University President Discourse After an On-Campus Crisis

Andrea Renee DeCosmo

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT DISCOURSE
AFTER AN ON-CAMPUS CRISIS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Department of Leadership, Policy and Development:
Higher Education and P-12 Education
Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership

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This Dissertation by: Andrea Renee DeCosmo

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ABSTRACT

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The presidents of higher education institutions (HEIs) may, at some point during their tenure, be faced with managing a crisis such as a natural disaster, an individual or group intending to harm the campus community, or a large-scale accident or student protest. While leadership can take on many forms in daily life, leadership after crisis requires communication with stakeholders and the media, and may help or hinder crisis recovery (Hincker, 2014). Understanding the elements included in HEI president post-crisis discourse may help presidents and crisis managers formulate a comprehensive crisis communication strategy, moreover, it provides the higher education community the opportunity to learn from presidents’ experiences so that we may be better prepared to communicate post-crisis. This study focused on university president discourse after an on-campus crisis and explored four crisis types: environmental, intentional, accidental, and student protest. Three cases were considered under each crisis type, for a total of 12 cases. Data included transcripts from speeches, press conferences, press releases and interviews, written statements, authored articles, and emails from the president starting the day the crisis impacted the HEI through one year after. Use of framing devices, recommended strategies from situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), and other emergent themes were explored. Findings were compared within and between each crisis
type. While framing devices were present in the HEI president discourse of all 12 cases, presidents leading their HEI through an environmental crisis used them most often. Of the four crisis types considered, presidents leading their institution through environmental crises used recommended SCCT strategies in their discourse, while the discourse of presidents leading after the other crisis types included strategies that were misaligned. Major themes identified in the presidents’ discourse included positivity from environmental crisis cases, and messages of family and community from accidental crisis cases, but common themes within intentional and student protest cases were not found. Results from this study can assist current and future HEI presidents who are faced with managing a crisis by creating awareness of framing devices and SCCT recommendations and informing how they can be used to communicate, support, and lead after particular types of crises.
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suffering you endured during or after these crises. I acknowledge and admire your
strength, courage and resilience.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Mass shootings, natural disasters, and accidental deaths are unfortunate realities in our world. With the development of social media, news of a crisis spreads quickly and may reach large populations even while the crisis is ongoing. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are not immune to crises and many campus communities have experienced hurricanes, floods, fires, earthquakes, hazing deaths, mass shootings, large-scale student protests, and catastrophic accidents. During crisis, and in its aftermath, people and communities often expect leaders to provide direction, information, comfort, and strength (Foote, 1996). When a crisis occurs on a campus, the community often expects its president to guide the institution through the event and its recovery by providing strength, comfort, and confidence, by acting as the HEI’s spokesperson and by taking quick and appropriate action (Bion & Hart, 2003; Hincker, 2014).

The way in which a president handles a crisis can impact the ability of the HEI to fulfill its mission effectively, as well as the president’s and the institution’s legacy. A poorly managed crisis can quickly become a scandal, tarnish the HEI’s reputation, create further harm to a community, and even end a presidency (deVise, 2011). While most HEIs have crisis management teams and plans in place, and most presidents receive preparation and guidance regarding crisis management, presidents wish they had more training on how to manage a crisis (Ono, 2016). This is a difficult request to fulfill for HEI presidents who may only handle one major crisis.
Key elements for successfully managing a crisis include communicating to the public clearly, authentically, soon, and often, while incorporating language to provide direction, calm fears, restore confidence, and show both strength and sympathy to victims and their families (Klann, 2003). Presidents therefore have important symbolic functions to play during a crisis and a significant portion of this role involves formal and informal communications. Communications, which for the purposes of this study I defined as spoken or written discourse, can be separated into public and private. Public communications may include speeches, press conferences, interviews, and opinion pieces intended for an external audience such as alumni, donors, and members of the surrounding community, while private communications may include letters, announcements, and emails for internal stakeholders such as students, faculty, staff, and parents.

Crisis situations create a public demand for information (Coombs, 2006). Yet, after a crisis, many presidents either do not know what to say, or fear saying the wrong thing, so they may wait too long to respond or say nothing at all (White, 2009). When crisis communication is not proactively managed by the HEI, the media can begin to fill in the gaps with increasingly negative assumptions about the institution and its leadership, thus influencing public perception of the crisis (White, 2009), possibly making the crisis even worse for the institution and the president to overcome. Crisis communication theory suggests specific crisis response strategies based on the type of crisis a community experiences, but research typically focuses on such strategies with crises in the corporate world or the private sector, not higher education (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2006).
HEI presidents report a lack of knowledge about and confidence in communicating about a crisis (Ono, 2016). The consequences for mishandling a crisis are severe and may include altering the institution’s mission, future, and legacy, and the president’s career (deVise, 2011). When presidents learn or hear about colleagues who mishandled a crisis that impacted their institution or career, they may become even less confident in their own knowledge and crisis communication abilities than before. Then, if a crisis occurs, the presidents’ lack of knowledge and confidence or fear may cause them to mishandle the crisis communication or fail to respond, thus impacting crisis recovery at their own institution (White, 2009) and causing other presidents observing the events to grow more unconfident. The cycle of lack of knowledge and confidence about how to communicate about a crisis, possibly leading to mishandling crises, leading to a greater lack of knowledge and confidence may continue to be a problem in the HEI presidency, and the institutions they lead, unless scholarly research can begin making stronger connections between crisis communication theory and presidents.

This post-positivist comparative case study used content analysis to analyze HEI president discourse after an on-campus crisis. Content analysis revealed the key elements contained in post-crisis communication such as those described in the previous paragraph including providing instructions, information, and comfort. Additionally, content analysis was helpful to determine which types of audiences received which messages, and at what point during crisis recovery.

**Background to the Topic**

Like corporate CEOs, many HEI presidents will need to respond to crises that bring harm to the entity for which they have responsibility (Hincker, 2012). In the
private sector, the field of crisis management and related research expanded in the aftermath of the 1982 incident in which seven people in the Chicago area died from cyanide poisoning by ingesting the Johnson & Johnson product Extra-Strength Tylenol (Wang & Hutchins, 2010). Although there was evidence the product tampering occurred outside Johnson & Johnson facilities and was contained in one geographic area, executives quickly intervened with a nationwide recall at a cost of $100 million (Simola, 2005). Through this action and public discourse which included recall information, care and concern for victims and their families, and a commitment to a thorough investigation, Johnson & Johnson executives demonstrated commitment to public safety over profits, which strengthened trust and protected the Tylenol brand (Simola, 2005). As a result of this crisis, Johnson & Johnson sales and market share rebounded and the field of modern organizational crisis management emerged (Mitroff, 2005).

Many CEOs are now coached to frame their public discourse during a crisis, and they often use the suggestions from image repair theories and crisis communication theories to inform their discourse with the public and the media to successfully navigate the crisis (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2004). For example, in August 2016 when a power outage resulted in Delta Airlines cancelling over 1,000 flights and delaying another 3,000, CEO Ed Bastian was coached to quickly disseminate information and apologize both internally and to those affected (CityBusiness, 2016). Crisis communication theory suggests that during a crisis, company employees and those affected by the crisis should be the first groups to be given information as it shows trust, concern, and loyalty, and because information can be disseminated from these groups to others; in addition,
external audiences such as customers, clients, and business partners should also be informed and updated on the crisis (Benoit, 1997).

Similar to their private sector counterparts, HEI presidents may communicate after a crisis to internal stakeholders such as faculty, staff, and students through discourse such as emails and announcements, and to external audiences such as alumni, parents, and the surrounding community by holding press conferences, conducting interviews with news media, and writing newspaper editorials. What is less understood is to what extent presidents use the suggestions from crisis communication theory in their discourse.

Contemporary researchers have investigated the ways in which managers in corporate settings frame their discourse using devices such as metaphors, stories, contrast, or spin, and found that leaders can influence how events are seen and interpreted by others by using such devices (Fairhurst, 2011; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Even though Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) focused primarily on discourse that occurs with internal audiences, specifically between managers and employees they supervise, their work resulted in the development of framing devices. Young (2013) examined the major, planned speeches given by a selection of all university presidents and found they use techniques to frame content in their speeches similar to those used in a corporate setting (Fairhurst, 2011; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). However, it is not yet known how HEI presidents use devices to frame their discourse during or immediately after an on-campus crisis.

Immediately after a crisis occurs at an HEI, presidents likely need to consider internal and external audiences, and the fact that there may be some overlap between the two. There is often increased presence of external agents on campus. Media outlets may
set up temporary satellite locations to give the public a first-hand view of the aftermath, state governors and other politicians may visit campus to see the destruction and offer support, and first-responders arrive to help with logistics. After the crisis subsides, the president may not be in the larger public eye as much, but may still serve an important role to the HEI community. Depending on the type of crisis, the president’s leadership may be needed over the next several months as the physical and emotional healing process, rebuilding of physical campus structures, restoring feelings of trust and safety, and reputation repair begin and continue. These processes are dependent on the president’s leadership, guidance, and communication.

During this period, campus traditions and events such as convocation and commencement likely still take place in an effort to return the campus to a feeling of normalcy. All HEI presidents make major, planned speeches at convocation and commencement and deliver the state-of-the-university address. After a crisis occurs on campus, the president has an opportunity, perhaps even an obligation, to use these major speeches in an attempt to restore the public’s confidence that the institution is a safe place and one whose community will heal, rebuild, and improve processes and procedures to prevent similar crises from occurring.

With increased access to the internet and social media as well as increased attention to higher education issues such as access, cost, and completion rates, these speeches are being viewed by a larger constituent base. Thus, presidents have an opportunity to convey their goals and vision for the post-crisis institution and can help shape the institution’s image and reputation through these speeches to a wide audience. Knowing the primary messages conveyed by HEI presidents in these major, post-crisis
speeches and in what ways presidents use suggestions from crisis communication theory or framing devices in their discourse will provide us greater understanding of how presidents communicate to the campus community and external audiences after a crisis.

This study built on the previous work of Young (2013), who used content analysis to examine the framing devices used in the discourse of 57 university presidents by analyzing the most recent formal speech available for each president, and found presence of framing in all 57 speeches. Young (2013) made comparisons for male versus female presidents, public versus private institutions, and new versus veteran presidents but no significant difference in the framing of these comparison groups was found. This study looked at fewer university presidents, but provided a more in-depth analysis of the discourse of a particular type of president, one whose institution endured an on-campus crisis.

**Purpose of the Study**

When a crisis is mishandled, the campus community, the institution, and the president are impacted (deVise, 2011). Thus, the purpose of this study was to add to existing knowledge about post-crisis communication and to apply existing crisis communication theory to HEI president discourse. Increasing scholarship and knowledge about HEI president communication after a crisis may assist current and future presidents so that if a crisis occurs on their campus, they will be able to communicate quickly, appropriately, and confidently. Well-defined post-crisis communication may help crisis recovery efforts and healing within the campus community, preserve the institution’s mission and legacy, and protect the president’s reputation and character. Another rationale for this study was to help break the possible cycle described in the previous
section of HEI president lack of knowledge about how to communicate post-crisis which may lead to a communication void, ineffective campus recovery and further lack of knowledge.

Another purpose of this study was to support members of the president community who are truly attempting to manage an on-campus crisis and are not directly involved in wrongdoing or in the creation of the crisis. This study sought to understand president discourse after a crisis occurred with very little warning to the HEI community and without the president’s prior knowledge of it. This study did not include examples of crises in which the HEI president was perceived as complicit. It is possible discourse from a complicit president would not be as authentic as from a president required to react and respond to a crisis with very little notice, therefore, such crises were omitted from this study. For example, former Michigan State University President Lou Anna Simon was perceived as having at least four years’ prior knowledge of, and assisting to cover up, allegations of sexual abuse of hundreds of women’s gymnastics team members by former university physician Larry Nassar (Thomason, 2018). If Dr. Simon did in fact know about the scandal before the media broke the story and was involved in protecting Dr. Nassar, it is possible her discourse content and timing may have been influenced by her prior knowledge and involvement. Dr. Simon resigned as Michigan State’s president shortly after the scandal broke, but had she stayed in her position, this crisis would have been excluded from this study due to media and public perceptions her limited communication and discourse content were due to her guilt.
Significance of the Study

After an on-campus crisis occurs, television, the internet, and social media give others the ability to scrutinize the president for steps taken and missed during the crisis management, including what is done, said, and decided, and who is involved (Genshaft, 2014). The way in which a crisis is handled matters: A poorly managed crisis may alter the reputation, and future, of an institution if it changes people’s feelings about its mission or whether they want their children to attend, causes faculty to decide against teaching and researching there, or discourages donors from offering financial support (Genshaft, 2014). Additionally, mis-managing a crisis can harm members of the campus community both physically and emotionally, result in people feeling unsafe and wanting to leave, and in some cases, encourage further incidents. A poorly managed crisis may also bring a dishonorable end to an HEI president’s career, and alter legacy (Bataille & Cordova, 2014). For example, after President Simon resigned as the Michigan State University President in the midst of the Dr. Larry Nassar scandal described in the preceding section, John Engler was hired as interim president to lead the university through the crisis. However, he too resigned just one year later, after he publicly criticized the victims and implied they enjoyed the recent attention they had received (Allen, 2019). Not only were both presidents’ careers impacted, but in spring 2018, in the midst of the scandal, Michigan State’s applications hit a four-year low (Frost, 2019).

Despite numerous books about crisis management, many HEI presidents want to know more about how to successfully manage and communicate about a crisis (Ono, 2016). Adding to the existing knowledge base by examining the discourse of presidents whose campus endured a crisis will be helpful to current presidents, aspiring presidents,
and those who train them, as well as speech writers, crisis managers, and crisis management scholars by informing them of the content and framing that can be included in the discourse after a campus crisis. Thus, this study sought to determine what messages were contained within president discourse after an on-campus crisis and in what ways suggestions from crisis communication literature were followed.

Additionally, the field of higher education leadership currently lacks enough empirical research on specific components of leadership, such as communication; much of what has been written about leaders, specifically HEI presidents, is experiential, anecdotal, and focuses on broad leadership styles (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin. 2006). Many leadership books are written by practitioners, not scholars, and include advice for aspiring leaders on how to lead, lists of desirable personality characteristics to be a successful leader, and different leadership models one could follow (Bass, 2008; Bornstein, 2003; Fisher & Koch, 1996; Ikenberry, 2010). While this study adds to the broader research base and scholarship on HEI president leadership, it focused on a specific component of leadership during a particular situation, discourse after an on-campus crisis. Introducing crisis communication theory to HEI presidents to use in their public discourse may provide research-based scholarship to presidents looking for additional tools to guide their crisis management and leadership.

In addition, this study fits into the existing scholarship on the application of crisis communication theory, which seeks to explain how leaders of organizations use discourse to protect stakeholders, repair reputation, and restore image after a crisis (Madden, 2015). While experiments are useful to build the theory itself, case study is typically used to apply the theory (Coombs, 2006). Much of the contemporary research applying crisis
communication theory uses case study and content analysis to determine how crisis response managers use recommendations of crisis communication theory in their discourse (Farrell & Littlefield, 2012; Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009; Sisco, 2012b; Weber, Erickson, & Stone, 2011). This study also used a form of case study, comparative case study, and content analysis to determine in what ways HEI presidents used the suggestions from crisis communication theory in their discourse.

By conducting this research, I hoped to contribute to existing knowledge about HEI president leadership as it relates to post-crisis discourse and to inform HEI presidents and stakeholders, professional development groups, and agencies who train and cultivate new and future presidents. While learning about post-crisis discourse will likely not prevent future crises from occurring, this study may inform current and future HEI presidents as they prepare for the possibility of leading through a crisis. In addition, associating crisis response strategies with previous HEI president discourse may make a difference in the discourse HEI presidents use when managing future crises, which may impact the outcome of the institution’s crisis recovery.

**Research Questions**

Despite our knowledge about crisis management both within and outside HEIs, we do not know how HEI presidents communicate to external and internal constituents and the public during, and for several months after, a crisis occurs on campus. The purpose of this study was to analyze the discourse of HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis and to compare the discourse used from four different types of crises. Data used included transcripts of the presidents’ speeches, press conferences, and interviews and written communication such as emails and letters and
was examined for presence of crisis response strategies, congruence between the present strategies and those recommended from crisis communication theory, presence of framing devices, and other emergent themes. The following research questions guided this study:

Q1 In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using framing devices in their discourse?

Q2 In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using crisis response strategies recommended by situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) in their discourse?

Q3 What were other primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis?

Q4 What were the primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an environmental crisis as compared to an intentional crisis as compared to an accidental crisis as compared to a student protest crisis?

The first research question was included in this study to look for evidence of framing devices in president discourse after an on-campus crisis. Previous research has found that managers in a corporate setting use framing devices in their daily communication (Fairhurst, 2011; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996) and in addition, HEI presidents use framing devices in their major, planned speeches (Young, 2013). In this study, I looked for usage of framing devices with a specific group of HEI presidents whose campus endured a crisis.

The purpose of the second research question was to determine how HEI presidents incorporated the suggestions from SCCT in their discourse. As will be explained further in Chapter II, SCCT suggests leaders who are managing a crisis use specific language based on the crisis type. However, SCCT is not emphasized in the specific advice and scholarship connected to HEI president leadership and discourse,
Therefore, it is unlikely HEI presidents are aware of SCCT or are consciously following it. Thus, to examine this research question, each crisis included was considered according to its SCCT crisis type, and usage of the appropriate SCCT recommendations was investigated. Additionally, I sought to discover if there were any omissions of recommended SCCT strategies, or if there were mismatches between crisis type, recommended SCCT strategies and actual response strategies used by HEI presidents.

