

Chapter 14

Crisis Leadership in Liberal Arts Colleges



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Abstract In a world that might be described as both increasingly fragmented and interconnected, liberal arts colleges serve an important purpose. Like all institutions of higher education, leaders of liberal arts colleges must monitor, prepare for, and learn from a wide array of institutional and environmental challenges that might threaten one's mission, some of which might be characterized as crises. This chapter provides a snapshot of potential crises facing liberal arts colleges—both those that are unique to specific schools and others that reflect the more systemic issues across the higher education landscape. The chapter continues with an overview of theory-informed principles for effective risk and crisis prevention, management, and communication during the multiple phases of organizational crisis. Advocating for a values-driven approach to crisis leadership that reinforces and reflects the unique mission of liberal arts colleges, this chapter concludes with potential strategies for policy leaders and practitioners to consider as they triage immediate needs and engage in strategic, long-term, and sustainable development for the future of these institutions.

Keywords Organizational crisis · Liberal arts · Crisis leadership · Higher education leadership

14.1 Introduction

In a world that might be described as both increasingly fragmented and interconnected, liberal arts colleges serve an important purpose. The complexities of the current moment demand a cross-disciplinary education that equips students with a global perspective. As Pasquerella (2019) writes, “fostering student success and preparing the next generation of leaders to thrive amid such vast uncertainty requires creating the foundations for adaptability, flexibility, and innovation—the very skills engendered by a liberal education” (p. v). The global response to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic serves as a reminder of our shared and inextricably

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linked connections with one another, while also highlighting the systemic risks of globalization as it relates to the rapid spread of a contagious virus.

Leaders of liberal arts colleges and universities are no strangers to crisis. A scan of news headlines regarding this subject paint a picture of a system under siege: “The Liberal Arts May Not Survive the 21st Century,” “The Constant Crisis of the Liberal Arts,” and a widely used headline, “Liberal Arts Colleges in Crisis.” To be sure, the challenges facing liberal arts colleges and universities are extensive, and the COVID-19 pandemic has in many ways accentuated these challenges. Declining student enrollment, increased financial pressures, and existential questions regarding the future of the residential campus experience have the potential to threaten the work of liberal arts institutions; yet, as discussed further in this chapter, crisis lies in the eye of the beholder, and many may not agree with this broad characterization of the sector.

Like all institutions of higher education, leaders of liberal arts colleges must monitor, prepare for, and learn from a wide array of institutional and environmental challenges that might threaten one’s mission, some of which might be characterized as crises. This chapter provides a snapshot of potential crises facing liberal arts colleges—both those that are unique to specific schools and others that reflect the more systemic issues across the higher education landscape. The chapter continues with an overview of theory-informed principles for effective risk and crisis prevention, management, and communication during the multiple phases of organizational crisis. Advocating for a values-driven approach to crisis leadership that reinforces and reflects the unique mission of liberal arts colleges, this chapter concludes with potential strategies for policy leaders and practitioners to consider as they triage immediate needs and engage in strategic, long-term, and sustainable development for the future of these institutions.

14.2 Liberal Arts Education Backdrop

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), in collaboration with Hanover Research, released the results of a survey administered in Fall 2020 in a report entitled “Campus Challenges and Strategic Priorities in a Time of Change: A National Survey of Campus Stakeholders” (Finley, 2020). This report details many of the significant challenges facing colleges and universities. Of the various challenges detailed in the report, these five challenges were cited most frequently: financial constraints (74%), recognizing and overcoming persistent inequities (46%), capacity-building for institutional change/transformation (37%), articulating the value of the liberal arts for career preparation (30%), and communicating the overall value of liberal education (24%). As we broaden this scope to consider the international landscape of liberal arts colleges and universities, many of these same challenges take center stage. The expansion of liberal education programs beyond the United States is still in its infancy, with a study from Boston College’s Center for International Higher Education noting that almost 60% of non-U.S. liberal education programs

were started since 1990 (Godwin, 2015). In addition to the challenges noted above, the goals of a liberal education may often conflict with the political dynamics of the country, which can position college and university leaders in precarious positions.

