August 19 2020, the university officially moved from Alert 1 (where hybrid classes met face-to-face for one-third of the semester and no departments were entirely online, dining services were in person, and social distancing is allowed for campus events) to Alert 2 protocols (all methods of instructions switched to online-delivery, dining services switch to takeout/delivery, and academic and recreational activities are suspended) as 26 students were in quarantine and 11 were isolated on campus. A day later, an email was sent out to university

publics with a message from a currently enrolled student to President Morrison-Shetlar on controlling COVID-19. The main point of the email was emphasized in the following statement from the student:

“ I often see an ever-growing number of students in the lounge booths sitting all together without a single mask between them. This, combined with the recent email citing 100s of reports of policy-violations, has me very worried that my time here, despite my best efforts, will be ruined by the few bad apples that ruin the bunch. . . . It puts everyone, including students like me who would otherwise remain vigilant about wearing masks, in a mindset of *"If they're not wearing one, why do I have to? Everyone's gonna get sent home anyway, so I might as well not wear one either."* Needless to say, this mindset is dangerous and one that will end up being the reason we get sent home early.” (Michael Jones, personal communication, August 20th, 2020).

This email from a student, combined with the school’s re-emphasizing of the importance of following the policies, serves as a blended corrective action and victimization responses. As an institution responsible for the well-being of its students, there is a duty for the institution to inform and enforce COVID-19 protocols to their best ability. The University of Lynchburg took corrective action to try to manage the pandemic within the community by making resources available to the community to inform themselves about the pandemic, as well as correcting inappropriate student behaviors (as seen with the 100s of policy-violation citations). While the University of Lynchburg did not directly acknowledge the corrective actions took to protect the university community, the letter from the student serves as a third-party endorsement of the messages that the institution has already made a part of its’ mission to stay open for the academic year.

In the next email to the campus community, the university emphasized its dedication in taking corrective action on August 28: “Please know that we hear you and that we understand your fears. We are aware of your concerns and are working to address them in real time.”

(Michael Jones, personal communication, August 28, 2020)

Once the school’s numbers began to dwindle, the university began to use ingratiation (praising stakeholders and reminds them of the past good works done by the organization) methods in its messaging:

The numbers tell the story: We are managing the incidence of the virus on campus. This is due to the extraordinary efforts of our students and the support staff in our health center, housing & residence life, the dean of students office, campus safety & security, and dining services, among many others (Michael Jones, personal communication, September 11th, 2020)

The University of Lynchburg gave due credit to the actions of the students and encouraged the continuation of positive behavior rather than using threatening language to describe the consequences of not following procedure. As the institution continued to provide resources for its students and announce its plans for the spring semester, the rest of the semester’s messaging included mostly ingratiation, even as cases began to rise in the surrounding community. On December 17, 2020, the institution announced that mandatory testing would be required prior to returning after winter break, and that students were required to submit to random testing in order to continue to manage the spread of COVID-19. Additionally, the mid-semester break had been dissolved and split into five wellness days throughout the semester, and the university encouraged students to continue to be steadfast in practicing behavior to lower their risk of

COVID-19 even away from campus. As the university announced these policies, words of caution were advised to the students, faculty, and staff:

“Our primary goal throughout the pandemic has been to keep students, and all within our community, safe and free of the virus. We are determined to bring everyone back for the spring as “clean” as possible. This means continuing to keep your guard up, as you did all semester here on campus.” (Michael Jones, personal communication, December 17th, 2020).

In this email, the institution’s use of the word “continuing” implies that the campus community had already proven to be acting in a way that is favorable to preventing the spread of COVID-19. In addition to praising the campus community, the university also adjusted its communication strategy, stating that they will “communicate as needed” and announcing that the university will remain in Alert Level 2 at the start of the semester. When the first week of classes concluded, the university continued with its methods of ingratiation, praising the campus community in their compliance with the vaccine mandate (Michael Jones, personal communications, January 29th, 2021).