The purpose of the third research question was to learn what themes HEI presidents used in their discourse after an on-campus crisis. Crisis response trainers recommend leaders who are managing a crisis first provide frequent, clear information regarding the crisis, including what happened, directions for the campus community regarding possible campus evacuations, campus closings or class cancellations, and when it is safe to return to campus (Genshaft, 2014; Kuypers, 2007; Parrot, 2012). Next, leaders are encouraged to transition from information dissemination to acknowledging the need for healing through community building and expressing genuine care and concern for any victims and their families (Kuypers, 2007). Finally, crisis response trainers suggest leaders return to information dissemination, this time including lessons learned by the crisis and any specific actions, changes, or improvements the president and campus community are taking to avoid something similar reoccurring (Lawson, 2007; Parrot 2012). I analyzed the data to discover if these themes existed, as well as any additional themes not specifically recommended by crisis response trainers.

The fourth research question was incorporated to provide an opportunity to compare HEI president discourse by crisis type (Zdziarski, 2007). For example, what themes were included in the presidents’ discourse whose campus endured an
environmental crisis versus an intentional crisis? Environmental crises cause damage to physical structures on campus that will need time and financial support to rebuild, and there is typically no one to blame for causing the crisis. Intentional crises also cause damage, but more in the emotional realm, requiring a different kind of support and communication to help people feel safe on campus and confident in the HEI and its leadership. Additionally, there is usually a person or persons at fault for causing an intentional crisis, and depending on who that person is and what their relationship is with the HEI, there might be damage caused to the HEI reputation. Did the HEI presidents’ discourse from each of these crisis types include different themes? By exploring this final research question, I hoped to learn what themes were included in each crisis type.

**Types of Crises**

For the purposes of this study, an on-campus crisis is defined as a sudden or unexpected event with a limited response time that disrupts normal operations of a higher education institution, affecting the entire campus community as well as impacting the community beyond campus borders (Zdziarski, 2007). During a crisis, lives, property, financial resources, and the reputation of the institution can be threatened or lost (Zdziarski, 2007). Scholars do not agree on the types of crises that can affect higher education institutions. Some have identified over 13 types of human-created disasters that occur on college campuses: sexual assault, stalking, campus dating violence, hate crimes, hazing, celebratory violence (riots), attempted suicides, suicides, murder/suicides, manslaughter, aggravated assault, arson, and attack on faculty/staff/students (Cole, Orsuwan, & Ah Sam, 2007).
Zdziarski, Rollo, & Dunkel (2007) developed a crisis matrix model to provide a framework for assessing and responding to campus crisis. The model suggests three levels of crisis: critical incidents, campus emergencies, and disasters; three crisis types: environmental such as natural disasters, facility crises such as power outages and structural weaknesses, and human-created crises caused by either human error or conscious act; and intentionality, for a total of 18 different possible cells into which a campus crisis may fall.

For this research study, I chose to consider the following four crisis types: environmental, intentional, accidental, and student protests. Some scholars define only two types of crises, natural disasters or human-made disasters (Lindell, Prater, & Perry, 2007). Using two crisis types would have provided straightforwardness to this study and provided opportunity to compare multiple crisis events within each category; however, categorizing all human-made disasters together would have lost contrasts between accidental and purposeful crises and how discourse might have been different between these two types. In addition, there have been recent student demonstrations, protests, and unrest on college campuses regarding treatment of minority students that Lindell et al. (2007) do not specifically mention as a crisis type, but were important to this study due to their relevance. These protests influenced and prompted conversations on college campuses across the United States about race and equity in higher education.

Environmental crises include natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and earthquakes. Often, they are predictable and, with the exception of earthquakes, come with a warning shortly before the crisis occurs (Lerbinger, 1997). Environmental crises can be costly, as they can damage or destroy campus buildings
including performance, athletic, academic, and residence halls, as well as their contents, such as research equipment, historical artifacts, library books, and art. The campus community may need to be evacuated before or after the crisis for clean up and repairs.

Intentional crises include deliberate acts initiated by an individual or group meant to do harm, such as a campus shooting, sexual assault, hazing, or vandalism (Zdziarski et al., 2007). While this type of crisis does not cause as much physical damage to a campus community, the emotional toll is greater. Intentional crises are often sudden and unexpected, and the campus community struggles to understand the reasons why the event occurred. People can feel shock, sorrow, and disillusionment after this crisis type, making recovery more people-centered than structural-centered, and due to the intentionality of the crisis, feelings of blame, anger, fear, and insecurity are also common (Zdziarski et al., 2007).

Accidental crises include unintended events caused by either human error or facility failure, such as fires, explosions, chemical leaks, and building or other structural collapse (Brown, Allen, Conneely, & Good, 2007). This crisis type can cause both physical and emotional damage to the campus community. Extensive physical damage to campus buildings, trees, and landscape can be a result of a fire or explosion, and because it is unintentional, this crisis type can cause campus community members to feel unsafe and fearful the event could recur (Zdziarski et al., 2007).

Student protest crises can begin as a group of students peacefully exercising their right to voice their opinion about perceptions of events or attitudes, but can often escalate to a crisis level if the demonstration becomes threatening, violent, or grows to include crowds of protesters and counter-protesters large enough to disrupt campus operations.
Because emotions can be strong, planned protest events can quickly get out of control, leading to destruction, violence, injury or death. One example of a student demonstration that grew to crisis level occurred at Kent State University in May 1970. The event started as a group of students protesting the Vietnam War. The demonstration lasted over a four-day period but turned violent when a campus building was set on fire and windows in other buildings were broken with rocks. The National Guard was called in to disperse the crowd, which had grown to include approximately 2,500 people. At first tear gas was used but then shots were fired, killing four students and wounding nine (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b; Zdziarski, 2007). Since then, students have continued to exercise their right to demonstrate and protest on campus; however, over the last two years there has been a recent increase in students protesting the treatment of minority students at their institutions. Some protests lasted for days and included national news coverage, hunger strikes, the firing of faculty, cancelling classes, and the resignation of the president. When these demonstrations escalate, they can include damage to property, injury to campus community members, feelings of unsafety, mistrust, and frustration if the demonstrations do not lead to significant change (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b).

**Research Design Overview**

As will be explained further in Chapter III, a post positivist perspective served as a lens through which the study was viewed. Transcripts and writings from president discourse meant for stakeholders of the campus community such as students and their parents, faculty, staff, donors, alumni, and members of the surrounding community served as data. Further, this study used comparative case study in order to examine discourse within and between specific crisis types such as natural disasters, intentional
crises, and accidents, from the period beginning when the crisis occurred and ending one year later.

**Researcher Perspective**

At the beginning stages of a research study, it is important for the researcher to reflect on experiences, assumptions and biases as they relate to the study. This helps both the researcher and reader understand why specific approaches were taken or why data may have been interpreted in a certain way (Merriam, 2009). I will briefly describe my background and personal experiences as related to this study.

I consider myself fortunate to have not experienced a crisis up to this point in my life. When I hear about natural or human-made crises occurring in the world, especially ones that impact students in a higher education community who are away from home, I feel sympathetic toward the victims and their families. I typically take advantage of opportunities to donate small sums of money or supplies to crisis victims, and as a religious person who practices the Christian faith, I keep them in my prayers. I have always been interested in reputation management and find it fascinating that some leaders come through a crisis with better reputations for themselves and their institutions than before, while other leaders’ careers do not survive, and their institutions are tarnished. I have often wondered what makes the difference between the successes and the failures.

Leadership, crisis management, reputation management, and related communication have interested me my entire adult life and I thought it would be exciting to delve deeper into these topics for my dissertation; but the idea for this topic came to me during an unrelated conversation with a colleague. She and I were discussing university presidents and how often they mention, or do not mention, part-time
instructors in their major speeches and that it would be interesting to analyze their speeches to find out. That conversation introduced me to the idea of analyzing public discourse, so I started searching for dissertations and articles that used this method. All of my interests on leadership, crisis management, reputation management, and analyzing discourse converged and as I delved deeper and deeper into the literature, I realized this topic would contribute to the existing research base.

**Summary and Overview**

This chapter provided a background and rationale for studying HEI president discourse after an on-campus crisis. In addition to the research questions that guided this study, definitions were presented as well as a brief description of researcher positionality. Chapter II provides a foundation for the study by presenting an in-depth review of literature on crisis communication theory, framing, university president leadership and discourse. Chapter III outlines and justifies choices of the research design including a post-positivist paradigm, a comparative case study methodology, and content analysis of the transcriptions and writings of president discourse following an on-campus crisis. Findings are presented in Chapter IV, and Chapter V includes a discussion of findings and implications.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of a literature review is to summarize and evaluate the existing knowledge on a particular topic (Machi & McEvoy, 2009). Conducting a literature review is a critical step for a researcher because it provides a foundation for a study through discovery of what is already known, it introduces the language used and current scholarship in the field of study, and it informs the researcher on what is not yet known through analysis of current work and by learning what areas and questions in which other scholars in the field are calling for additional research. Conducting a literature review helps the researcher organize thoughts and ideas and it also helps the reader understand the current landscape of the topic. Each section of this literature review includes an overview as well as a presentation and analysis of current research in the topic area.

Sections include HEI president leadership and discourse in general and specific to crisis situations, situational crisis communication theory, and framing. The first section will present and analyze literature about HEI president leadership. There is a clear distinction between scholarly research and non-scholarly advice in this field, yet both types of literature inform thoughts and ideas about HEI president leadership, therefore both types of literature will be discussed. For transparency, clear distinctions will be made between scholarly and non-scholarly work. Next, both scholarly and non-scholarly work as it relates to a specific responsibility of the HEI president, communication, will be
analyzed. The subsequent two sections will analyze both scholarly and non-scholarly work pertaining to HEI president leadership and communication specific to crisis situations, with the two different types of literature clearly indicated. Following the focus on the HEI president, situational crisis communication theory will be defined and its components explained. Literature will be presented showing its application, particularly in case study methodology, to support its use in this study. Finally, framing will be defined in two ways, first, as a way to view and navigate personal experiences, and second, as a way to communicate in an effort to influence others’ perceptions of an event or message. Scholarship looking for evidence of framing in communication will be presented to justify using a similar technique in this study.

**President Leadership**

While the purpose of a literature review is to summarize and evaluate the current research on a particular topic (Machi & McEvoy, 2009), this section will summarize both historical and contemporary perspectives about the university president as a leader, thus providing context to current research and thinking regarding the HEI president role. Next, current research on university president leadership will be reviewed and analyzed. While a literature review typically includes scholarly research, it is important to note that empirical research on leadership, specifically HEI president leadership, is light. Much of what has been written about leadership is not scholarly and is framed as advice and best-practices for aspiring leaders. Typically such non-scholarly advice would be omitted from a scholarly literature review, but because this type of leadership literature is vast and informs what we currently think about leadership, it is included in this section.
However, in order to be fair to the reader, two distinct subsections clearly separate what has been written about leadership versus what has been studied.

**What Has Been Written About President Leadership**

Over the years, HEI presidents have been described as giants (Kerr, 1964), living logos (McLaughlin, 1996), all-powerful heroes who can make a difference (Fisher & Koch, 1996) and being as interchangeable as light bulbs (Cohen & March, 1986) whose leadership is uninfluential due to the unique shared governance structure of colleges and universities (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989). One explanation for this inconsistency is due to historical changes in higher education institutions which impact changes in expectations of the HEI president role as well as the role itself (Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013).

Today’s HEI presidents face far more demands than their predecessors, including greater competition for students, faculty, and resources, increased accountability for success, retention, and graduation of students, and an expectation to build and maintain close relationships with external stakeholders such as donors, alumni, and community members while building and maintaining close relationships with internal stakeholders such as faculty and staff (Hendrickson et al., 2013). Contemporary HEI presidents serve many roles: They may shape the institution’s mission and vision, provide guidance while working within a shared governance structure, communicate internally and externally with the HEI community, build confidence and consensus, form and maintain relationships with donors, and work responsibly with the budget (Ikenberry, 2010). Contrast this with the role of the HEI president from the mid-1800s, whose institution was religious and whose role, in addition to teaching, was of a learned clergyman, and it
is understandable why the description of the HEI president as a leader has changed over the years.

Another theory explaining why HEI president leadership is described and defined so differently by leadership scholars is attributed to transactional versus transformational leadership perspectives (Fisher & Koch, 1996). Transactional leadership focuses on the interchange between leaders and followers aimed at satisfying their own self-interests (Bass, 2008). Transactional leaders give directives to their followers, who then either receive praise for completing the assigned tasks or punishment for failure to do so. An HEI president who uses a transactional leadership style believes in the importance of shared governance processes based upon consensus; thus, scholars in the field suggest transactional HEI presidents have less opportunities to influence change because they emphasize the democratic structures and communication processes already in place (Fisher & Koch, 1996). Conversely, transformational leaders engage and motivate followers to do more than the followers originally intended. A transformational leader explains expectations and sets parameters, and followers are trusted and allowed to achieve goals however they see fit as long as they work within the given parameters (Bass, 2008). Transformational leaders are believed to have vision, energy, and the ability to make a difference by inspiring others; thus, higher education scholars who subscribe to this theory believe university presidents are influential (Fisher & Koch, 1996). While an abundance of books and articles have been written on the role and leadership of the HEI president, Fisher and Koch (1996) suggest that every higher education leadership scholar comes down on one side or the other of the transactional/transformational debate, which may explain why some scholars in the field
describe HEI presidents as limited and uninfluential while others describe them as highly effective.

Transformational leadership theory is more modern than transactional (Bass, 2008), which might explain why recent emerging scholars describe HEI president leadership as moving away from leader-centered, hierarchical, and focused on power over followers, and moving toward collaborative, contextual, relational work and fostering change (Kezar et al., 2006). Bornstein (2003) suggests that the most effective HEI presidents should blend the qualities of transactional and transformational leaders into a third leadership style, transformative leadership, which uses more collaboration and team-based approaches.

Scholars who write about HEI president leadership have differing opinions on the level of influence an HEI president possesses. Publications from several decades ago suggest HEI presidents lead in isolation, which may explain why some authors feel the president has a limited sphere of influence; while current thinking is more congruent with the idea that today’s HEI presidents use a more transformational, collaborative, team-based leadership style with a larger sphere of influence, thus perhaps providing the opportunity to make more of a difference at their institution. Because current thinking and writing may inform current research, the next section, which describes scholarly research specific to HEI president leadership, will focus on dissertations and studies published in peer reviewed journals within the last 20 years.

**What Has Been Studied About President Leadership**

**Studies associating leadership traits with gender and race.** Recent research on higher education leadership still uses traditional perspectives such as describing effective
leadership traits, styles, and behavioral approaches, but other, newer theories are also being applied to higher education leadership such as power and influence, cognitive, cultural, learning, and collaboration (Kezar et al., 2006). Historically, HEI presidents were white males, but with the emergence of more females and minorities serving in the HEI president role, several recent studies examine these groups (Gregory, 2015; Madsen, 2007; Navarro-Garcia, 2016; Reis, 2015; Waits, 2016; Wolverton, Bower, & Hyle, 2008).

Wolverton, Bower, and Hyle (2008) conducted a narrative case study of nine women college or university presidents and found they embrace the following tenets: passion for their institution, reflectiveness, competence, strong communication skills, the ability to understand the role culture plays in higher education, physical and emotional stamina, focus, forward thinking, respect for individuality, and credibility. Data is collected through interviews, documents, and newspaper articles and no particular leadership theory is applied. Reis (2015) also examines leadership traits of women university presidents through narrative study, but applies a personality inventory as a conceptual framework for organizing leadership traits. While the theory applied suggests successful leaders possess neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, Reis found the women presidents’ strongest traits were extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness, and in addition, they used collaboration in the workplace and navigational skills to balance family life. Waits (2016) also looked at leadership styles and traits of women university presidents, and through the use of interviews and questionnaires, found the women presidents possessed both a collaborative and transformational leadership style. Gregory (2015) too explored the self-reported traits of women college and university presidents, but in addition also
interviewed some of the presidents’ followers in order to obtain their perspectives of the women leaders. The women leaders self-reported qualities of openness, collaboration, strong work ethic, work-life balance, family, faith, and spiritual presence, and high energy levels; however, the only commonalities between what qualities the presidents self-reported and what qualities the followers reported of their presidents was openness and collaboration.

Madsen (2007) also studied women university presidents’ traits and qualities but did not simply explore their current traits as practicing leaders; rather, ten women university presidents were interviewed about their childhood experiences, qualities, traits, and activities. Findings included the university presidents described themselves during childhood as obedient, smart, self-directed, confident, and competitive, involved in a variety of activities, thrived on acquiring new skills. In addition to having these traits, they reported having predominantly women as their role models and overcame obstacles such as childhood illness and relocation.

Only one recent study found explored connections between university president leadership traits and race (Navarro-Garcia, 2016). Six African American university presidents who had a history of social justice efforts were interviewed and completed questionnaires. Findings showed the presidents exhibited traits of a moral leadership style, which includes the desires to do the right thing and to improve society. In addition, Navarro Garcia found the presidents’ social justice values were influenced by their culture, their family, and their personal experiences with and observations of injustice, and these values influenced their leadership style.
**Studies exploring fundraising skills of presidents.** In an era where higher education funding is becoming scarce, fundraising is a highly coveted skill among HEI presidents. Three recent studies explored the leadership styles of university presidents who are successful at fundraising (Barrows, 2016; Meyers, 2016; Nicholson, 2007).