Despite the unique priorities, intentions, and approaches that one might find in institutions dedicated to a liberal education, these colleges and universities are subject to the same types of disruptions as any other postsecondary institution across the globe. In some cases, these disruptions—both those that are internally generated and externally imposed—may be viewed as crises. Broadly defined in the literature, a crisis is “a specific, unexpected, and nonroutine, event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high-priority goals” (Ulmer et al., 2018, p. 7). Seeger and Ulmer (2001) describe crises as “high impact events that often strip an organization to its core values” (p. 374), and as Fink (1986) acknowledges, crises might constitute “a turning point, not necessarily laden with irreparable negativity but rather characterized by a certain degree of risk and uncertainty” (p. 15). Crises have the potential to tear at the fabric of an institution, and in addition to causing fear and uncertainty, these moments of exigency can often serve as accelerators for change, renewal, and growth.

As we take stock of recent high-stakes events across the global higher education landscape, some are localized to one institution—consider, for instance, the active shooter situation, the highly publicized dismissal of a senior official, or the admissions scandal at any given institution. One might also consider specific examples outside of the United States, including the court-mandated bankruptcy reorganization of the state-owned Peking University Founders Group (Juanjuan et al., 2021); the scandal involving the falsification of academic achievements of former South Korean Minister of Justice, Cho Kuk, to gain admission to Korea University in Seoul (Chung, 2019); or the resignation of Austrian minister, Christine Aschbacher, following allegations of plagiarism of her university work (Bailey, 2021). In other cases, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic or the 2007–2008 financial crisis, the burden for responding to and navigating the emergency is shared across different institutions. Taking a step back from these specific instances, however, there remains some debate over whether and to what degree an event, incident, or emergency, rises to the level of crisis. The disruption caused by deadly natural disasters, active shooters, rampant sexual abuse scandals, or cases of academic integrity and plagiarism at one or more institution leads to a widespread recognition of the event(s) as a crisis of significance for the institution and its leaders. However, as will be noted in the pages ahead, the lens of social construction helps us to think about the wide array of other events or situations that become crises based on how we come to interpret, construct, and describe them. Furthermore, the wide array of stakeholders who are directly and indirectly impacted by crisis situations are actively involved in elevating situations to the level of crisis. As described further in Gigliotti (2020a), both leaders and internal and external organizational stakeholders wander through crises, render crises meaningful, and elevate crises through our communicative engagement during these periods of unrest.

For leaders in higher education, including those engaged in leading liberal arts colleges and universities across the world, the themes of preparation, perception, and principles can serve as a useful guide for making sense of, responding to, and learning from these moments of disruption. The sections to follow will briefly explore each of these themes and explore the linkages to the liberal arts college setting. Building upon the following themes, a set of guiding questions will be shared that could serve as a guide for leaders and policy makers across the liberal arts education landscape.

14.3 Three Themes for Effective Crisis Leadership Practice

14.3.1 *Preparation*

Despite a shared commitment to learning, leadership training and development, particularly within the context of crisis, has not historically been a priority for colleges and universities beyond the most senior levels of our institutions (Ruben et al., 2021). There are many explanations for this absence of adequate leadership preparation across higher education, including the reliance on on-the-job training, the tendency to view disciplinary or technical expertise as a sole predictor of leadership excellence, and perhaps even the treatment of leadership or administrative work as the “dark side” of the academy.

There was a time when crises on college and university campuses were relatively rare and episodic. Much has changed, and it has changed quite rapidly. Rather than being isolated incidents requiring the exclusive attention of presidents, chancellors, or communication professionals, the proliferation of crises across campuses means that crisis leadership has now become fundamental to the work of university personnel across levels, disciplines, and institutions (Gigliotti, 2019). Preparing leaders at all levels of our institutions to engage in the work of crisis leadership will be critical as we learn from the current exigencies facing institutions of higher education and adequately prepare for those moments of discord and disruption that inevitably lie ahead.