About one month later, there was a shift to focus on getting students to graduation, with the institution announcing its plans to hold an in-person ceremony, and updates from this point on center mainly about commencement procedures as well as starting plans to return for Fall 2021 (Michael Jones, personal communication, February - May 2021). General messaging reminded students of the COVID-19 precautions on campus, but no further updates since the shift to Alert 2 had been made for Spring 2021. Overall, the university focused on deploying tactics that followed three main strategies found in the SCCT (Victimization, ingratiation, and

corrective action) that guided their communication plans in reducing the spread of COVID-19 on campus.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech)

Prior to the start of classes, Virginia Tech President Tim Sands addressed the campus community, using a blend of corrective action and ingratiation for the institution's plan for Fall 2020:

“We will hold a variety of town halls in the summer to continue to seek further input and to keep you apprised of developments ... To our students, employees, and community members in the New River Valley, gratitude is the most appropriate word to describe my appreciation for your individual and collective commitment to serving our community during these challenging times. **Your** swift and persistent adherence to public health guidelines — from physical distancing, to voluntary self-isolation, to the wearing of face coverings — has limited the impact of COVID-19 in the Blacksburg area” (Zibton, 2020).

Virginia Tech giving its campus community an outlet to vent any frustrations that may arise as the institution navigates higher education during a pandemic is a form of corrective action while Virginia Tech is not directly responsible for causing COVID-19, it is responsible for guiding the individuals within its community. Emphasizing the efforts of each individual student by saying “your swift and persistent adherence...” rather than using “our” indicates that while the institution is also a victim of the crisis, the actions that are taken to prevent the worsening of a crisis are ultimately up to the individuals within the community. Throughout June 2020, Virginia Tech slowly announced the changes it made to campus infrastructure, such as the rearrangement of the dining hall and classrooms in order to accommodate the social distancing requirement of six feet and the installation of 1,600 new hand sanitizer locations across the Blacksburg campus

(Vosburgh, 2020). General messaging between the beginning of the semester and the mid-semester mark included motivational messaging for students to continue the behavior that has been displayed, focusing heavily on ingratiation. At the mid-semester mark, President Sands addressed the campus community's diligence in following campus procedures, praising what the institution had been able to accomplish despite the pandemic. Overall, due to the campus community's actions in following the COVID-19 procedures outlined, very little change was made to the policies that the institution announced at the start of the year for the spring semester (Vosburgh, 2020b).

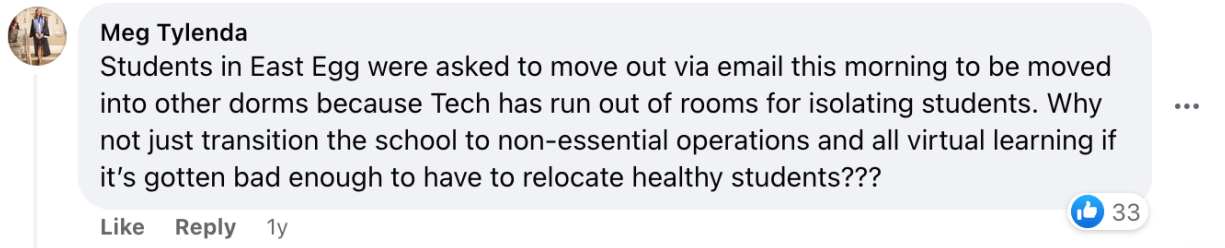
Mandatory and voluntary testing procedures were introduced for the spring semester, as well as a new way for students to socialize in "pods," which are small groups of students registered with the campus to interact in a more close, unmasked environment. No other changes were made to the policies that the institution introduced the previous fall, and Virginia Tech began to publicize its plans for an in-person Fall 2021 beginning March 2021 (Vosburgh, 2021).

Several posts discussing the institution's handling of COVID-19 were shared on Facebook, where the greater Virginia Tech community (such as alumni, parents, prospective students, and concerned community members) could voice their opinion publicly on the social media page. The overall sentiment of three main announcements regarding COVID-19 were concluded to be positive based on the built-in reactions on the Facebook page, but the comments raise concerns from the public about the potential impact of the institution's decisions.