Nicholson (2007) used a mixed methods approach to examine the traits, behaviors, and leadership styles possessed by four university presidents who are successful fundraisers. Findings include the presidents all had a transformative leadership style as well as qualities of constructing vision, good listening skills, the ability to tell stories, and the ability to build individual relationships with donors. Myers (2016) also explored the leadership traits of university presidents successful at fundraising and had similar findings: the presidents used a transformative leadership style, set a vision for the university, motivated donors to join the vision, and were able to build strong individual relationships with them. Barrows’ (2016) study was similar to the other two in that the leadership style of university presidents successful at fundraising; however, this study used quantitative data. Interestingly, there was no statistically significant difference between the presidents using transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles and their ability to raise funds.

**Studies exploring the leadership of non-traditional presidents.** Two recent studies have examined leadership in non-traditional university presidents. Klein (2016) used a narrative inquiry methodology to explore the unique experiences of university presidents who did not arrive in their position through the traditional trajectory. Eleven one-on-one interviews were conducted with non-traditional presidents, with questions focusing on the faculty-president dynamic, the governing board-president relationship,
and the need for fundraising and meeting financial goals. Findings included non-traditional presidents initially face challenges due to faculty resistance to their appointment, yet the governing board trusts the president’s expertise in leading complex organizations will transfer to the higher education environment. Further, the presidents’ ability to connect with faculty and the board of trustees as well as the ability to fundraise was important to gain credibility with constituents. Smerek (2011) explored the leadership styles, behaviors, and sense-making abilities of new university presidents. Using a grounded theory approach, Smerek conducted one on one interviews with 18 presidents at colleges and universities who were in their position for less than five years and were not previous presidents and found that the ability to handle uncertainty, the ability to admit what they do not know, and the ability to use social interactions to quickly develop close relationships with stakeholders and peers were important qualities to this group of presidents. Moreover, participants admitted to making broad goals at first as a way to buy time while learning about the institution.

**Studies associating president preparation with leadership.** Freeman and Kochan (2012) used mixed methods to examine 13 university presidents’ perceptions of their academic doctoral program as it prepared them for their position and influenced their leadership style. Quantitative data was gathered to identify the degree to which the university presidents felt their doctoral program prepared them for their position. Presidents with doctorates in education or higher education felt more prepared than presidents with doctorates in other disciplines in the areas of assessment and enrollment management, while presidents with doctorates in other disciplines felt more prepared for fundraising expectations than those with doctorates in education or higher education.
Qualitative data was gathered to explore the presidents’ perceptions of their doctoral program and how it influenced their leadership style. Findings suggest that doctoral programs give university presidents foundational knowledge about finance and the history of higher education, knowledge acquisition skills, and complex cognitive skills. In terms of leadership style, participants reported their doctoral program strengthened their interpersonal development skills, public speaking skills, and self-confidence, which helped them interact and build relationships with key constituent groups such as faculty and major donors.

Effective HEI president leadership is difficult to define and explore, especially since the role itself has changed and evolved over the years, which creates challenges when attempting to conduct research on HEI presidents. Empirical research is light and is typically restricted to specific types and traits of HEI presidents. The next section of this literature review will investigate current research in a particular area of HEI president leadership, one that no president wants to manage, but one that all presidents must be prepared to manage: leadership during a crisis situation. As with the previous section, much of the literature is non-scholarly but is provided in this chapter to provide context. Thus, a clear distinction is made between non-scholarly advice and scholarly research.

**President Discourse**

Discourse refers to spoken and written language (Fairclough, 2003). As the chief spokesperson of the institution, the HEI president uses discourse both internally and externally to articulate issues needing leadership and direction; inform the national higher education audience and advance national issues; explain national issues to a local audience; explain the institution’s problems and issues to a national audience; articulate
the institution’s values, goals, mission, and vision; disseminate ideas; influence social perceptions; draw upon the institution’s positive characteristics with stakeholders; attain social recognition; and project a specific image to society (Fain, 2010; McGovern, Foster, & Ward, 2002; Rodriguez-Pomeda & Casani, 2016). This section will describe different types and content of HEI president discourse as well as explore how discourse can be applied in research.

Types of Discourse

**Spoken discourse.** The HEI president uses planned, formal speeches such as the State of the University address, Commencement, and Convocation as a primary means of spoken discourse (Fain, 2010). In the past, these speeches did not reach a broad audience because the audience was limited to those physically present; but today, because of the popularity of cell phone video recorders, the internet, and social media, the president’s formal speeches reach a much larger audience. HEI presidents have an opportunity to use their spoken discourse to reach more stakeholder groups, remind people why their institution exists, and attain social recognition (Fain, 2010).

**Written discourse.** The HEI president disseminates written discourse through publication in scholarly and lay journals, emails, and editorials (McGovern et al., 2002). Scholarly journals, the most formal means of written discourse, affords the president the opportunity to contribute to the existing knowledge base on higher education issues. Writings for lay journals and editorials provide the president an opportunity to shape the direction of the institution as well as higher education in general at a local, regional, and national level; discuss contemporary topics, internal and external concerns; and
contribute to the national debate on higher education issues (Rodriguez-Pomeda & Casani, 2016).

**Discourse Content**

McGovern et al. (2002) analyzed the public discourse of 32 university presidents representing all institutional types. The discourse content analysis yielded five major themes that presidents discuss in both their speeches and their writings: restructuring, leadership and governance, technology and the future, university as citizen, and diversity. Restructuring refers to changing how the work of higher education is done in relation to financial accountability, student success, and institutional effectiveness. Leadership and governance refers to university presidents thoughtfully reflecting on their own leadership as well as the leadership of others. Presidents stress the importance of technology in their discourse by highlighting the need to educate students on how to create it and use it as well as imagine its use in future applications. University as citizen refers to the ways in which university presidents send messages to local government officials, business people, and community organizers regarding university-community partnerships. Finally, presidents write and speak about diversifying the racial and ethnic makeup of their student bodies, faculties, and staffs in addition to the importance of diverse opinions.

McGovern et al. (2002) found most university president writing focuses on contemporary issues and dilemmas pertinent to higher education. Findings included four additional qualities unique to university presidents’ written discourse: prescriptive, descriptive, biographical, and autobiographical. University president written discourse is prescriptive in that it offers timely recommendations to higher education decision makers; it is descriptive by the ways in which it illuminates and explains the current state
of higher education affairs; it is biographical when presidents use historical contexts to frame an issue or problem; and it is autobiographical in that presidents tend to write from their foundation of experience, reflections, and personal histories.

A second study examined the content of university president spoken discourse by analyzing one speech per president from 100 different presidents leading institutions with a strong focus on research, a strong international reputation, a solid financial position, and high attraction of talented faculty and students (Rodríguez-Pomeda & Casani, 2016). The study found presidents spoke about their institution in relation to other research universities, mission and values, the importance of education, stakeholders, and leadership.

In addition, four recent dissertations examined university president discourse. Gamble (2003) analyzed transcripts of speeches including inaugural, state of the university, and responses to national events, and opinion-piece articles of four university presidents to determine how Bolman and Deal’s four leadership frames are manifested in the presidents’ discourse. Gamble chose university presidents who led at more than one institution and analyzed transcripts and writings from the multiple universities each president served over the course of their careers. For each president, Gamble used a grid to mark which leadership frames were used in each of the speeches and writings and used findings to make conjectures as to the presidents’ leadership styles. Findings include all four frames, structural, symbolic, human resources, and political, were used in each of the presidents’ speeches and writings. The structural frame was used most often, followed by human resources, then symbolic. The political frame was used least often in the presidents’ discourse. Most presidents used three frames in a single speech or writing,
leading Gamble to conclude the presidents are multi-framed in their leadership. Additionally, Gamble found the presidents’ writings included less frame usage than speeches.

Anastasia (2008) used content analysis to examine metaphors used in transcripts of 20 women college presidents’ inaugural addresses delivered at coed institutions over 17 years. Anastasia coded the metaphors used, and identified 46 resulting themes, such as spirituality, mental health, physical health, peace, collaboration, and reconciliation. Individual themes were combined into the following ten broad themes: Three principal themes found were limits, resources, and perseverance; four central themes were vision, strength, growth, and creativity; and three supporting themes were power, competition, and nature. Anastasia compared findings to those found in research literature regarding metaphors male college presidents use, which include themes of power, control, and dominance.

Using content analysis, Brandebury (2015) analyzed transcripts of State of the University speeches given by presidents at six Midwest Big Ten universities and looked for ways in which the presidents described the value of a higher education. Themes in the data included an emphasis on student success, concern about the declining public good, and the importance of land-grant institutions. Comparisons were made between the presidents’ tenure, race, and ethnicity, audience, and the historic mission of each institution. Brandebury concluded all six presidents, regardless of tenure, race, or ethnicity, are sending mixed messages about their institutions’ values by combining themes of social values, institutional values, and messages of inter-university competition within the same speech.
Young (2013) analyzed the most recent speech obtainable by 57 different university presidents and looked for evidence of Fairhurst and Sarr’s framing devices. For each speech, a coding instrument was used to tally the existence and frequency of various framing devices used. All framing devices were present in the speeches, but positive spin and agenda setting were used the most, while metaphors and contrast were used the least. In addition, statistical tests were used to determine if significant differences existed between frame usage of presidents based on gender, tenure, institution type, and institution size. The only statistically significant finding was male presidents used traditional framing devices such as positive spin, agenda setting, and communicated predicaments, more often while female presidents used more cultural framing devices such as jargon, catchphrases, stories, metaphors, and contrast.

**President Leadership During Crisis**

For an HEI president who operates in the complex, higher education structure of shared governance and many different constituent groups, a crisis provides a particularly critical challenge (Foote, 1996). Scholars and crisis management professionals have given guidance to HEI presidents to help with crisis preparation. While it is not scholarly research, this advice is important to include in this literature review as it informs presidents with crisis preparation, response, and recovery. A presentation and review of scholarly research is also included.

**Non-Scholarly Advice from Specialists**

Many experts in the field of crisis management as well as higher education professionals have made recommendations to HEI presidents on how best to lead during a crisis. The one piece of advice most reported does not relate to leadership during the
crisis, rather, it relates to leadership before a crisis event occurs: creating a crisis management team and a crisis management plan.

**Crisis management teams and plans.** Preparation is the first step to leading during a crisis (Zdziarski, 2007). Professionals in the crisis management field recommend the HEI president form a crisis management team consisting of a business officer, the chief student affairs officer, legal counsel, a human resource officer, the chief of campus security, an information technology officer, the director of residence life, the director of health counseling, the director of public relations, and the director of environmental health (Sherwood & McKelfresh, 2007). While the president is involved with the majority of campus crises, they may not necessarily be a member of the crisis management team (Zdziarski, 2007). Depending on the president’s leadership style and the size and culture of the institution, the president may choose to delegate the crisis management team to another campus leader, who would keep the president informed of the team’s direction and seek counsel from the president on major issues and decisions (Zdziarski, 2007). If the president is not a member of the crisis management team, one of the most important choices the president will make is deciding who will lead the team, and the president must value, trust, and support the team (Sherwood & McKelfresh, 2007). Team members should understand their individual roles on the team as well as the team’s role, authority, and the protocol for activating the team (Sherwood & McKelfresh, 2007).

Once the crisis management team is formed and responsibilities are established, its first task is to develop a crisis response plan, which will provide the foundation, protocols, and action steps from which the campus will operate during a crisis (Abraham,
The plan should be shared with and approved by the HEI president, practiced, reviewed, improved upon, and updated annually (Wilson, 2007). If a crisis occurs, the HEI president should allow the staff to perform their jobs and to support them however possible (Lawson, 2014; Parrot, 2014).

**Leadership qualities to exhibit.** During and after an actual crisis event, crisis management professionals recommend the HEI president put the needs of the students and the victims first (Bataille, Billings, & Nellum, 2012; Brown et al., 2007; Genshaft, 2014; Klann, 2003; Paterson et al., 2007; Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007a). Reputations are important to protect, but not more important than lives. As the crisis management team does its work, the president should create a central hub, not only for the team to do its work but also for decision-making and disseminating information (Alden & Hafer, 2010). Providing accurate, honest, and clear communication is critical for the crisis management team and the president; if there are any inconsistencies in communication to any constituent groups, the president will likely be blamed (Cooper, 2012; Klann, 2003).

Even though it is recommended the HEI president allow and trust the crisis management team do its work, the president is also expected to be in charge and act decisively (Bass, 2008; Hincker, 2014; Kuypers, 2007). A campus community under stress will have confidence in a strong, confident leader and prefers a president who can use a more directive leadership style as the situation warrants (Hincker, 2014).

After the initial threat of the crisis subsides, experts recommend HEI presidents maintain frequent, clear communication both internally and externally, be visible to the campus community, and continue conveying an image of being concerned and in charge (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Presidents should take ownership of the crisis, and depending
on the type of crisis that occurred, an internal investigation should be conducted to
determine the crisis cause, and the president should be as transparent as possible by
releasing as much information about the investigation as is legally allowed (Cooper, 2012). The president should fix any systems that may have failed, revise any policies or
procedures to ensure the crisis will not happen again, and share these steps with internal
and external constituents (Genshaft, 2014). Finally, the president should lead the healing
process for the campus community (Parrot, 2014).

When these leadership traits are not exhibited during and after crisis, possible
complaints from constituents who perceived the HEI president did a poor job of leading
may include feelings the president exhibited an overly directive leadership style and a
lack of communication. For example, after an earthquake destroyed much of the
California State University Northridge campus in January 1994, some faculty members
felt the president did not communicate or consult directly with faculty enough about key
decisions such as opening buildings and resuming classes (Blumenthal, 1995). Faculty
related the president’s lack of communication and decision making structure to a
destruction in the university’s vision and mission (Blumenthal, 1995).

Another complaint stakeholders may have after a crisis is if there is a perception
the president cared too much about covering up the crisis to protect the university’s
reputation (Genshaft, 2014). When news broke of the Penn State sexual abuse scandal in
Fall 2011, internal and external stakeholders felt the president and other key
administrators knew about, and covered up, the incident. Lack of visible leadership and
clear communication after the media broke the story may have led to the resignation of
Penn State’s president, vice president, athletic director, and head football coach (Cooper, 2012).

Thus, a president’s reputation after a crisis may depend on whether or not the president communicates by gathering relevant information, shares it with internal and external stakeholders, and takes decisive action to address the crisis (Cooper, 2012). Consequently, it may be crucial the president achieve a balance with leadership style, communication, and authenticity. If the public perceives the leadership of the institution has not taken ownership of the crisis, sometimes the only way to rebuild confidence in the institution is through a change in leadership, even if it is not the leader’s fault (Bass, 2008; Cooper, 2012; Genshaft, 2014).

**Non-Scholarly Advice from Presidents Who Lead During a Crisis**

In addition to professionals in the crisis management field and higher education scholars giving advice to HEI presidents on how to best lead during a crisis, presidents who have led their institution through a crisis have some suggestions as well. Mason (2014), who was the president of the University of Iowa during a catastrophic flood in 2008, suggests patience during the rebuilding period, wisdom to build the best teams, and vision when reimagining the campus post-crisis. Hincker (2012), who was the Associate Vice President of University Relations at Virginia Tech during the campus shootings, stresses the importance of the president being visible and maintaining open, frequent communication. Lawson (2014) asked Ray Bowen, who was president of Texas A&M University in 1999 when the bonfire collapsed, what advice he would have for other presidents leading during crisis. Bowen suggested university presidents surround
themselves with people who have common sense and then to take advice from them, including lawyers, and above all, do the right thing, regardless of any legal fallout that may result from the crisis. Finally, Foote (1996), who was the president of the University of Miami in 1992 when Hurricane Andrew hit campus, recommends university presidents be prepared, get the facts, disseminate information calmly and accurately; prioritize; make decisions without consultation when necessary but involve others in decision making when possible; stay visible; and practice self-care.

**Scholarly Research**

It is important to highlight non-scholarly advice on HEI president leadership during crisis because presidents are more than likely using it to influence thoughts and actions on crisis leadership. Nonetheless, it is also important to discuss what scholars in the field have studied on the topic. For clarity, non-scholarly advice was presented in the previous section, separate from scholarly research, which is presented below. Research on higher education leaders’ experience with crisis is limited compared to research in the corporate setting (Wang & Hutchins, 2010); in this section, both types of studies will be presented.

Wang and Hutchins found that the leadership at Virginia Tech exhibited evidence of moving through all six phases, they did not evaluate success, failures, strengths, or weaknesses of leadership in any of the phases.

One dissertation examined university president leadership during crisis. Mills (2004) interviewed the president of Oklahoma State University as well as his staff and other senior leaders in order to determine the president’s leadership style before, during, and after an on-campus crisis involving a plane crash that killed several athletes. Using Bolman and Deal’s (2013) leadership frames as a reference, Mills found that before the crisis, the president used all four leadership frames: symbolic, structural, political, and human resources. However, during the crisis, the president used the symbolic and human resources frames the most, followed by the structural frame, and used very little of the political frame. Mills did not ask the president whether or not this was purposeful.

Another dissertation looked at the perceptions of the roles university presidents and campus crisis managers play as leaders during crisis (Garcia, 2015). This study did not focus on presidents who led their campus community through a crisis, rather, Garcia interviewed six presidents and ten crisis managers, all from the Florida University System, to analyze their perceptions of crisis, crisis leadership, crisis management, and their roles pre-, during, and post-crisis. Key findings included: participants perceived their role to be critical during a crisis as well as the other’s role; participants believed they must offer support to one another; the importance of an established culture of crisis management; participants felt it was important that others in the campus community saw the president support the crisis managers, and vice versa, to elevate the importance of crisis management to the campus community. An addition to this study could have been
to include university presidents and crisis managers who led their institution through a crisis.