An initial approach to crisis preparation might involve an identification of the types of crises that could impact one’s unit, department, or institution. Some examples of widespread and perennial crises that Mitroff et al. (2006) highlight in their writing include grade tampering; the alteration of key files and student records; computer hacking; major fires and explosions; student unrest; civil disturbances; confrontations, sometimes violent, between students of different political, religious, and ideological viewpoints; ethical breaches by top administrators, faculty, and students; the fraudulent use of tutors by student athletes; and the stealing of body parts from university medical schools (p. 61). Other crisis types that are germane for institutions of higher education are depicted in Table 14.1. The wide range of crisis types included in this table is the result of a content analysis of references to “crisis” from a five-year period of higher education news coverage (Gigliotti, 2019).

Table 14.1 Higher education crisis types (adapted from Gigliotti, 2019)

Crisis type	Example
Academic crisis	Debate over tenure, widespread plagiarism or academic fraud, or significant violations of academic integrity
Athletics crisis	Child abuse scandal and incidents of hazing
Clinical crisis	Physical malpractice in academic health center
Financial or business crisis	Significant decrease in state appropriations
Human resources crisis	Employee crime and issues surrounding hiring and firing of employees
Leadership or governance crisis	Conflict between state legislature and university leadership
Natural disaster	Flood, tornado, or hurricane
Public health crisis	Pandemic or outbreak
Public safety crisis	Active shooter, sexual assault, suicide, or death
Racial or identity conflict	Campus unrest due to racial or identity tensions with the community or acts of intolerance by any campus stakeholder
Student affairs crisis	Mental health crisis, controversial speaker, or student code of conduct violations
Technological and facilities crisis	Water main break, chemical spill, widespread power outage, or significant damage to university infrastructure

Looking more specifically at liberal arts institutions, recent events that might be perceived as crises include the following: Yale-NUS, Singapore's first liberal arts college, is closing (Sharma, 2021), American University of Nigeria is working through a workforce reduction of approximately 400 staff (Nan, 2020), non-state armed groups are threatening violence across educational institutions in parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2020), faculty and students who speak up against the government are facing censorship in China (McLaughlin, 2021), and student activists at Haverford, Bryn Mawr, and Swarthmore Colleges in the United States are staging protests requesting institutional changes to account for oppressive systems that marginalize various populations (Anderson, 2020).

Crises are not new to colleges and universities; however, changes in technology, the emergence of social media and the 24/7 news cycle, increasing dependence on alternative sources of revenue beyond government and taxpayer support, and evolving expectations and perceptions among key stakeholders make the subject of crisis leadership in higher education one of increased relevance and urgency (Gigliotti, 2022). As crises continue to grow in magnitude, frequency, and complexity (Helsloot et al., 2012), it is incumbent on leaders across the academic enterprise to consider both the unique organizational dimensions that leave higher education vulnerable to such exigencies and the implications for the scholarship and practice of crisis leadership in higher education.

In addition to taking note of the types of crises that one might encounter when leading a unit, department, or institution, leaders at all levels of the institution should

also take the time to consider the individuals with whom one must collaborate in responding to any of the aforementioned crises, the initial strategies one would hope to enact when faced with any of these crisis types, and the appropriate distribution of responsibilities. Prior to the crisis, appropriate preparation steps would also include a comprehensive review of the institution's crisis management plans and emergency management materials, the development and refinement of appropriate campus protocols, the formation of a diverse emergency response team, and the testing of one's response through tabletop simulations or drills.

At the conclusion of an incident or emergency, during what might be characterized as the post-crisis stage, preparation can commence in anticipation of the next crisis, including a debrief with one's crisis management team and key stakeholder partners, and the completion of an after-action analysis to explore lessons learned and areas in need of attention. Leaders should also use this time to encourage learning throughout the organization by broadly sharing these lessons learned to inform how one's unit, department, and institution might address future crises, and by also soliciting input from stakeholders regarding individual pearls of insight gleaned from the crisis. Finally, depending on the scope of the event or series of events, those most directly impacted by the crisis will need an opportunity to heal—and this process of renewal and rejuvenation will often look different for each crisis. No two crises are identical, and the process by which individuals learn from each crisis will also vary (Gigliotti & O'Dowd, 2021).