POST #1: September 8, 2020: Virginia Tech launches dashboard updates each weekday

Out of the 154 interactions on the Facebook post there were 142 likes, 1 angry, 3 sads, 4 wows, 2 hahas and 2 cares. While the numbers show that the overall sentiment of this post is positive, the most relevant of the 119 comments cover a variety of concerns from parents and students; Parents mainly had concerns

about student's rights, facility operations, and the infrastructure for the delivery of material. Most of the comments were focused on asking questions about tuition and housing refunds due to the switch to remote learning rather than the actual dashboard and transparency of COVID-19 information. Meg Tylenda, a student attending Virginia Tech at the time, raised the following concern about how the school was handling COVID-19 protocols:

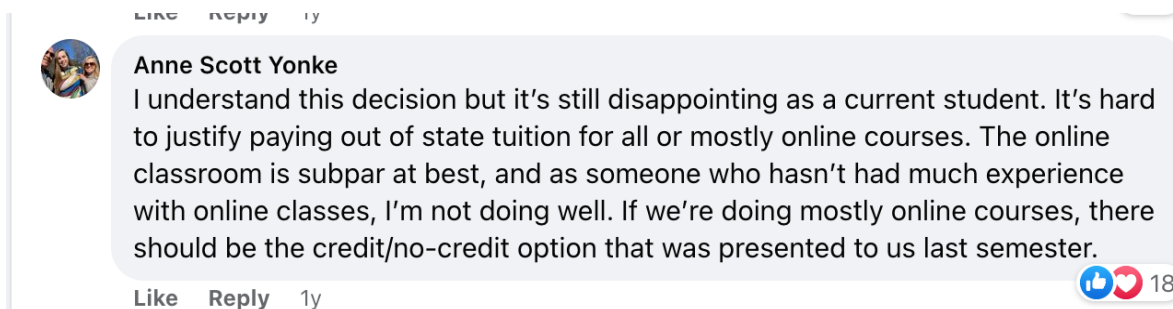


Tylenda received 33 likes on her comment, showing that she is not the only member of the larger Virginia Tech community that is concerned about the way that Virginia Tech is managing the spread of COVID-19 on its main campus. Comments such as Tylenda's on a post with generally positive reactions indicate that while the greater Virginia Tech community is in favor of the publication of daily COVID-19 numbers within the community, there were still concerns about how the school is responding to these numbers.

POST #2: October 19, 2020: Virginia Tech announces plans for the Spring Semester

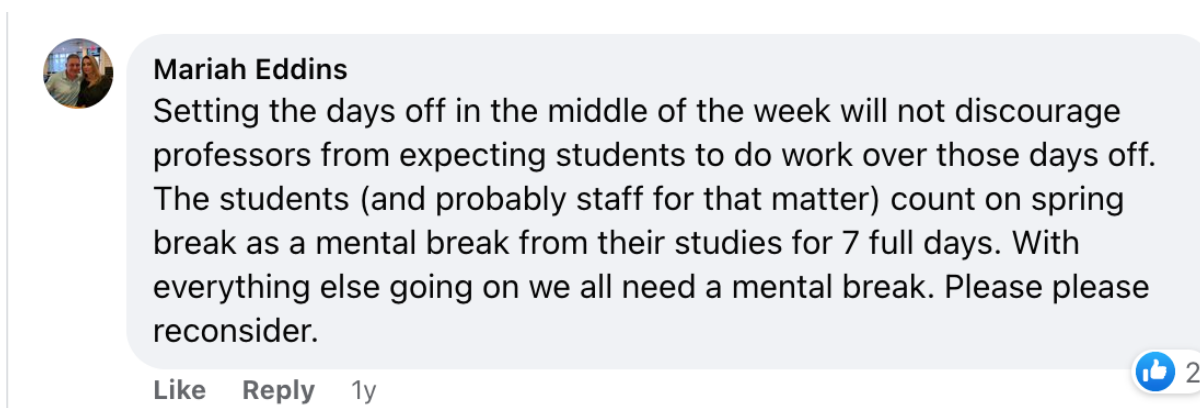
Out of 478 interactions on the Facebook post, there were 333 likes, 95 angries, 19 sads, 12 loves, 9 wows, 6 hahas and 4 cares. The overall sentiment for this post shows that 355 reactions were positive, 114 reactions were negative, and 9 reactions were neutral. Some of the negative comments in response were removed by the Virginia Tech Facebook group admins on the claim that they were "off-topic, defamatory, an unauthorized commercial solicitation, an attack, if they contain illegal suggestions or use foul language," however even with vulgar comments removed most of the 228 comments critique and questions the school's actions after making the decision rather than disagreeing with the decision about instruction during the spring semester. The comments came from students concerned about their mental health, students complaining about the virtual instruction of material, and parents upset with the cost of

tuition with the adjustments made for COVID-19. Ann Scott Yonke, who was a student at Virginia Tech for the 2020-2021 academic year, brought up the following point as it relates to out-of-state students:



Yonke's comment opens the floor to a discussion of justifying tuition rates for a learning experience that most students have to adjust to without allowing for the flexibility of pass/fail options as well as discounted tuition rates for out-of-state students, since as a public institution Virginia Tech only subsidizes in-state students' tuition rate.