One study looked at leadership during crisis in the banking industry, and found that collaborative leadership was used more often during non-crisis situations than during crisis situations (Mulder, deJong, Koppelaar, & Verhage, 1986). In addition, the participants indicated a preference for more directive leadership during crisis. Conducting such a study in a higher education institution would yield a useful contribution to the current knowledge base.

Another study outside of higher education looked at corporate CEOs who lead during crisis and determined five major tasks they perform: making sense of the crisis, making decisions to manage the crisis, framing the crisis to stakeholders, stopping the crisis, returning normalcy to the corporation, and helping the organization learn from the crisis (Lucero, Teng-Kwang, & Pang, 2009). In addition, the CEOs’ subordinates were interviewed and asked at what point during a crisis should the CEO become involved. Participants reported a desire for the CEO to be involved at the beginning and during the height of the crisis. Participants were also asked what types of crises CEOs should help manage. Accidents, organizational misdeed, and workplace violence crises were listed as types in which CEO leadership was expected, while strikes, rumors, product recalls, mergers, and economic downturns were crises types in which participants did not expect CEOs to help lead.

Bauman (2011) also examined crisis leadership in corporations, but categorized leaders’ approaches to crisis involving intentional harm as using either an ethic of justice, an ethic of care, or virtue ethics. Bauman found that stakeholders prefer corporate
leaders to use an ethic of care during a crisis, which includes acknowledging the crisis occurred, apologizing, and acting by resolving the crisis problem.

During a crisis, much is expected of an HEI president: strength, decisiveness, compassion, emotion, directive leadership when needed, being visible, and either leading or supporting the crisis management team in its work. A large part of these leadership tasks will involve external and internal discourse. The following section will provide a foundation for HEI president discourse in general, followed by a section on HEI president discourse during crisis.

**President Discourse During and After Crisis**

HEI presidents are expected to communicate early and often during crisis response and recovery. This section will outline what can happen when there is a lack of communication as well as both non-scholarly advice and scholarly research on university president discourse during and after a crisis situation. This section is similar to previous sections in that there is a separation between non-scholarly advice given to HEI presidents and scholarly research. It is unconventional to include non-scholarly work in a literature review, but since it comprises the majority of the literature on this topic and informs our thinking, it is included. As with previous sections, to avoid confusion and clarify for the reader which works are non-scholarly and which are, they are separated into two distinct subsections.

**Crisis Communication Void**

The way in which a college or university communicates about a crisis as it is taking place is critical as it can impact the safety of those on campus (Varma, 2011). Post-crisis communication is also critical in that it impacts recovery efforts and the
institution’s reputation. Crisis situations create media and public demand for information, and silence about the crisis gives the public the perception of uncertainty or apathy on the part of the institution (White, 2009). One recent study examined what happens when there is a communication void—the absence of a proactive, strategic public relations response—after a crisis (White, 2009). The case studied was of the University of Tennessee president, John Shumaker, who received a glowing performance review from the Board of Trustees in June 2003, 12 months after he started the job, yet two months after that, in August 2003, resigned under suspicion of wrongdoing. From June to the day President Shumaker resigned in August, the media reported new stories every few days about the president’s lavish personal spending, unethical hiring processes, and inappropriate use of the university airplane (White, 2009). As the incidents dominated the news, there was an unusual lack of response or proactive communication from the university’s public relations office. It was later revealed that university administrators provided the negative information about the president to the media in order to damage the president’s reputation and pressure him to resign. The media reported the information, and the public relations staff purposely remained silent and nonresponsive (White, 2009). The study found that because there was a communication void where a proactive communication strategy should have been, the media filled the void with negative reaction and opinion, and the public not only believed, but elevated the only information it was given, thus stressing the importance of proactive communication for managing public opinion (White, 2009).
Non-Scholarly Advice for Presidents

Crisis communication practitioners agree that both during and after the crisis the president should communicate with a wide audience including students and their parents, staff, faculty, the board of trustees, legislators, donors, local community members, the media, and the general public (Lawson, 2007). The president’s crisis communication plan should first start with preparation and planning, including building positive relationships with the media and creating a crisis communication team with clear procedures for releasing information (Lawson, 2007).

During a crisis, disseminating factual, accurate information as quickly as possible about what is happening and what students, faculty, and staff should do is critical (Kuypers, 2007; Parrot, 2012) and should include ensuring websites and social media are updated with any new information or directives as quickly as possible (Whitely, Felice, & Bailey, 2007). In addition, HEI presidents should provide daily and timely communication on the status of the campus and do not wait too long to speak, and do not misspeak (Genshaft, 2014). It is okay if the president does not have all of the facts in the beginning stages of the crisis, but instead of staying silent waiting for accurate information, it is important for the president to state what is known, what is not yet known, and more information is to come as soon as it is known (Genshaft, 2014).

After the initial threat of the crisis is over and the institution moves into recovery mode, HEI president communication should shift from information-giving to acknowledging the need for healing (Kuypers, 2007). The president should not point fingers or lay blame, rather, the president should build community, speak to the spirit and values of the institution, mourn with families and friends of the victims, and encourage
the community to prevail and heal together (Kuypers, 2007). Then, it is important to go into information mode again, to communicate what initiatives the university is taking to ensure that a crisis of similar nature never happens again. Inform stakeholders about lessons learned, changes or improvements to policy or procedures, and thank first responders and others who helped the university through the crisis (Lawson, 2007; Parrot, 2012).

**Scholarly Research**

Recent scholarly research in peer reviewed journals which focuses on the president’s public discourse during and after crisis is light. One study examined communication given by HEI presidents in the greater St. Louis area in the days leading up to the grand jury announcement regarding the potential indictment of police officer Darren Wilson, who shot and killed Michael Brown in the city of Ferguson, Missouri the fall of 2014 (Lucas, Linsenmeyer, & O’Brien, 2015). Local colleges and universities anticipated protests on campus after the grand jury announcement and, as a result, many HEI presidents in the area sent out communications to their campus community during the days before the decision. The study found that while most HEI presidents communicated to their communities transparently about the situation, others remained silent. Of those who communicated, the majority of the presidents gave information such as notifying the campus community of class cancellations and reminders of procedures for peaceful protests, and referenced care and concern for student safety, peace, and the well-being of the university community. Surprisingly, the majority of the presidents’ discourse included references to branding and the university’s reputation and status, which the researchers concluded was inappropriate (Lucas et al., 2015).
Outside of higher education, one recent study examined the CEO’s communication in the wake of a corporate crisis (Lucero et al., 2009). Lucero et al. (2009) analyzed over 30 corporate crises and concluded that when a corporation is in crisis, the CEO only needs to communicate formally to stakeholders when the integrity of the organization is in question, and not at the height of the crisis, which misaligns with advice and research findings of crises in higher education institutions. This might be due to the fact that most corporate crises are financial and do not present an immediate threat to the safety of its constituents.

Another study examined one particular crisis, Hurricane Katrina, and examined how the media characterized the crisis communication of a variety of different authorities during and after the disaster (Littlefield, 2007). A textual analysis of 52 articles appearing in national and local newspapers the week after the hurricane struck revealed few positive and mostly negative terms were used to describe the communication efforts of the military, the Department of Homeland Security, President Bush, the federal government, and local government. The researchers concluded the media stepped outside their role of objective reporting and abused its influence, using it to point blame toward those with authority, thus empowering the media to evaluate and give opinion on crisis responses and influence public perception (Littlefield, 2007).

Three recent dissertations and a master’s thesis examined crisis discourse specific to the university president (Burner, 2016; DiManno, 2010; McNeely, 2013; Rossi, 2012). Burner (2016) interviewed six former college and university presidents whose institutions endured a crisis to find out what the presidents thought was most important in the crisis communication process. Findings include the importance of pre-planning, keeping
reputation and perception in mind, and taking time to debrief and discuss learning opportunities.

DiManno (2010) examined how newspapers portrayed college and university presidents’ communication during institutional crises and looked for potential differences between the ways in which female and male presidents were represented. Twelve different institutional crises were examined, all in the northeast. Major themes in the data included lasting labels, in which the media’s coverage and interpretation of the president’s initial communication stayed with him or her throughout the entire crisis; certain coverage, which describes how a communication misstep or void was almost guaranteed to receive prominent coverage; en masse education, in which the media explained higher education in general, academic terminology, and the history of the institution in crisis for the president; various voices, which refers to the media including communication from sources other than the president such as students, faculty, and community members; and millennium media, which refers to the president using multiple forms of communication such as press conferences, interviews, websites, and social media. In addition, DiManno (2010) concluded the presidents were largely portrayed through direct quotations from themselves and reports were either objective or slanted negatively. An additional finding was that male presidents and female presidents were portrayed similarly in the newspaper coverage.

McNeely (2013) examined the communication of Xavier University Louisiana President Francis in the days following Hurricane Katrina and looked for evidence of Kouzes and Posner’s (2007) five practices of exemplary leadership theory. Major themes revealed that of the five practices, Dr. Francis’ communication primarily used Model the
Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, and Challenge the Process. The additional practices of Enable Others to Act and Encourage the Heart were evidenced in Dr. Francis’ communication, but in a less prominent way. Additional themes revealed Dr. Francis’ communication confidence, integrity, optimism, and faith (McNeely, 2013).

A master’s thesis examined a particular crisis involving Penn State football assistant coach Jerry Sandusky and allegations of his sexual abuse of young boys (Rossi, 2012). The thesis compared the crisis communication of the local news outlet to the communication disseminated by top university officials and found that while both attempted to repair the image of the university through discourse, the local news outlet described the crisis events in more detail, while Penn State University officials avoided details and specific facts (Rossi, 2012).

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is a crisis management application of attribution theory, which suggests that human beings attempt to understand the behavior of others by attributing feelings, beliefs, and intentions to them and their actions (Weiner, 1986). SCCT involves crisis managers protecting an organization’s reputation after a crisis by selecting the appropriate and recommended crisis response strategy (Coombs, 2006). There are many components of SCCT, all of which should be applied sequentially and in a careful, purposeful manner. First, SCCT recommends dividing crisis response content into three distinct and sequential categories: (1) instructing information, (2) adjusting information, and (3) reputation management (Coombs, 2007). Instructing information involves telling stakeholders what to do in order to protect themselves both physically and emotionally during a crisis, because,
according to SCCT, protecting lives is more important than protecting the institution’s reputation, which is one of the theory’s elements that separates it from other crisis response theories (Coombs, 2007). After the immediate threat of the crisis subsides, the next category of crisis response, adjusting information, involves crisis managers reassuring stakeholders on a basic, psychological level by informing them about what happened: the what, where, when, why, and how of the crisis (Bergman, 1994). The final component of crisis response, reputation management, is where the bulk of SCCT content lies. Because reputations are threatened during and after a crisis (Coombs, 2007), an organization’s words and actions will influence how stakeholders perceive the organization, so it is important that crisis managers communicate appropriately with stakeholders. Reputation management involves choosing, and using, a specific response strategy based on the particular type of crisis.

The first step in choosing a crisis response strategy is to evaluate the reputational threat the crisis brings to the organization, which involves considering the crisis type, the organization’s crisis history, and the organization’s prior reputation (Coombs, 2006). Most crises will fall easily into one of three crisis types, each of which have different levels of responsibility: victim, accidental, and preventable (Coombs, 2007). The victim crisis type has a minimal level of reputational management responsibility because stakeholders view the organization as a victim, not a cause, of the crisis. Victim crises include natural disasters such as fires, floods, tornadoes, and earthquakes, and workplace violence events such as shootings or when a disgruntled employee attacks or harms another (Coombs, 2007). The accidental crisis type includes technical-error accidents and technical-error product harm, such as an oil spill or a plane crash resulting from a
mechanical malfunction. Organizations experiencing these crises have a low level of reputational threat to manage because stakeholders perceive these crises are uncontrollable and unintentional. The preventable crisis type includes human-error accidents, human-error product harm, and organizational misdeeds, such as the President Bill Clinton sexual misconduct allegations during his presidency or the accusations of corporate greed and government influence that led to the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement. Stakeholders attribute a high level of crisis responsibility to organizations experiencing these types of crises because stakeholders perceive the organization may have willfully engaged in behaviors that led to the crisis (Coombs, 2006).

The second step in choosing a response strategy is to evaluate the organization’s prior crisis history and reputation (Coombs, 2004). If an organization has undergone a prior crisis, or if it has a weak reputation, the current crisis will present a stronger reputational threat, thus, crisis managers will need to adjust the crisis response choice (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). SCCT recommends that crisis managers whose organizations have undergone a prior crisis or have a weak reputation treat a victim crisis like an accidental crisis and an accidental crisis like a preventable one (Coombs, 2007). Once the crisis type is determined, the crisis manager chooses the appropriate crisis response strategy.

**Crisis Response Strategies**

SCCT organizes crisis response strategies into four categories: denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering, based on whether the intent of the crisis manager is to change perceptions of the crisis itself or of the organization in crisis (Coombs, 2006). The denial category includes three crisis response strategies: attack the
accuser, in which the crisis manager confronts the individual or group claiming that a crisis exists; denial, where the crisis manager states no crisis exists; and scapegoating, which involves the crisis manager blaming some other person or group outside the organization for the crisis (Coombs, 2007). The diminishment category includes two crisis response strategies: excusing, which involves the crisis manager minimizing the organization’s responsibility for the crisis; and justification, where the crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage resulting from the crisis (Coombs, 2007). The rebuilding category includes two crisis response strategies: compensation, in which the organization provides money or gifts to the crisis victims; and apology, which involves the crisis manager stating the organization is fully responsible for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness (Coombs, 2007). The final category, bolstering, is supplemental to the other three and should not be used alone (Coombs, 2007). Bolstering includes three crisis response strategies: reminding, where the crisis manager tells stakeholders about the organization’s past good work; ingratiation, in which the crisis manager praises stakeholders; and victimage, which involves the crisis manager explaining that the organization too is a victim of the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

Once the crisis type and reputational threat are identified, the final step for the crisis manager is to match the crisis type with the appropriate crisis response strategy (Coombs, 2006). SCCT suggests that crisis managers and organizations with no prior crisis history and strong reputations use deny strategies for victim crises, diminishment strategies for accidental crises, and rebuilding strategies for preventable crises (Coombs, 2007).
Research Applying Situational Crisis Communication Theory

While the majority of scholarly research applying SCCT uses a case study method, in which one crisis is chosen and the crisis communication is analyzed through an SCCT lens, scholars apply SCCT in different ways. For example, several contemporary researchers compare crisis responses used by an organization to determine if the appropriate crisis response strategy was used according to SCCT recommendations (Kim & Liu, 2012; Sisco, 2012b; Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2010; Weber et al., 2011). Another application of SCCT research uses case study and a particular case to suggest and test revisions to the SCCT model (Choi & Lin, 2009) or by confirming the strength of the theory by examining crises or components not already represented in the model (Cooley & Cooley, 2011; Gerken, Van der Land, & van der Meer, 2016). Contemporary researchers typically include crises involving for-profit (Choi & Lin, 2009; Cooley & Cooley, 2011; Gerken et al., 2016; Weber et al., 2011) as well as non-profit organizations (Sisco, 2012b; Sisco et al., 2010), and only one study found explores SCCT in a higher education setting (Kelly, 2014). In order to provide context and background of the ways contemporary researchers use SCCT, descriptions of several of the aforementioned studies in both the for-profit and non-profit sectors will be provided in the remainder of this section.

Concerning the for-profit sector, Cooley and Cooley (2011) examined how General Motors used SCCT when communicating about its bankruptcy crisis in 2009, one of two studies found involving a financial crisis. Financial crisis is not specifically listed under any of the three crisis types (Coombs, 2007), thus, it was not completely
clear to the researchers whether the General Motors bankruptcy crisis fell under the victim, accidental, or preventable clusters. Consequently, it was not clear which crisis response strategies SCCT would suggest General Motors use. Nonetheless, Cooley and Cooley used content analysis to examine all corporate crisis communication messages made to the public through press releases, the General Motors website, press conferences, CEO speeches, and blogs from the date when GM filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy until the launch of the “new” GM. Case study was the methodology used, with the entire set of discourse being considered the case with each individual piece of communication the unit of analysis. Each message was coded and analyzed using the crisis communication strategies recommended from SCCT. Cooley and Cooley found that General Motors used the diminishment and rebuilding crisis response strategies most often, and because General Motors successfully navigated its way through the crisis and kept its reputation intact with its stakeholders, they recommended that other institutions who may face a similar financial crisis also use the same crisis response strategies.

Another study using SCCT theory involving a for-profit organization in a financial crisis examined Citibank’s use of crisis response strategies during the United States banking crisis in 2007 and 2008 (Weber et al., 2011). Similar to the previous study mentioned, this study did not situate the Citibank crisis in any of the three SCCT crisis types due to the absence of financial crises in the listings, and also used content analysis to examine the communication strategies the organization used. Excerpts from media stories, press releases, and advertisements were analyzed to determine whether SCCT strategies were used. The researchers found Citibank used bolstering strategies most often to attempt to repair its image and rebuilding strategies to assure stakeholders
of the company’s solid reputation and future. Because SCCT strategies were used and the Citibank did not suffer any adverse effects of the banking crisis, Weber et al. (2011) determined the company successfully navigated the crisis.