14.3.2 Perception

There are some situations, such as the previously mentioned active shooter incident or the cascading impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, that are widely understood as "crises." There is much agreement that crises disrupt and derail organizational practices, threaten individual and institutional reputations, and require rapid responses. However, from a social constructivist vantage point, crises lie in the eye of the beholder, and it is incumbent on formal and informal leaders to monitor potential issues that might develop into crises of significance, solicit input from stakeholders who may exhibit competing perceptions of what constitutes an organizational crisis, and engage in practices that reinforce, reflect, and reveal one's individual values and those held in regard by the organization during times of perceived crisis (Estes, 1983; Gigliotti, 2020a; Grint, 2005; Spector, 2019). Complicating the work of crisis leaders within the context of higher education—a sector with an abundance of key stakeholders—each group may possess different and at times competing perceptions of crisis. This perspective is echoed by Voss and Lorenz (2016) in their description of a constructivist understanding of crisis as one that "privileges not the objective threat but rather stakeholders' *perception of the situation as a crisis*. Regardless of whether purportedly 'objective' criteria have been fulfilled, a crisis is said to exist when a certain situation is regarded as critical from the involved actors" (p. 48, emphasis in

original). Incidents and emergencies happen, but crises are created through communication—and it is through communication that they must be addressed (Gigliotti, 2019).

Given that crises are perceived and defined differently by a wide array of institutional stakeholders—of which there are many in higher education—leaders must seriously consider the ways in which potential crises are perceived by internal and external constituent groups. Individual perceptions matter, and as socially constructed phenomena, crises exist if others perceive the existence of crisis. The failure to respond meaningfully to these events of perceived crisis has the potential to erode the trust and credibility of leaders; complicate future leadership decisions and actions; and perhaps even amplify, elevate, and escalate the situation to a level of heightened concern. Many say that liberal arts colleges are in crisis. But leaders might ignore those perceptions or minimize the extent of the risk if they have enough applicants or avoid immediate threats. As evidenced by the closure of Concordia University Portland or Green Mountain College in Vermont—liberal arts institutions in the United States—the institution might fail to “execute sound strategies in the face of challenges” (Seltzer, 2020).

14.3.3 Principles

Crises are disorienting and unwieldy events for an organization and its leaders. These often senseless and complicated moments become crucible experiences for those with leadership responsibility (Gigliotti, 2016; Koehn, 2018; Stern, 2009). It is in the darkness and chaos of crisis where values-based leadership becomes most critical, most visible, and most desired (Gigliotti, 2019). Recognizing, endorsing, appreciating, communicating, and behaving in accordance with the core values of an institution are important during times of normalcy and stability. When responding to crises, it is essential for leaders to rely on these shared values and principles as a guide, an anchor, and a source of stability. Crises threaten individual and organizational reputations, but reacting to these challenging moments in ways that are purely centered on preserving and protecting one’s reputation is both short-sighted and problematic. Rather, effective crisis leadership involves responding in ways that reflect and reinforce the mission and core values of an institution and acknowledge the significance of the crisis on those individuals most directly impacted.

Acting in accord with core values could enhance one’s reputation, yet these values have the potential to be undermined or downplayed when responding to crises in ways that exclusively focus on preserving reputation. In some cases, leaders and institutions may feel pressured to act in ways that are incongruent with these espoused values due to the time pressures imposed by the crisis, or under conditions of stress and stress-induced “tunnel vision.” For some, a restricted focus on preserving reputation can lead to acts of egregious behavior, such as active attempts to conceal the truth. Any attempt to deemphasize sincere concern for those most impacted by crises may

limit dialogue, stifle learning, and stall the necessary renewal and healing that are necessary during times of crisis (Gigliotti, 2022).