In addition to raising the question of discounted tuition rates due to the pandemic, Virginia Tech also announced its plans to substitute the week-long mid-semester break with five wellness days instead, with each wellness day happening on a different day of the academic week (Monday - Friday) to keep the calendar year balanced. Some concerns were brought up regarding professors not acknowledging the wellness days for their intended purpose, seeing them as just another day off in the middle of the week:



Comments such as Eddins' serve as key points that institutions should consider while continuing to navigate COVID-19; While funding the institution and keeping it open is a priority, navigating the COVID-19 crisis without prioritizing making the service of the institution (an education) work in the favor for the publics engaged (the students) can have a negative impact on Virginia Tech's reputation for how it provides for its students.

Post #3: March 23, 2021: Due to COVID-19 precautions, Tech Athletics will not host traditional spring football game - Virginia Tech Athletics

The post received a total of 384 engagements: 273 likes, 77 sads, 15 angries, 8 cares, 5 hahas, 4 loves and 2 wows. This post's sentiment was positive overall, with the top comment thanking the institution for keeping the community safe. Out of the 103 comments under the post, most come from members of the community who believe that canceling the event is a bad idea, whether it is due to financial reasons (since sporting events are a large part of Virginia Tech's source of income), calling the institution 'soft' in their decision to not hold events, or students stating that they have been let down by the institution. Below is an example of two different responses to the announcement, one praising the institution, and another disagreeing with it:



While the sentiment analysis of all three posts regarding COVID-19 decisions are positive, the opinions expressed by the community lean more negative than positive, giving the school more critique for the methods and not doing enough for the students or disagreeing completely with the proper way to handle COVID-19. Overall, the posts represent a passive positive agreement with the actions that Virginia Tech has taken in navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, but a more direct negative discussion when publics are given the forum to do so.

Discussion

While the University of Lynchburg and Virginia Tech had to react to different circumstances (due to the COVID-19 spike in the Lynchburg areas and various regions with Virginia Tech campuses), both institutions encouraged the positive behavior displayed by their student body. However, the University of Lynchburg, due to its position as a small private liberal arts institution, needed to utilize the victimization method of SCCT in order to defend some of the actions it took including letting go of staff in order to keep the institution afloat. Additionally, being a larger school allows Virginia Tech to accommodate and have more flexibility in managing their quarantined and isolated students without shifting delivery instructions of classroom materials further than what had been announced at the start of the year.

Evaluating both institutions' uses of the SCCT, Virginia Tech mainly utilized ingratiation (praising stakeholders and reminding them of good past work) and corrective action (trying to prevent a repeat of the crisis and/or repair the damage done by the crisis), whereas the University of Lynchburg deployed the aforementioned response strategies in addition to the victimizations response (reminding the stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis as well). This response strategy was instrumental in painting the narrative of individual responsibility and emphasizing that the consequences within the community could be dire if even one student did

not play their part, whereas for Virginia Tech the compliance of the many was enough to filter out the behavior of detractors. However, the administration at Virginia Tech communicated more frequently, with encouraging messages of ingratiation being sent out each week and publishing a COVID-19 dashboard for students to inform themselves about the numbers on campus, whereas the University of Lynchburg focused its weekly updates on COVID-19 within the community and reminding students, faculty and staff of CDC recommendations, with ingratiation messaging being sporadic and not the main focus for encouraging students. Possible expansions upon this study would be to include a survey of the student groups who attended the institution during the 2020-2021 school year to collect audience feedback about how each institution was handling the crisis each time that policies were updated or reinforced.

Some of the limitations this study faced were the availability and access to campus messaging. As a University of Lynchburg student, I had more direct and private information to work with regarding the University of Lynchburg's responses to COVID-19 as they changed, whereas the communications used to evaluate Virginia Tech were written for public release and with little reflection and evaluation for how the policies affected the rest of the community other than the positive effects. If this study were to be replicated, I recommend adding interviews of a random sample population of students on each campus to see if the school's promises for campus life and how the university was navigating the pandemic affected institutional reputation after the school had been guided by the SCCT strategies and implemented tactics that worked for the long-term communications plan in navigating the pandemic.

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