Choi and Lin (2009) explored the role of emotion in the SCCT model by analyzing the content of consumer responses on Mattel’s online message boards during a series of four product recalls. The researchers found anger, surprise, fear, and worry were emotions frequently expressed by consumers, and suggested that a revised SCCT model consider stakeholders’ emotions when determining crisis response strategies. This study reversed the SCCT analysis by focusing on stakeholders’ responses and using them to suggest revisions to the theory rather than analyzing Mattel’s responses as a way to preserve its reputation.

A final study in the for-profit sector examined both the organization’s crisis response as well as the public’s response to the organization. Gerken et al., (2016) used content analysis of social media posts to explore AirAsia’s crisis response to a plane crash involving 162 people as well as the public’s response via social media to AirAsia’s crisis management. The researchers found AirAsia used a single crisis response strategy recommended by SCCT, adjusting information, in the majority of their communications to reassure stakeholders by explaining basic information about the crisis to the public. Conversely, the public’s responses indicated not only a need for information, but also a desire for an emotional response from AirAsia, which they did not receive. Because AirAsia’s response did not completely align with what the public wanted, the researchers suggest adding an element of emotion to the SCCT crisis response strategies for other organizations that might face a similar crisis (Gerken et al., 2016).
In the non-profit sector, three recent studies use SCCT and case study to analyze organizations’ crisis responses. Sisco (2012b) examined the crisis response strategies the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) used when responding to a series of crises involving embezzlement, voter registration fraud, and undercover video showing ACORN employees behaving in an unprofessional manner. Using document analysis of newspaper articles, Sisco (2012b) found that ACORN did not use crisis response strategies suggested by SCCT. In the embezzlement scandal, SCCT would classify it as a preventable crisis and recommend rebuilding communication strategies; however, ACORN portrayed itself as the victim. In the voter registration fraud crisis, SCCT would classify it as an accidental situation and would recommend using the diminish response strategies rather than the denial strategy ACORN used. In the undercover video crisis, ACORN used both deny and diminish crisis response strategies, but SCCT suggests this was a preventable crisis situation and should have been handled using rebuilding strategies. Sisco (2012b) suggests that ACORN’s poor communication about these crises may have contributed to the organization shutting its doors soon after.

Another study examining a non-profit organization’s response to crisis through the SCCT lens does not look at one particular case, rather it examines the organization’s response to all crises encountered during a ten year time period (Sisco et al., 2010). The American Red Cross sometimes responds to crises it creates such as blood shortages, management scandals, and usage of donations intended for victims’ families in addition to crises such as natural disasters. Using discourse analysis of newspaper articles over a ten year period, Sisco et al. (2010) found a significant difference between crisis response strategies used by the American Red Cross and those recommended by SCCT. The Red
Cross used the recommended response strategies only one-third of the time, which may weaken its reputation in the eyes of the public.

While the majority of scholars applying SCCT use case study, Sisco (2012a) used an experimental research design to investigate if participants felt more favorable toward a non-profit organization that used crisis response strategies recommended by SCCT rather than a non-profit organization that did not use recommended strategies. Sisco (2012a) asked research participants to read fictitious crisis scenarios along with different crisis responses and then answer questions that asked how they viewed the organization’s response to the crisis and found participants were more favorable toward organizations who use recommended SCCT crisis response strategies.

One recent study used the SCCT lens to compare how corporate organizations and government organizations responded to the 2009 flu pandemic (Kim & Liu, 2012). Using document analysis, Kim and Liu (2012) examined social media postings as well as newspaper articles of corporations and government entities directly involved in managing the crisis. The researchers found government organizations provided instructing information to the public while corporations utilized crisis response strategies to manage their reputations (Kim & Liu, 2012). Kim and Liu (2012) applied SCCT through an examination of the ways 13 entities such as corporate organizations from industries such as airlines, pharmaceutical, and food services, and government organizations such as the Department of Health and Human Services, the World Health Organization, and the Center for Disease Control, responded to the 2009 flu pandemic. Data was collected from press releases, press conferences, reports, statements, Facebook posts, Twitter posts, and web sites. Document analysis was used to determine how SCCT theory was used,
and findings indicated that government organizations were more likely to emphasize instructing information and suggest specific actions the public should take to protect themselves, while corporations focused more on reputation management through their communication.

While the studies mentioned thus far applied SCCT in different ways, many used case study methodology and content analysis of communication, and they all examined crisis cases as experienced by for-profit and non-profit organizations. It is notable that a thorough review of the literature revealed only one study that applied SCCT in a higher education setting. A dissertation using quantitative, survey data to compare four different stakeholder groups’ perceptions of a university response to an actual crisis that occurred on the university’s campus found that staff viewed the university’s reputation and crisis response more favorably than the other stakeholder groups of administrators, faculty, and students (Kelley, 2014). While the study did not identify the particular university or crisis studied, Kelly (2014) found that the university used recommended SCCT strategies in its crisis response, suggesting that SCCT can be applied to higher education institutions.

Thus far, this literature review has provided an introduction to framing and SCCT as well as related research. The remaining sections will shift attention toward the HEI president, as leader and communicator both on a daily basis as well as during crisis situations.

**Framing**

A frame is a structure through which people see the world (Goffman, 1974). Frames provide context, help us to make meaning of our experiences, and give us a
vantage point or perspective through which we can look at the world (Zoch, Collins, Sisco, & Supa, 2008). There are two types of framing that will be highlighted in this section, a frame defined as a mental model people use in everyday life to help navigate familiar and unfamiliar circumstances (Bolman & Deal, 2013), and framing used in communication (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996).

**Framing as a Mental Model**

Bolman and Deal (2013) consolidated ideas from both research and practice in the fields of psychology, sociology, political science, and anthropology to suggest four perspectives, called frames, we use to make meaning of experiences: structural, political, symbolic, and human resources. The structural frame stresses policy, process, and procedure; the political frame emphasizes power and competition for scarce resources; the symbolic frame highlights culture, ritual, ceremony, and stories; and the human resources frame stresses people and relationships. Individuals typically have one or two dominant frames which typically govern thoughts and actions, specifically in the workplace and when in leadership positions (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

The four leadership frames were not created or defined by Bolman and Deal (2013) as a direct result of their own research; rather, the frames were categorized, labeled, and defined based on the thoughts and previous research of other scholars and practitioners. Nonetheless, many research studies have applied Bolman and Deal’s model by looking for evidence of the four frames used by leaders in the workplace environment (Albino, 2013; Boff, 2015; Clark, 2013; Gilson, 1994; Guidry, 2007; Mabel, Tie, & Chua, 2015; Probst, 2011; Schumacher, 2011; Sypawka, 2008; Thompson, 2000; Thompson et al., 2008). Even though the leadership frames will not be directly applied to
this study, it is important to define them as they are often mentioned when discussing leadership traits in individuals. It is possible the four leadership frames will be mentioned in later chapters of this study.

**Framing in Communication**

Framing can also be defined, analyzed, and used within the context of communication. This type of framing refers to using specific words and language to emphasize certain parts of a message in order to shape others’ interpretations and influence perceptions of the topic being discussed (Zoch et al., 2008). In addition, specific events can be framed in different ways by the person describing them, which gives leaders the opportunity to use specific frames in their communication to help others interpret the event and remember certain details in specific ways. Leaders often operate in uncertain environments, and while they cannot always control the situation, they can use frames to influence how the situation is perceived by others (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Just as photographers look through a camera lens and frame a picture by choosing and drawing attention to a subject, using filters to enhance parts of the shot they want the viewer to notice, and excluding or minimizing elements they hope the viewer will ignore, leaders frame a situation through communication by including and highlighting the parts of the story they want others to take note of and remember, and minimizing or completely excluding parts they hope others will forget (Fairhurst, 2011). For example, one theory suggests typical framing used in communication uses devices including catchphrases, depictions, metaphors, exemplars, and visual images (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). It is important to note framing devices are not intended to be used to manipulate an audience, rather, they are used to guide an audience’s views and opinions of an event.
Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) looked for the types of framing devices practicing leaders use in their workplace communication. After collecting and analyzing over 200 thirty-minute workplace conversations involving at least one practicing leader, Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) developed 11 common framing devices leaders use in their spoken communication. They are: (1) metaphor, which compares a situation’s resemblance to another situation that does not relate; (2) story, which frames a situation by using a narrative; (3) contrast, which describes a situation in terms of what it is not; (4) spin, which places a situation in either a positive or negative light; (5) jargon/catchphrase, which describes a situation using familiar terms; (6) analogy, which includes describing how a situation parallels another, related situation; (7) argument, which justifies or defends a situation using reason; (8) feeling statements, which use emotions to frame a situation; (9) category, which describes a situation in terms of it belonging or not belonging to a particular class or group; (10) three-part-list, which describes a situation using easily remembered threes; and (11) repetition, which includes the reiteration of a word or phrase (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). In a single thirty-minute conversation, a leader can use multiple framing devices, a single framing device, or no framing devices, and they often miss opportunities to use them. While most leaders do not realize they use framing devices, they can be taught how and when to use them (Fairhurst, 2011). This study was limited to leaders in a corporate environment and did not include leaders in higher education. Furthermore, the participants in this study knew they were being recorded and that their language would be analyzed, which means they may have been more conscious and careful of their word choice and less authentic in their everyday conversation.
Research applying framing devices specific to the ones developed by Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) is light. As mentioned earlier, Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) analyzed over 200 unscripted workplace conversations and found leaders in the corporate setting use all 11 framing devices. Further, Shapiro and Ward (1998) use case study and discourse analysis to look for evidence of Fairhurst and Sarr’s framing devices in the political setting, and found political leaders in the Oregon State Legislature used them in speeches on education reform.

A single study applied Fairhurst and Sarr’s (1996) framing devices in a higher education setting, which looked for usage of Fairhurst and Sarr’s framing devices in University President speeches (Young, 2013). Young analyzed the most recent commencement, inauguration, convocation, or state of the university speech that could be acquired from 51 university presidents and found while some speeches contained a subset of Fairhurst and Sarr’s framing devices, and one speech contained none, all of Fairhurst and Sarr’s framing devices were represented in the speeches as a whole. Young also looked for framing device usage by type of university, size of university, and university president demographics such as gender, age, total years of experience, and years in the current position. Findings included the most commonly used framing device by the university presidents was positive spin, and the least commonly used was metaphors. Inaugural addresses contained the most framing devices, and commencement speeches the fewest. The more experience a university president had, the more jargon and catchphrases used in the speeches. Similarly, as university enrollment increased, jargon and catchphrase use increased. Male presidents tended to use positive spin more than the other framing devices, and female presidents used more catchphrases and stories. While
this study produced useful findings in that it connected Fairhurst and Sarr’s framing devices to university president speeches, its main limitation was that it did not look at multiple speeches made by the same president, nor did it examine speeches given by presidents who might wish to frame particular events in specific ways. This research study is particularly relevant because it was conducted in a higher education setting. Participants were university presidents, and findings indicated university presidents use framing devices in their speeches. My study will build upon these results to explore framing device usage in public discourse of a particular university president, one whose institution endured an on campus crisis.

Framing as it Relates to Crisis Communication

Crisis situations create a public demand for information (Coombs, 2006). What is said during and after a crisis has implications regarding others’ perceptions of the crisis management effort (Coombs, 2007). While some crisis communication theories exist, several recent research studies look for general crisis communication themes without applying a specific theory. These studies share the common research methodology of case study of either a corporate or government crisis and through discourse analysis look for general crisis communication themes without applying a specific theory (Bowen & Zheng, 2015; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Leysen, 2013; Hargie, Stapleton, & Tourish, 2010; Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson, & Shin, 2011; Park, Bier, & Palenchar, 2016; Peeters, 2010; Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz, & van Atteveldt, 2012; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014; Wickman, 2014). For example, Hargie, Stapleton, and Tourish (2010) studied the public testimony of four banking CEOs during the 2008-2009 banking crisis and, using content analysis, explored how the CEOs expressed
responsibility and blame for the crisis. No particular crisis communication theory was applied; rather, general themes were investigated and discovered. Findings included the CEOs expressed regret, attempted to align with others affected by the crisis, and disassociated themselves from the events causing the crisis; however, these findings were not connected with established theory. As another example, Wickman (2014) studied the British Petroleum (BP) response to the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill by analyzing press releases and statements on the BP corporate website. Even though crisis communication theory was not applied, Wickman found that while BP claimed responsibility for mobilizing resources, stabilizing the situation, and quickly paying out claims after the spill, it did not accept responsibility for the spill itself, suggesting that BP attempted to shape its reputation and image in a positive light after the incident.

In contrast, there are framing theories specific to crisis communication that can be used and applied in research. Hearit’s (2001) third-party response theory suggests there are three roles third-party groups play in the aftermath of a crisis: the victim, where a third-party individual or group claims the actions of one of the main participants of a crisis or scandal wronged them; the critic, in which a third-party observer opines about the wrongdoing of the guilty party of a scandal and suggests social sanctions against him or her; and the defender, in which a third-party defends the guilty party and offers an explanation for the accused. Tavuchis (1991) also developed a third-party response theory, but specifies roles for the third party of casual bystander, impartial observer, eyewitness, commentator, critic, conciliator, mediator, advocate, adjudicator, and judge. Restorative rhetoric theory focuses on recovery and rebuilding after a crisis (Griffin-Padgett & Allison, 2010), while image restoration theory focuses on managing an
institution’s reputation after a crisis (Benoit, 1997). The most useful crisis response theory to this dissertation is situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) because it not only emphasizes caring for victims’ immediate needs after a crisis, but it also focuses on the importance of communicating to stakeholders in a meaningful way by matching the crisis type to the appropriate crisis response (Coombs, 2006).

**Summary**

To review, this chapter began with a presentation and analysis of writings and scholarly research related to HEI president leadership and discourse, which was found to be complex and evolving. Following, writings and research related to leadership and discourse specific to crisis events was presented. Next, SCCT was explained and its applications to research both inside and outside of higher education were described. Finally, different types of framing, including leadership framing and the framing devices people use in discourse, were reviewed.

A thorough review of the literature found case study methodology and content analysis methods are widely accepted as valid research design elements applying SCCT to discourse, but no studies applied SCCT to crisis communication in a higher education setting. Further, one study revealed HEI presidents use framing devices, but we do not know how they are used by presidents whose campus endured a crisis. Presidents are advised to provide information during a crisis, exhibit care and concern for victims and their families, and reassure stakeholders measures have been taken to prevent a similar crisis from reoccurring, however, this advice has not been connected to SCCT through empirical research. Finally, no research studies examined the different types of crises that exist on HEI campuses.
While the research reviewed in the area of HEI president discourse during crisis has been insightful, there have been no connections between discourse during crisis recovery and HEI presidents. Thus, my research study, which was specific to this area, adds to the currently existing body of research as well as provides information to HEI presidents, and the organizations who train them, how discourse can be used to assist the campus community with crisis recovery.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of research is to develop new knowledge through exploration, explanation, discovery, description, experimentation, or interpretation (Creswell, 2009). When designing a research study, careful consideration must be given to its major components, as they are the defining features in a study. The paradigm, methodology, and methods used should be congruent, fit well together, and make sense (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). If these fundamental pieces are incompatible with one another, the resulting study will risk quality and worthiness. This chapter will describe and justify the paradigm, methodology, and methods I used for this study, as well as identify some of its limitations.

As stated in chapter one, the following research questions guided this study:

Q1 In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using framing devices in their discourse?

Q2 In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using crisis response strategies recommended by situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) in their discourse?

Q3 What were other primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis?

Q4 What were the primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an environmental crisis as compared to an intentional crisis as compared to an accidental crisis as compared to a student protest crisis?
The framework used to explore these research questions is described in the following section.

**Philosophical Paradigm**

A paradigm is a fundamental belief, or worldview, that shapes thinking and provides a way of interpreting and studying the world (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Mertens, 1998). A researcher’s paradigm can be shaped by background, upbringing, discipline area, and past research experiences (Creswell, 2009) and influences the way research is approached (Ryan, 2015). It is important for researchers to reflect on paradigm before beginning a research study as it will influence research questions, guide and inform other aspects of the research design, and act as a lens through which the entire study is examined. As with all other components of a research study, paradigm must fit and make sense with the other pieces. Because a paradigm is the overarching worldview that shapes the entire study, it is chosen and described first. In addition, a researcher should explain and justify the paradigm used so the reader will understand the perspectives and framework used throughout the rest of the research design.

**Post-Positivism**

Post-positivists modify and soften what they perceive as the strict, absolute, black-and-white thinking and beliefs of positivists by describing their worldview as more cohesive and realistic (Creswell, 2009). Post-positivists believe that while a measurable reality exists, and that objectivity in discovering truth is essential, bias and measurement limitations when working with human subjects prevent knowing an objective reality with certainty (Mertens, 1998). In the post-positivist paradigm the researcher takes a distanced view of a study’s participants and experiences by remaining as disassociated
and uninvolved with research participants as possible when collecting and analyzing data (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). The researcher and participant have distinct roles, the researcher collects and analyzes data and the participant provides data, unlike other paradigms in which the researcher and participant become co-researchers or co-constructors of knowledge.