Liberal arts colleges and universities are values-based organizations—with a common emphasis on freedom of thought and expression, global education opportunities, intimate interactions with faculty and students, diversity, and critical thinking. These values, along with a broad commitment to a “fully rounded” education serves as a guide for liberal arts education throughout the world (Al-Hendawi et al., 2019; Jung et al., 2016; Lilford, 2012; Ma, 2018). Many of the core values shared across the liberal arts education landscape have been threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic because of sudden shifts to remote education and the closure of global borders (Gigliotti, 2020b). However, as noted at the outset of this chapter, this very crisis both threatens these central imperatives, while also reinforcing the broader value of a liberal arts education. The challenges of the time demand a comprehensive understanding of the world around us, including a mutual respect for others, an ability to engage in thoughtful synthesis and critical exploration, and the skill to think across disciplines, across boundaries, and across intellectual, cultural, and social traditions. In responding to the global health crisis in a principle-centered way, we might find leaders amplifying the fundamental value of global learning opportunities in a coordinated manner, responding to financial and enrollment exigencies in ways that leverage the distinctive value proposition of a liberal arts education, and positioning student and employee health and well-being at the foundation of all college and university decisions. A response of this kind takes notice of the alternative voices that call into question these espoused values—and rather than distancing oneself from these shared principles, these pillars help to propel the organization forward. For example, in advocating for the relevance of a liberal arts education in the twenty-first-century world, Wellesley College (n.d.) notes the following:

Without an immediately obvious vocational outcome, study of the liberal arts sometimes comes under attack for being impractical. Wellesley is at the forefront of addressing this challenge, not by abandoning its belief in a liberal arts curriculum, but by working to ensure that students themselves understand—in the course of every learning challenge—that the disciplined thinking, refined judgment, creative synthesis, and collaborative dynamic that are hallmarks of their Wellesley education are not only crucial to developing their leadership abilities, but are habits of mind that will serve them well throughout their lives, and be primary contributors to their success (The Value of a Liberal Arts Education).

As this example so eloquently displays, a values-centered response demands that we lean into these shared principles with conviction and confidence during times of normalcy and perhaps most especially when navigating threat, risk, or disruption. Furthermore, when facing existential challenges during times of crisis, the exigency provides a unique opportunity to review, rethink, and reorient members of the community regarding the espoused values and principles of the institution. Within the context of liberal arts education, crises have the potential to threaten *and* reinforce the values held in high regard by these institutions who share a commitment to the liberal arts.

14.4 Conclusion

Given the wide array of challenges facing liberal arts institutions, and the three-fold focus on preparation, perception, and principles discussed in this chapter, the following questions may serve as a guide for leaders and policy makers from across the liberal arts education landscape:

- What values do I stand for as a leader/teacher/scholar?
- What are the espoused values of my specific liberal arts institution and what shared values do these types of institutions hold in high regard?
- What are the criteria I use to identify, define, and assess the severity and impact of a crisis?
- What are the crisis warning signs I need to monitor in my current role?
- What are the types of crises that could potentially impact me individually as a leader/teacher/scholar, and what are the types of crises that could potentially impact my unit/department/school?
- In what ways would I like to respond to a crisis? What resources would I need to marshal, on whom may I need to learn, and how might I address the crisis in a coordinated, systematic, and values-driven manner?
- How will I evaluate my response to the crisis? What metrics would I use to determine a successful response?
- Following the crisis, what did I learn from the situation? What might I do differently if faced with a similar crisis in the future?

No pre-determined formula can prevent the onset of crises and no rubric can guarantee a successful response to a crisis; however, these questions highlight the value of approaching these periods of disrupt from a position of intentionality and purpose. Furthermore, as we look ahead to consider the potential crises that might not yet be known, this broad and expansive treatment of crisis leadership might prove useful as we enter a post-pandemic period of prolonged uncertainty for liberal arts colleges and universities.

Referring to some crises as “cosmology episodes,” Weick (1993) describes the profound impact such events have “when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system” (p. 633). As he goes on to suggest, “What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together” (p. 633). Those engaged in leadership play a critical role in helping members of the community make sense of the uncertainty, volatility, and deeply fractured sense of normalcy posed by crises. And to be sure, there is no shortage of events that might be viewed as crises across the liberal arts education landscape. As this chapter highlighted, crisis leadership requires a commitment to the preparation of leaders across an institution, an awareness of the power of perception in shaping impressions of an organization, and an unwavering and steadfast commitment to the principles and values that unify the members of a diverse community. As current crises and the crises of tomorrow threaten institutions of higher education, including those dedicated to a liberal arts education, it is my

hope that we will respond to these unsettling episodes with care, compassion, clarity, and a commitment to the well-being of our communities—all the while contributing to the “reservoir of goodwill” from which we may need to draw upon in the future.

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