I used post-positivism as the theoretical paradigm for this research study and it informed the remaining parts of the research design. There are four basic assumptions of post-positivism that closely align with the other research components of this study. First, this study analyzed HEI president public discourse to look for the presence and usage of framing devices, which are named and described in literature, and the presence of crisis response strategies and their correspondence with the recommended response strategies from SCCT, which is an already-established theory. Using theory to guide the development of research questions, data collection, and data analysis are elements of post-positivist research designs (Creswell, 2009). Second, data collection was unobtrusive; I was not directly involved with the participants and was able to take a distanced view (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Third, as will be explained in the Methodology section of this chapter, the study used predetermined approaches and organized, structured categories to compare findings (Creswell, 2009). Finally, this study did not seek to identify a single universal Truth that applies to all HEI president crisis discourse; rather, the goal was to analyze, describe, and explain the truth that occurred within the selected crisis cases.
Ontology

Ontology is the nature of reality (Mertens, 1998). A post-positivist ontology is that reality exists in the world, independently of human consciousness or knowledge about it. This reality is discoverable, predictable, and knowable not perfectly, but within probability (Merriam, 2009). The researcher might not be able to discover and examine it completely or perfectly because of the lack of absolutes that exist in the social research world; however, reality can be discovered, approximated, and better understood through research that is as unbiased as possible and includes minimal contact with research subjects (Creswell, 2013). In a post-positivist ontology, reality is not constructed socially between researchers and participants; the researcher’s role is to discover and examine and the participant’s role is to provide data and information.

In my research study, the reality I sought to examine was the presence and usage of framing devices, presence and usage of crisis response strategies and correspondence with recommended response strategies from SCCT, and other emergent themes in HEI president discourse after an on-campus crisis. These themes and usages already existed in the data, independent of the researcher, waiting to be uncovered and analyzed. If a different researcher conducts the same study as I, similar conclusions should be made when answering the research questions, because the reality in this data will exist independently of the person collecting and analyzing it. There may be slight variations in findings due to researchers focusing on and stressing different themes, but the overall conclusions should be similar, stressing the post-positivist view that reality is not discoverable perfectly, but approximately. Furthermore, I had no contact with my participants; rather, I examined transcripts of HEI president discourse that already
occurred. Congruent with a post-positivist ontology, I served and remained in the researcher role and the participants remained in their role since they had already provided the data.

**Epistemology**

Epistemology is the nature of knowledge and explains how we know what we know (Crotty, 1998). A post-positivist epistemology stresses the importance of objectivity (Mertens, 1998). The researcher should collect, observe, and analyze data in the most unobtrusive, objective, dispassionate way possible in order to learn about the topic of study in its purest form. In other words, inserting the researcher deeply in the study among the participants may distort the subject area and knowledge being discovered. Objectivity implies knowledge and meaning exist independently of experience and social constructs, therefore research must seek to uncover truth in a manner that is as neutral and unbiased as possible. In a post-positivist epistemology, knowledge is discovered, not socially constructed, because the topic under consideration already exists that way, independent of social interactions (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 2009; Mertens, 1998).

In my research study, I remained in the researcher role by collecting and analyzing data that had already been generated. I attempted to remain objective throughout my study and feel I did so because I was not personally or professionally connected with the study or its results. For example, I was never involved in an on-campus crisis, I felt neither validated nor wronged by the way an HEI president handled a crisis, nor was I an HEI president whose reputation was tarnished during a crisis who might have been unconsciously looking for certain themes in the data. I did not have a
personal or professional desire for the study’s results to turn out one way or the other. My future did not depend on the results leaning one way or the other; if it had, in a post-positivist paradigm it might have introduced unconscious bias during data analysis and influenced the outcome. I conducted this research with an unbiased, yet deep interest in the topic area and an authentic desire to investigate its truth, not perfectly, but approximately, in order to contribute to scholarly research in this area. In other words, while I was passionate and connected with this topic and the research process and was excited to examine and analyze the results, I was disconnected from the participants and outcomes.

**Methodology: Comparative Case Study**

Case study allows for in-depth exploration and investigation of a contemporary phenomenon such as an event, a setting, a situation, a particular person or group, or a collection of documents or objects within a real-world context (Berg & Lune, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Case study is typically used in social science, education, and business research and is commonly used to answer “how”, “what”, or “why” research questions over which a researcher has little control (Yin, 2014). A variety of evidence is used to answer these questions, including documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations.

For example, case study was used to examine the resignation of the University of Tennessee president, John Shumaker, after only 14 months in the position due to accusations of lavish spending and inappropriate hiring procedures (White, 2009). Participant observation, interviews, and content analysis of newspaper coverage were used to examine the crisis communication techniques used to respond to the accusations.
Research questions began with “what” and “who” and focused on the contemporary phenomenon of what happens when there is a crisis communication void coming from a university’s public relation’s office during a crisis.

Another component of case study involves bounding the case by membership and by time (Yin, 2014). During initial planning stages, the researcher must determine who or what is to be included in the group and clearly define the beginning and endpoints of the case. For example, Wang and Hutchins (2010) examined the crisis response management and recovery of one particular case, the campus shootings that occurred on the campus of Virginia Tech in April 2007. Research questions focused on “how” Virginia Tech engaged in crisis management and recovery, which are congruent with case study methodology. The bounded system under consideration was Virginia Tech, and data collected included articles, commentary, and reports published about the shootings. The time period identified began several months before the shootings occurred since the shooter displayed concerning behavior that went unnoticed by the university. While a post-crisis recovery period was studied, the particular ending date was not clearly identified (Wang & Hutchins, 2010). However, Farrell and Littlefield (2012) used case study to examine news stories discourse after the Fort Hood, Texas military base shooting which occurred on November 5, 2009. The study clearly stated data collection started with related newspaper articles dated on the day of the shooting and in the 13 days following. This clear bounding of the time period for the starting and ending of data collection helps determine the scope of the study and follows recommendations for using case study (Yin, 2014).
A particular type of case study, comparative case study, is an exploration and examination of more than one case within a single research study (Yin, 2014). The multiple cases selected are explored and analyzed as individual cases but are also compared with one another. Findings and discoveries are written about at the individual case level as well as the group-comparison level. For example, comparative case study was used in a recent dissertation examining the crisis management of presidents at three small liberal arts colleges (McGadney, 2015). Although the crises at each college were different, one was due to a hurricane that struck campus, the second involved a student who was murdered at her workplace, and the third consisted of a financial crisis at a historically black university (HBU), the crisis management and leadership approaches of each president were analyzed independently of one another, then were compared and contrasted.

This research study used comparative case study to investigate 12 cases, all of which were high profile crises impacting higher education institutions in the United States, particularly focusing on the 12 HEI presidents’ discourse after the crisis impacted the institution through the period of time one year later. Comparative case study requires a strong definition of the cases under investigation, including boundaries to define the beginning and ending of each case as well as sources of data and a description of the unit of analysis used (Yin, 2014). This research study defined each of 12 cases as crisis events, each impacting a different higher education institution. Multiple sources of data for each case were considered and included any formal speech, planned interview, press conference, press release the HEI president publicly gave which was meant for external audiences, or emails, announcements, or memos intended for internal audiences.
Crisis communication scholars recommend leaders manage a crisis by first instructing the campus community, expressing concern and care for the safety of its members, then focusing on communicating plans for recovery and managing the institution’s reputation, which is impacted by public perception (Coombs, 2007; Zdziarski, 2007). Target audiences for such communication during and after an on-campus crisis include both external and internal stakeholders such as current and prospective students and their parents, faculty, staff, legislators, alumni, donors, the community in which the HEI resides, relatives and friends of victims, the media, and the general public (Lawson, 2007; Lucas et al., 2015). Therefore, this study considered the communication HEI presidents made to these groups. In addition, internal communications the president made within the HEI community such as emails, memos, or announcements was considered. However, internal discourse HEI presidents engaged in directly with their crisis communication teams was not considered; while analyzing this data would have been an impactful study, it was not this study’s focus; moreover, the data would have been difficult to obtain in large enough quantities to have been meaningful.

Presidents who led their campus through a crisis and higher education crisis managers stress the importance not only of successfully managing crisis as it occurs, but also managing the healing process after the crisis appears to be over (Brown et al., 2007; Kuypers, 2007; Lawson, 2007; Parrot, 2014; Paterson et al., 2007). Specifically, they recommend communicating support of students, families, and the campus community as the healing process unfolds, assuring the campus community steps have been taken to prevent a similar crisis from occurring in the future, and sharing lessons learned.
Moreover, SCCT suggests crisis managers communicate with constituents after a crisis in order to repair any reputational damage to the institution (Coombs, 2007). Thus, the literature indicates HEI president discourse matters for a period of time after the immediate threat of the crisis subsides, but does not indicate an exact period of time. I expected that some HEI presidents may have commemorated the one-year anniversary of the crisis by some sort of an event such as a memorial service or a dedication ceremony which may have incorporated a formal speech containing meaningful data; therefore, the time boundary for each case began when the crisis first posed a threat to the institution and ended one calendar year following.

As stated earlier, case study research requires a clear definition of the case, or unit of analysis, under consideration (Yin, 2014). In this study, the unit of analysis was the crisis event bounded by the time period beginning when the crisis first posed a threat to the HEI and ended one year after, as described in the previous paragraph. Publicly available president discourse during the specified time period for each case also determined the scope of data collection.

Research questions were explored by collecting data, analyzing it and developing findings by examining the content of the HEI presidents’ discourse from each of the 12 cases individually as well as by making comparisons within and between the four crisis types. Comparisons included usage of recommended SCCT discourse, usage of framing devices, and other emergent themes such as a shift in discourse from information dissemination to empathy toward victims to lessons learned. Most HEI presidents have a public relations staff, a speechwriter, and a crisis management team, so my conjecture was that presidents used the recommendations from literature in their crisis discourse. In
addition, it was possible that depending on the crisis type, the crisis event may either have been mentioned in detail often throughout the following year, or minimally. For example, an unpreventable crisis such as a natural disaster may be mentioned repeatedly and described in detail throughout the HEI president’s discourse, possibly as part of a reminder of financial support needed to repair and rebuild physical structures on campus that were ruined by the crisis, while an intentional crisis may not be mentioned or described in detail, possibly out of respect for victims’ families. This study did not directly seek to understand the reasons why HEI presidents included or excluded certain topics from their discourse, but theorized some possibilities during data analysis and discussion. While the reader may fear entering into data analysis with pre-established theories and ideas for comparisons might introduce bias, it is important to note that the post-positivist paradigm allows for and encourages a structured, research-based, categorized framework through which to view the entire study (Creswell 2009).

Additionally, contemporary researchers have approached case study with similar, pre-established theory (Kim & Liu, 2012; Sisco, 2012b; Sisco et al., 2010; Weber et al., 2011; Young, 2013).

Cases were considered and chosen from one of four crisis types: Environmental, intentional, accidental, and student protests. These crisis types were chosen because they are defined in higher education crisis management literature (Zdziarski et al., 2007) and because SCCT recommends different discourse for each (Coombs, 2006), thus providing natural comparison between crisis types. For example, in an environmental crisis, the HEI is often perceived as the victim whereas in an intentional crisis, the HEI is often blamed for ignoring possible signs that led to the crisis (Coombs, 2006). Both crisis
types require different types of reputation management, and thus, different types of
discourse (Coombs, 2006). To deepen data analysis and strengthen findings through
theoretical replication (Yin, 2014), and to have similar quantities of data within crisis
types, three cases were chosen under each of the four crisis types, for a total of 12 cases.
Financial crises, while significant, were not included because their causes, and thus their
crisis types, are unclear. Financial crises may be a result of external factors such as the
economy, funding, or enrollment trends, or internal factors such as poor budgeting and
spending by high-level administrators including the HEI president, or a combination of
both external and internal factors. In addition, the start-date of a financial crisis is
unclear because many of the factors intertwine and occur over longer or shorter periods
of time.

In consultation with my research advisor, I identified 12 crisis cases. Some were
selected because of the level of severity and impact the crisis had on the institution, its
recovery, or its reputation, while others were chosen due to the effect the crisis had on the
higher education community at large. In addition, crises considered to be high profile
were selected as possible cases because of their potential to require long term campus
healing, reputation management, and increased attention and support to the campus
community from the president through public discourse. Even though HEIs include 4-
year public and private colleges and universities, 2-year colleges, single-gender
institutions, and minority serving institutions, the majority of cases chosen involved
public, 4-year colleges and universities. The other institution types were not purposely
excluded. Brief descriptions of each of the 12 cases are provided in the following
sections, and a longer narrative for each, including descriptions of the institutions’
background, presidents’ background, and justification for selecting each case, is provided in Chapter IV.

**Cases One through Three: Environmental Crises**

Environmental crises comprise events that originate with nature, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods. In the case of a hurricane or flood, the campus community often has prior warning and opportunity for evacuation or preparation; however, in the case of an earthquake, no prior warning exists. Often times, environmental crises can threaten human lives and afterwards, rebuilding of physical structures on campus is required. The following cases were selected due to their impact and physical destruction at each institution:

**Case one: Tulane University and Hurricane Katrina.** On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the central Gulf Coast as a Category Three hurricane. It will be remembered more for the impact it had on New Orleans after the storm, when a surge broke through the levee system that protected the city from the Mississippi River and surrounding lakes. Tulane University endured over $200 million in damages and suffered the loss of tuition for the Fall 2005 semester. Scott Cowen, Tulane University’s president during the crisis, was in his seventh year in his role as president when the hurricane struck, and this was his first university president role (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b).

**Case two: The University of Iowa flood.** On June 16, 2008, after months of near-record spring rains and snowmelt from heavy winter snowfall, the Iowa River overflowed its banks, flooding more than two million square feet of building space and causing nearly $1 billion in damages to the University of Iowa campus infrastructure and
facilities. Sally Mason, President of the University of Iowa at the time, assumed the presidency only 10 months before the crisis. This was her first university president role (Mason, 2014).

**Case three: California State University-Northridge earthquake.** On January 17, 1994, southern California was struck by a 6.7 magnitude earthquake whose epicenter was one mile away from the California State University Northridge (CSUN) campus. Even though the quake lasted only 20 seconds, all 107 buildings of the CSUN campus were either damaged or destroyed, with estimated damage costs of $400 million. Two CSUN students were killed. Blenda Wilson was president of CSUN at the time, beginning her tenure in 1992 (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007).

**Cases Four through Six: Intentional Crises**

Intentional crises consist of conscious, criminal acts, initiated by either a single human being or group of human beings either with an intent to cause harm or as a result of mental illness (Zdziarski et al., 2007). Intentional crises can shake a campus community by creating fear and feelings of unsafety. After crises of this type, the campus community will require emotional healing, thus the president will need to help constituents feel safe, repair and rebuild the institution’s reputation, and instill confidence in the strength of the institution’s future. The following three cases were selected because the impacted institutions sustained either loss of life, loss of reputation, or both. In addition, all three cases changed the way higher education prepared for crisis (Zdziarski et al., 2007).

**Case four: Virginia Tech shooting.** On April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a student in his senior year, shot and killed 32 people and injured 17 others in two separate
attacks on the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). At the time, the attack was the second deadliest shooting by a single gunman in U.S. history. Stakeholders were frustrated with how the crisis was handled and called for the president, Charles Steger, to resign. However, he remained in his role until 2014. Dr. Steger was president of Virginia Tech starting in 2000. He held other offices at Virginia Tech before he became president, and this was his only presidential role (Hincker, 2014).

**Case five: Penn State sexual abuse scandal.** In late 2011, former defensive football coordinator Gerald Sandusky was accused, and in June 2012 was found guilty, of using his position in the Penn State football program to sexually abuse 10 boys over a 15-year period. Several senior-level administrators were either fired or resigned, accused of covering up the scandal, failure to report suspected child abuse, and perjury. Among those fired was university president Graham Spanier, who was forced to resign on November 9, 2011, when the scandal broke. He was replaced by Rodney Erickson, who was executive vice president and provost of Penn State before assuming the interim president role and then was later named president. Dr. Erickson served as president from November 2011 until June 2014 (O’Rourke, 2014).

**Case six: Florida A&M band hazing scandal.** On November 19, 2011, Robert Champion, a drum major of the Marching 100 Band, took part in a hazing ritual after an off campus performance in which he was made to run from one end of a charter bus to another while other band members hit and kicked him. Each time he fell before reaching the other end, he was stomped, picked up, and forced to start the run over again. He collapsed and died one hour after the incident occurred. His death was ruled a homicide, and several students were charged and convicted of felony hazing and manslaughter.
James Ammons, who was Florida A&M’s president at the time and had already been president there for four years, resigned eight months after the hazing death occurred under criticism for not taking a strong enough action after the incident. The incident caused a nationwide focus on hazing and was the first known marching band hazing death ever in the United States (Cooper, 2012).

**Cases Seven through Nine: Accidental Crises**

Accidental crises include both facility failures, which are events or situations caused by mechanical failure, and crises caused by human error (Zdziarski et al., 2007). While the outcome of either of these crisis types might be serious injuries or fatalities, the original intent was not criminal. For the purposes of this research study, these two crisis types were combined into one because often, after a crisis occurs, it is difficult to determine whether the original cause of the crisis was due to mechanical failure or human failure. As with intentional crises, accidental crises often cause emotional turmoil and feelings of unsafety, but since no one person or entity is to blame, anger can often become misdirected.

**Case seven: Texas A&M bonfire collapse.** It was a Texas A&M tradition to build a large bonfire structure and light it the night before the annual Thanksgiving weekend football game against rival University of Texas. Students started building the Fall 1999 bonfire in August, and by November, the structure stood 40-50 feet tall and consisted of around 5,000 logs. At approximately 2:40am on November 18, 1999, the structure toppled while approximately 70 students were working on it. Eleven current students and one former student died, and 27 others were seriously injured. After the incident, many of the victims’ families filed lawsuits against Texas A&M and senior
level officials, as well as university president Ray Bowen. Dr. Bowen formed an independent investigation into the cause of the collapse and communicated findings. He was president of Texas A&M from 1994-2002 (Paterson et al., 2007).

**Case eight: Oklahoma State University plane crash.** On January 27, 2001, a plane carrying ten men associated with the Oklahoma State University (OSU) basketball team crashed shortly after takeoff in a field near Strasburg, Colorado, about 40 miles east of Denver. All eight passengers and two crew members on board were killed: two student athletes, a student manager, a sports information coordinator, an athletic trainer, a basketball staff member, two media personnel, and two pilots. The president of OSU at the time was James Halligan, who assumed the role of president in 1994 (Paterson et al., 2007).

**Case nine: Seton Hall University residence hall fire.** At 4:30am on January 19, 2000, a fire broke out in a residence hall at Seton Hall University. Three first-year students died and more than 50 other students were treated for related injuries. The residence hall, which was built in the 1950s, did not have a sprinkler system. Although the fire alarms worked, there had already been eight to nine fire alarms set off that week in the same residence hall, so many students did not believe the alarm was real. Given Seton Hall’s close proximity to New York City, the time of day the story broke, and the scope of the tragedy, the fire quickly became national news. When the tragedy occurred, Seton Hall University’s president was Monsignor Robert Sheeran, who served as the president from 1995-2010 (Brown et al., 2007).
Cases Ten through Twelve:  
Student Protest Crises

Student demonstrations and protests can be peaceful and lead to change, but when they escalate to include destruction, violence, and injury to the campus community, they reach crisis level. Recently, students at college campuses have protested the treatment of minority students at their institutions, with some demonstrations growing in size and scope to include national news coverage. Crises of this type can cause physical destruction to campus buildings and emotional damage to the campus community as individuals struggle to understand one another’s perceptions and viewpoints. In addition, after the crisis, there can be feelings of mistrust and frustration if the demonstrations did not lead to significant change.

Case ten: The University of Missouri-Columbia protests. On September 12, 2015, Student Government President Payton Head expressed his frustration via Facebook with racial, homosexual, and transgender attitudes at the university’s main campus in Columbia. The post was widely shared, and on September 24, 2015, students protested due to the university’s inaction from the post. The month of October 2015 included anti-racism rallies, disruptions of African American student groups, vandalism in residence halls, a protest during a homecoming parade leading to police being called to clear the streets, and an order for required student and faculty diversity training. Toward the end of October, a student group calling themselves Concerned Student 1950, in honor of the year black students were first admitted to the university, presented a list of demands to the Columbia Campus Chancellor, Bowen Loftin, and Missouri System President, Tim Wolfe. Both Dr. Loftin and Dr. Wolfe admitted racism existed at the university campus, but Concerned Student 1950 demands were not met. In November 2015, large-scale
student boycotts, hunger strikes, the refusal of black football players to practice or play, and repeated demands by the Missouri Student Association all led to the resignation of Campus Chancellor Loftin and System President Wolfe (Pearson, 2015).

**Case eleven: Ithaca College protests.** On November 11, 2015, over 1,000 students at Ithaca College participated in a demonstration to protest recent racial incidents they felt were ignored by College President Tom Rochon. Incidents that led up to the protest included insensitive racial comments made during resident advisor training sessions, perceptions of public safety officers initiating physical altercations with black students, a speaker referring to a black woman as a “savage”, and a fraternity party with a “preps and crooks” theme. Students called for the resignation of President Tom Rochon, and he retired 14 months later, in January 2017 (Ross, 2015).

**Case twelve: Claremont McKenna protests.** In November 2015, Mary Spellman, Dean of Students of Claremont McKenna College, a selective liberal arts college, wrote an email to a Latina student expressing her support for students who “don’t fit the CMC mold.” Some students perceived Dr. Spellman’s email as offensive and called for her resignation. Students participated in a hunger strike and other campus protests, and Dr. Spellman resigned. As a result, Claremont McKenna College President, Hiram Chodosh, created new leadership positions on diversity and inclusion and committed to support modifications to existing curriculum to include diversity and identity. In addition, Dr. Chodosh created a physical space on campus dedicated to free speech (Watanabe, 2015).
Methods: Content Analysis

Transcripts of HEI presidents’ public discourse from major, planned speeches, such as convocation, state of the university, and commencement, planned interviews, press conferences, press releases, and opinion pieces meant for external audiences and internal discourse such as emails, memos, and announcements were collected for the year following each of the 12 crises described above. This particular type of discourse was chosen because of its importance: The constituents to whom this communication was delivered may have influenced the president’s legacy in addition to the reputation and future success of the HEI; moreover, it is the HEI president who served as the primary spokesperson and symbol of the institution.

Transcripts and writings were obtained from publications, the university website, the university president’s website or office, or the university archives website or office, and transcripts from interviews or press conferences covered by newspapers, radio, or television were obtained through the Lexis-Nexis database. Videos of speeches or interviews found on YouTube or news websites were transcribed. The data I used already existed and was publicly available, I did not use human subjects in my study to create data. Thus, I did not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct my research. Furthermore, I did not use open records laws or the Freedom of Information Act to obtain data. While these laws promote transparency, some researchers feel they threaten privacy, foster ill will between the owners and requesters of data, and discourage candid discussions in the research world and therefore advise others against using them (Kollipara, 2015).
Content analysis was used to explore and examine the transcripts and writings (Berg & Lune, 2012; Schreier, 2012). Content analysis is a method for analyzing and interpreting data often in the form of human communication or textual material such as transcripts, websites, contracts, articles, and textbooks (Schreier, 2012). Content analysis systematically investigates and describes the meaning of the data by classifying it as instances of categories in a coding frame, which is built according to the research question or questions (Schreier, 2012). While content analysis is systematic in that all relevant data is taken into account, a sequence of steps are followed during data analysis, and coding must be checked for reliability, it is also flexible in that the coding frame can be tailored to fit the data in order to strengthen validity (Schreier, 2012).

**History of Content Analysis**

Content analysis originated in the late eighteenth century when church leaders ordered the analysis of religious texts and hymns to ensure they aligned with church teachings (Krippendorff, 2013; Schreier, 2012). Another form of content analysis began in the nineteenth century when the newspaper became more popular and its content was studied in journalism schools, including the number and type of articles covered, letter size of headlines and text, percentage of a page taken up by an article on a particular topic, and article placement (Schreier, 2012). In the 1930s and 1940s, content analysis developed into a social sciences research method due to increased interest in theory-based research on the effects of communication content in the media, including newer media such as radio and film (Schreier, 2012).

Soon after, World War II provided a new application of content analysis for researchers and the U.S. Government, examining propaganda distributed by Nazi
Germany and its effects (Schreier, 2012). It is this particular application of content analysis that is credited for refining its steps, including building coding categories, giving it more credibility as an accepted research method (Schreier, 2012). Also in the 1940s, a national conference on mass communication was held and attended by leading scholars in the field, and the conference topic was content analysis. After this conference, scholars started using content analysis more frequently as a method and began writing textbooks about it (Schreier, 2012). Starting in the 1940s, usage of content analysis as a research method expanded outside of communication studies; disciplines such as political science, social science, psychology, education and literary studies started using it to analyze letters, small group verbal interactions, textbook readability, and personality tests (Schreier, 2012).

Today, content analysis is widely used and accepted by researchers who seek to objectively and systematically describe the content of communication (Schreier, 2012). For example, content analysis was used to examine consumer responses to four Mattel product recalls that occurred between August 1, 2007, and November 8, 2007 (Choi & Lin, 2009). Content analyzed was from consumer posts on online bulletin boards. The analysis revealed consumers experienced a wide range of emotions about the product recalls, including anger, fear, worry, and confusion. Similarly, content analysis was used to examine all available publicly released statements from General Motors during their financial crisis from June 1, 2009 through July 10, 2009 (Cooley & Cooley, 2011). Content came from official General Motors communication sources including press releases, press conferences, the Chief Executive Officer’s (CEO’s) blog, and speeches given by the CEO and president. This study used content analysis to examine transcripts
from speeches, press releases, interviews, and email communications from the HEI president.

**Approaches to Content Analysis**

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) describe three distinct approaches to content analysis: conventional, summative, and directed. A conventional approach is typically used in studies that have limited existing theory or research, and no preconstructed data analysis coding categories; instead the researchers allow the categories and coding frames to emerge from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The advantage of using a conventional approach is that themes are developed from the data without the imposition of preconstructed categories. A conventional approach was used to answer my third research question because I allowed the categories and themes related to HEI president post-crisis discourse to develop.

The second approach to content analysis, the summative approach, typically begins like the other two with either examining and analyzing emergent themes or analyzing the data using existing theory and categories, but then the researcher additionally explores the data for latent meanings or themes that may exist. One advantage of this approach is that it provides insights into how and why words are used. However, this approach requires a deep interpretation of the meaning and symbolism underneath the physical data, as well as validation from content experts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which was beyond the scope of this study.

The third approach to content analysis, and the one that was used to explore my first and second research questions, is directed content analysis, which involves the use of codes and categories derived from existing theories relevant to the research questions as
well as additional themes that may emerge from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I used existing framing devices and crisis response strategies from SCCT as categories to examine the ways in which HEI presidents incorporated the framing devices and strategies in their discourse.

**Content Analysis Limitations**

It is important to note the limitations of content analysis. One limitation is that the process of putting data into categories causes us to lose specific information at the individual level (Schreier, 2012). In other words, the analysis of unusual and unique data is sacrificed for more categorical, generalized data. Another limitation is that content analysis does not examine the data in each and every aspect, rather, it requires the researcher to search for particular characteristics in the data that are specified by the research question(s) (Schreier, 2012). This may limit analysis or even tempt the researcher to revise the research question(s) after data analysis has taken place, which is not recommended due to ethical concerns (Merriam, 2009).

Despite its limitations, content analysis is a research method well-suited for studies when careful, detailed, systematic examination of data in the form of human communication is desired in an effort to identify patterns, themes, and make connections to existing theory (Berg & Lune, 2012). It is also a recommended method for comparison of qualitative data from different sources (Schreier, 2012), which was a critical component of this study.

**Data Analysis**

To investigate the first and second research questions, “In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using framing devices in
their discourse?”, and, “In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using crisis response strategies recommended by SCCT in their discourse?”, directed content analysis was used. To explore the third research question, “What were the primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis?”, all transcripts and writings collected were examined using conventional content analysis, which involves coding and creating categories derived from the raw data itself (Berg & Lune, 2012). To do this, I analyzed the data to determine which meaningful patterns emerged. Patterns that were similar were assigned codes, and then similar codes were developed into themes and described (Yin, 2014).

As stated earlier, directed content analysis uses predetermined categories from existing theories to code the data (Berg & Lune, 2012). The transcripts and writings were coded using framing devices to investigate the first research question and SCCT theory to explore the second research question. Yin (2014) suggests making a matrix of categories and placing evidence from the data within each category. The matrix categories for framing devices included metaphor, story, contrast, spin, catchphrase, analogy, argument, feeling statements, categories, three-part list, and repetition (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). I used a separate matrix of categories for SCCT theory, which included instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management through denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering, which are the suggested response strategies (Coombs, 2006), with an additional matrix entry to indicate if the crisis type aligned with the recommended SCCT strategies.
Finally, to answer the fourth research question, “What were the primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an environmental crisis as compared to an intentional crisis as compared to an accidental crisis as compared to a student protest crisis?”, the themes found while answering the first three research questions were used to compare the content of the discourse both within and between the four crisis types and all 12 cases. Yin (2014) suggests a technique called cross-case synthesis, which includes creating word tables to display the data from each case according to the themes I will have developed by exploring the third research question. An analysis of the collection of word tables allows cross-case conclusions to be drawn. Further, Yin (2014) recommends using matrix arrays, which I had already created from analyzing the first two research questions, to make comparisons between cases according to the predetermined categories from framing devices and SCCT theory.

Yin (2014) also provides a detailed, systematic approach for comparative case study regarding the steps for reporting data. After collecting data for all 12 cases, I analyzed the data and wrote an individual case report for the first case; next, I analyzed the data and wrote an individual case report for the second case, and so on, until data was analyzed and individual case reports were written for all 12 cases. Subsequently, I drew cross-case conclusions as described earlier, then wrote a cross-case analysis within the first three cases, which are the environmental crises; then I drew cross-case conclusions and wrote a cross-case analysis for cases four, five, and six, which are the intentional crisis cases, and then I repeated this process for cases seven, eight, and nine, the accidental crisis cases; and cases ten, eleven, and twelve, the student protest crisis cases.
Last, I analyzed the results from the four crisis types, environmental, intentional, accidental, and student protests, by making comparisons, noting differences, and drawing conclusions using the word table and matrix techniques described earlier (Yin, 2014).

**Rigor**

When conducting research, it is important to employ validation strategies to ensure the quality of the study and the accuracy of its findings (Mertens, 1998). This is referred to as increasing rigor and establishing validity and reliability in the study (Creswell, 2013). Case study methodology recommends techniques for ensuring construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (Yin, 2014) and are explained as follows.

**Construct Validity**

In case study research, one way to achieve construct validity is to use multiple sources of data (Yin, 2014). In this study, data sources included transcripts from major, planned speeches such as convocation, commencement, and the state of the university speeches; interview transcripts; press releases; press conference transcripts; letters to the editor of newspapers; and emails, announcements and letters to the campus community. Obtaining data from these multiple sources ensured different types of evidence was collected, included, and analyzed. This is also referred to as data triangulation (Yin, 2014). If findings were consistent across all sources of data within each case, general conclusions were strengthened.

**Internal Validity**

One way to achieve internal validity is to use a technique called pattern matching (Yin, 2014). In this study, patterns and similarities were looked for within the four crisis
types. If findings were similar within each of the four crisis types, internal validity was strengthened. Conversely, if findings were different within the four crisis types, a rival explanation to describe and clarify the differences in findings was considered.

**External Validity**

External validity refers to knowing whether a study’s findings are generalizable beyond the immediate study, regardless of the research methods used (Yin, 2014). External validity is difficult to achieve in case study research because cases are selected and chosen, not obtained through a random, or even a purposive, sample. However, instead of thinking of external validity as a way to use the cases under consideration to generalize to all possible cases, it can be thought of in terms of analytic generalization, a technique in which established theory is used and applied to the selected cases in data analysis (Yin, 2014). In this research study, cases were explored and analyzed using framing devices as well as SCCT theory. Analytic generalization posits that if the same two theories are used with different cases, the same results might not necessarily be obtained, but results the theories support will be obtained.

**Reliability**

Reliability is attained when conducting the same study results in similar findings (Yin, 2014). To strengthen reliability, thorough explanations were given regarding data collection procedures, coding techniques were described in detail, and a chain of evidence was established linking the data to the findings. In addition, reliability was strengthened in this study by limiting data analysis to manifest content. Content analysis can examine either the data’s manifest content or latent content (Berg & Lune, 2012). Manifest content is surface-level: it refers to words and phrases contained directly in the
data; the elements are physically present and observable in the data. Latent content includes symbolisms and meanings underneath the physical data; that is, latent content attempts to uncover and analyze the deeper meaning and intentions of the messages in the data. Latent content is more open for interpretation between researchers, which means if a different researcher replicated the study, different interpretations and conclusions could be made, thus decreasing rigor. To strengthen rigor, latent content was excluded from this study.

**Study Limitations**

All research studies have limitations, challenges, and restrictions which must be addressed up front. One limitation to this research study was the assumption that each president wrote, or at least endorsed, the words used in the discourse that was collected and analyzed. Many contemporary HEI presidents use speech writers or may hire and take advice from a crisis communication manager, so it is possible the president’s words are not always authentic. However, even if the exact words of the presidents used in this study were not self-written, the general thoughts and ideas were likely to be genuine, otherwise the president risked being accused of dishonest intentions; thus, this limitation was not great enough to dismiss the study.

A second limitation with this study was that the data was restricted to the records that were publicly accessible and that others were capable of, or decided were worth, preserving. It is possible additional data sources existed but were not obtainable because they were not archived, publicly accessible or kept in a location where they were easily retrieved. Even though efforts were made to obtain all data, it is possible some were missed.
A final limitation relates to the methods used. Content analysis can be used to determine what is present in the content of the university presidents’ public discourse after the crisis occurred, but not why certain words and phrases were used. Did the university presidents attempt to use framing devices in their speeches? Were they aware if they were using SCCT strategies? Due to inaccessibility to the university presidents, this study could not explore these questions.

Summary

A post-positivist paradigm was used as a lens through which the entire research study was viewed. Comparative case study methodology was used to analyze and compare 12 cases, each of which were crises that were high profile and had a major impact on a particular higher education institution in the United States. Data collected included different sources of each president’s discourse such as speeches, press conferences, interviews, editorials, emails, and announcements, and was bounded by the time period from the moment the crisis impacted the institution through the year following. The manifest content of the university presidents’ discourse was analyzed. Evidence of framing devices and SCCT theory was searched for, as well as other emergent themes. Data from all 12 cases was analyzed and findings reported individually, and compared and contrasted both within and between crisis types.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter I present findings, organized by crisis type. To review, the following research questions guided this study:

Q1 In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using framing devices in their discourse?

Q2 In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using crisis response strategies recommended by situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) in their discourse?

Q3 What were other primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis?

Q4 What were the primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an environmental crisis as compared to an intentional crisis as compared to an accidental crisis as compared to a student protest crisis?

Three cases were identified for each of the four types of crisis, for a total of 12 cases. Cases included had a significant impact on the nation, the higher education community, and the institution, involved reputation management, a recovery process, and HEI president support through discourse. Even though HEIs include 4-year public and private colleges and universities, 2-year colleges, single-gender institutions, and minority serving institutions, the majority of cases chosen involved public, 4-year colleges and universities. In the following sections I present the cases first using descriptive information, then offer the framing device findings, followed by SCCT usage, and finally
other emergent themes I identified. At the end of each crisis type, findings are compared and summarized. Finally, findings for each of the four crisis types are compared to one another.

**Environmental Crises**

Environmental crises comprise events that originate with nature, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods. In the case of a hurricane or flood, the campus community often has prior warning and opportunity for evacuation or preparation; however, in the case of an earthquake, no prior warning exists. Often times, environmental crises can threaten human lives and afterwards, rebuilding of physical structures on campus is required. The following cases were selected due to their impact and physical destruction at each institution:

**Case One Description: Tulane University and Hurricane Katrina Environmental Crisis**

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the central Gulf Coast as a Category Three hurricane, with sustained winds of 125 miles per hour. In addition to being one of the strongest hurricanes ever recorded, it will be remembered more for the impact it had on New Orleans as the storm surge breached the levee system that protected the city from the Mississippi River and surrounding lakes. Over 80% of the city was flooded in up to 10 feet of water, and it took weeks for the floodwaters to recede, leaving almost one million people displaced, and the tens of thousands who did not evacuate were stranded and without access to food, clean water, and shelter. More than 1800 people died during the hurricane and in its aftermath (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b).
One of the institutions most impacted by Hurricane Katrina was Tulane University, a private, highly selective university of about 13,000 students, located in New Orleans. The hurricane struck during freshman orientation week, and when the university evacuated, freshmen and their families, and other university staff, either returned home if it was safe, or found shelter elsewhere. Like the rest of New Orleans, Tulane was devastated by the hurricane and could not recover in time to hold classes for the Fall 2005 semester. It was the second time in Tulane’s history the university had to close, the first time was during the Civil War. Tulane endured over $200 million in damages, not including suffering the loss of tuition for the Fall 2005 semester because students were sent to host universities due to the closure. The financial challenge was too difficult to overcome, and as a result, the university laid off 230 faculty and terminated five undergraduate programs, more than half of its doctoral programs, and eight NCAA athletic programs (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b).

Scott Cowen, Tulane University’s president during the crisis, was in his seventh year in his role as president when the hurricane struck. He was Tulane’s 14th president, serving from 1998 until 2014. Before coming to Tulane, Dr. Cowen spent 23 years at Case Western Reserve University as a professor of economics and a dean. Tulane was his first, and only, university president role. Dr. Cowen’s leadership and outreach to students, faculty, and staff after Hurricane Katrina is perceived as being a major influence in Tulane’s recovery, specifically, Tulane’s reopening just five months after the hurricane with almost 90% of undergraduate students returning for the Spring 2006 semester. In 2009, TIME magazine named Dr. Cowen one of the nation’s top 10 best college presidents because of his leadership after Hurricane Katrina (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b).
I chose this case because, in spite of the additional flooding that affected New Orleans, and the budget and enrollment challenges Tulane faced after the hurricane, the university was closed for only one semester. Dr. Cowen negotiated arrangements for students, faculty, and staff to attend host schools all over the country for the Fall 2005 semester, and secured late admission and in-state tuition for all students, regardless of where they attended. While it would have been easy for students to stay where they were for the Spring 2006 semester, most came back to Tulane. While many first responders, including FEMA, were criticized by the media after the hurricane for lack of preparedness, support and results, Dr. Cowen incorporated community service into Tulane’s curriculum beginning Spring 2006 in order to assist the New Orleans area with recovery, was credited with an increase in undergraduate applications after the hurricane, and advocated for additional post-hurricane funds and support for K-12 schools in New Orleans. Even though Dr. Cowen had to lay off faculty and terminate academic and athletic programs after the hurricane, Dr. Cowen’s reputation as a leader strengthened.

Between the day hurricane Katrina struck and the following year, the discourse I found spoken by Dr. Cowen included four transcripts from planned speeches such as convocation and commencement, one interview transcript, and 20 quotes in newspaper articles. Additionally, I located written discourse in the form of four articles, one formal report, two letters from the president, and 38 emails Dr. Cowen authored. Evidence of framing devices present, SCCT recommended strategies, and other emergent themes are presented next.

**Framing Device Findings for Tulane University and Hurricane Katrina**
I found evidence that President Cowen used eight of the 11 framing devices: metaphor, story, contrast, catchphrase, argument, feeling statements, three-part list, and repetition. Of these, Dr. Mason appeared to use metaphor, story, contrast, and catchphrase only in written discourse such as emails to the campus community and written publications. Argument was used only in response to a question during a one-on-one interview. Feeling statements, three-part list, and repetition were used during planned, formal speeches such as convocation and commencement, which may be techniques used so that the listener can remember key takeaways.

**Metaphor.** As outlined in the literature review, a leader who manages meaning uses framing devices to help construct feelings and images in the listener’s mind (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Many presidents use framing devices in their formal, planned speeches (Young, 2013), but President Cowen also used framing devices in written form in his discourse the year following Hurricane Katrina. In an email to Tulane faculty, staff, students, and parents, Dr. Cowen used metaphor, a type of framing device, to describe his investment to support the rebuilding of New Orleans. He wrote, “Tulane stands shoulder to shoulder with other New Orleanians in its commitment and determination to rebuild our city, block by block” (Cowen, 2005b). While the Tulane community did not literally stand shoulder to shoulder with other citizens from New Orleans, perhaps President Cowen uses this particular metaphor to paint a picture of unity and togetherness between the two communities.

**Story.** Dr. Cowen used story-telling, another framing device, to recreate images of the hurricane. In a column he authored for an issue of Focus on the Presidency, a university sponsored publication, Dr. Cowen wrote:
Shortly after the storm in August, I convened the first of many conference calls and personal meetings with trustees to apprise them of our dire situation. It quickly became obvious that Tulane was going to be forever changed by Katrina and that we would need to significantly revise our thinking about the future.

(Cowen, 2006d, para. 3)

This type of story-telling possibly took the reader back to the hurricane event and provided additional information regarding President Cowen’s actions and decisions. Perhaps this type of explanation was offered to the Tulane community in an effort to describe Dr. Cowen’s communication with the board of trustees, maybe even as a response to a perception that Dr. Cowen did not communicate fully immediately after the hurricane.

In an editorial he wrote for the Chronicle of Higher Education, Dr. Cowen again used a story to describe his memories of Tulane’s campus after the hurricane:

On a recent afternoon, I stood before an assembly of first year students and their parents, and delivered my annual convocation address as president of Tulane University. It was a poignant moment for me. At the end of last August, Hurricane Katrina had forced the university to cancel its fall semester, and there had been many times since then that the prospect of recovery seemed nearly impossible. (Cowen, 2006c, para. 1)

Once again, President Cowen took the reader back to the hurricane event, but this time, the story he told may have reminded the audience of how far the university had come in its recovery. The Chronicle of Higher Education reaches a wide audience, and it is possible Dr. Cowen used this opportunity to remind not just members of the Tulane
family but the broader higher education community of the challenges the hurricane presented to Tulane University. It is possible Dr. Cowen described how the university had overcome these challenges in order to create connections between Tulane and the reader, and to restore confidence in the university’s outlook.

**Contrast.** The contrast framing device describes a subject in terms of what it is not (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). In an issue of Focus on the Presidency, Dr. Cowen used contrast to express concern for others outside the Tulane community when he wrote, “As difficult as this experience has been for the Tulane community, we consider ourselves fortunate in comparison with the plight of many others affected by the hurricane” (Cowen, 2005a, para. 3). Describing Tulanians as fortunate compared to other hurricane victims throughout New Orleans displayed Dr. Cowen’s qualities of empathy and sympathy toward his neighbors, which may have been one of the reasons why he supported students’ volunteer efforts to assist New Orleans in their recovery.

**Catchphrase.** In a letter to the campus community, Dr. Cowen incorporated a catchphrase in the sentence, “It’s not often that one can say, ‘What an unbelievable year we’ve had,’ and have it be an understatement” (Cowen, 2006e, para. 1). Framing Tulane’s crisis in such familiar terms brought an element of relatability to President Cowen and the university community, which could have been important if there had been a perception that Tulane received more recovery assistance or was somehow better off than others nearby.

**Argument.** Shortly after President Cowen announced Tulane University would close for the Fall 2005 semester, other universities across the country accommodated their students and faculty, but there was confusion about whether the students would
return to Tulane for spring or stay at their host schools as permanent transfer students. In a September 2005 interview with the Chronicle for Higher Education, Dr. Cowen used another framing device, argument, to voice his opinion on the host universities accepting Tulane students for transfer in Spring 2006:

I would strongly encourage them not to allow them to transfer to their institution until such point, if it ever came, where it was deemed impossible for them to come back to Tulane. They have to give us a chance to get back on our feet.

(Selingo, 2005a, para. 19)

It is understandable that President Cowen expected students to return to Tulane when it reopened, but it is also reasonable to expect that once students moved and got settled into their new university home for the Fall 2005 semester, they may not have wanted to disrupt their lives again by transferring back to Tulane. And it is also understandable that students’ new host institutions wanted to keep them and their tuition revenue. Tulane suffered great financial loss due to the hurricane, and President Cowen probably argued to keep his students for their tuition revenue as well as for Tulane’s reputation.

**Feeling statements.** Feeling statements frame a subject in terms of felt emotions (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), and in an email to the Tulane community, Dr. Cowen wrote, “I cannot remember being more proud of a group of students” (Cowen, 2006g) when describing students’ motivation to come back to campus in order to help the greater New Orleans community with hurricane recovery and clean up. In his convocation address in January 2006, Dr. Cowen expressed further emotion when he said:

I can’t begin to tell you what a pleasure it is to finally—and formally—welcome the classes of 2009 and 2010 to Tulane University. This is the most satisfying day
in my professional life. I am overwhelmed with emotion and sheer pleasure.

(Cowen, 2006f, para. 1)

Dr. Cowen’s expressions of pride in his students and happiness with his role at Tulane may have portrayed him as genuine and modest, and could have evoked feelings of optimism and confidence in Tulane’s standing with the recovery. It is possible that even several months after the hurricane, Dr. Cowen was still attempting to address concerns or ease fears regarding Tulane’s future.

**Three-part list.** Three-part list is a framing device that organizes a subject in easily remembered threes. Many leaders use three-part lists in discourse not only because three items are easy to remember, but also because three things are typically enough to establish a pattern and provide a perception of persuasion (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996).

During Dr. Cowen’s commencement address to the Tulane community in May 2006, he spoke of overcoming the challenge of Hurricane Katrina:

> I want you to remember three things as you leave today. Remember, during our darkest days, we always focused on the light. During our loneliness, we focused on our sense of community. During our hopelessness, we focused on the possibilities of the future. (Cowen, 2006a, para. 19)

In another formal speech, while Dr. Cowen did not specifically alert his audience to an upcoming three-part list, he stated during his spring convocation address, “I am older, wiser, and stronger as a result of the Katrina experience” (Cowen, 2006f, para. 4). If President Cowen was aware that three-part lists are used to convey messages and convince audiences of a particular point of view, it is possible he used this technique to
influence his listeners that he, and Tulane, not only recovered from the hurricane but were better than they were before.

**Repetition.** Repetition provides structure, order, and balance in discourse and increases chances the audience will remember the message (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Repetition is the final framing device found in Dr. Cowen’s discourse. During his convocation address in August 2006, almost one year after Hurricane Katrina, he stated:

Make no mistake about it – you are now part of a community that has seen adversity and overcome it, a community that has demonstrated courage and character throughout the past year, and a community that is deeply and passionately committed to this university and to the city of New Orleans.

(Cowen, 2006b, para. 13)

Repeating the word “community” brought to life the idea of family and togetherness. Establishing a sense of belonging is important for students attending any university, as well as for their families. It is possible that even a year after the hurricane, President Cowen still wished to stress the positive, family environment students would experience by attending Tulane, perhaps out of concern that enrollment may drop in the following year as a result of the hurricane’s destruction to the campus and the university’s financial status.

**Framing devices not found in the data.** Usage of the analogy, spin, and category framing devices were not found in the data. Analogy frames a subject in parallel to another subject (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), and it is possible President Cowen did not wish to compare Tulane with other HEIs in the area experiencing the same crisis, nor did he want to risk offending the citizens of New Orleans by pointing out similarities
between Tulane’s recovery and theirs. Spin places a subject in either a positive or negative light, but leaders who use spin risk being perceived as disingenuous (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Since Dr. Cowen risked losing his students to their host institutions, it may have been important for him to be as honest and forthcoming in his discourse as possible, which may explain why Dr. Cowen avoided this framing device. Finally, category frames a subject in terms of membership in a class or group. Even though President Cowen talked about “community” often in his discourse, I felt direct references to a particular group were not strong enough to classify them as a category. Later, I discuss and provide evidence of school spirit as a theme, which could be considered a category if the entire university community were a single group.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory Findings for Tulane University and Hurricane Katrina**

As described in the literature review, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) suggests leaders incorporate specific responses to a crisis based on its type (Coombs, 2007). Natural disasters, referred to as environmental crises in this study, are assigned to the victim cluster of SCCT due to the low level of responsibility and control the victim has over the crisis (Coombs, 2007). SCCT recommends leaders managing a crisis in this cluster first provide instructing information to all victims or potential victims in the form of warnings and directions, then provide adjusting information by expressing concern for victims and describing any necessary corrective action or updated instructions (Coombs, 2007). In order to support recovery and manage reputation, SCCT suggests instructing and adjusting information should be sufficient, however, crisis managers may adopt a bolstering posture by reminding stakeholders about the
institution’s past good works, show ingratiation by praising stakeholders, and use victimage to explain how the institution too is a victim of the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

Thus, if President Cowen were following recommendations from SCCT theory, he would have incorporated instructing information, adjusting information, then perhaps bolstering through reminding, ingratiation, and victimage.

**Instructing information.** Dr. Cowen issued instructions to the campus community during the days and weeks following the hurricane. During a press conference a few days after the hurricane struck, President Cowen announced the cancellation of the fall semester when he stated, “I am forced to make an extremely difficult decision. Tulane cannot hold a fall semester on its campus” (Gonzalez, 2005). A few days after, when students learned they would be offered space at host institutions elsewhere for the fall semester, there were questions about tuition, specifically, if students would have to pay additional tuition if their host institution’s tuition rate was higher than Tulane’s. President Cowen issued clarifying instructions by saying, “Let me be clear: No Tulane student will ultimately have to pay more than they would if they were here at Tulane for the fall semester” (Marcus, 2005). Less than one month after the hurricane, Dr. Cowen continued to provide instructions to students regarding tuition at their host schools when he said, “We have posted a full explanation of our tuition policy on www.tulane.edu, and I urge you to take a few moments to look at it. I believe this is an equitable policy as it gives our students many options” (Cowen, 2005c, para. 3). In addition to questions about tuition at host schools, students needed to know how to communicate with Tulane faculty. Dr. Cowen gave instructing information regarding communication when he stated in the same interview, “We hope that email will be back
in operation late next week. That will be the best way to contact faculty at Tulane” (Cowen, 2005c, para. 7). Because this communication was provided early-on, President Cowen cultivated the perception of organization and control of the crisis situation.

**Adjusting information.** Adjusting information can take the form of expressing concern, describing plans for next-steps, or outlining corrective action, and helps stakeholders cope psychologically with the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Concern for student safety was expressed during an interview when Dr. Cowen stated, “We are discouraging our students from coming back to New Orleans and our campus for the time being. However, as soon as we know the area is safe and secure for return we will inform the Tulane community” (Cowen, 2005c, para. 9). This type of communication may have reassured stakeholders that their safety is a priority, thus reducing psychological stress (Coombs, 2007).

Another type of adjusting information includes describing plans for the future and furthers the perception that the organization has regained control of the situation (Coombs, 2007). Dr. Cowen explained his vision for a future Tulane in an interview when he stated, “We have acknowledged that the undergraduate program will be the center of a new Tulane, with fewer graduate programs. We will focus on and invest more heavily in what remains. We will get stronger by subtraction” (Selingo, 2005b, para. 6). Even though this decision led to the elimination of some graduate programs at Tulane, Dr. Cowen’s positive approach to the crisis communication may have been reassuring to the campus community.

The third form of adjusting information, outlining corrective action, attempts to rebuild confidence in the organization and avoids assigning blame (Coombs, 2007).
Corrective action for handling future natural disasters was described in Dr. Cowen’s quarterly Focus on the Presidency column when he wrote, “[We learned] that we needed an emergency preparedness plan that would be responsive to a catastrophic event…. In the event of another once-in-a-century disaster, we will be much better prepared” (Cowen, 2006i, para. 5). President Cowen again provided adjusting information in an email to the Tulane community:

Now plans for every university department are mandatory and are due at the end of this month. Our revised plan will make no distinction in how the university will respond to different categories of storms. There are several more changes to our hurricane preparation and response with which you should familiarize yourself. (Cowen, 2006g)

It is possible President Cowen described lessons-learned from hurricane Katrina in an attempt to lower stakeholder’s stress and anxiety levels and raise confidence in a future Tulane, increasing the chances current students, faculty, and staff would choose to return to Tulane in the spring semester and new constituents would consider joining the community.

**Bolstering.** While bolstering is not a required response according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007), Dr. Cowen incorporated ingratiation, which includes praising stakeholders, and victimage, explaining how Tulane too is a victim of the crisis, in his discourse following Hurricane Katrina. There was more evidence of praising and thanking Tulane stakeholders in the year following the hurricane than any other crisis response type. Several times following the hurricane, Dr. Cowen showed appreciation for the higher education community for welcoming Tulane students and faculty during
the Fall 2005 semester, once during an interview when he said, “I am deeply indebted to the higher education community in the United States. They have been a great source of strength and assistance” (Cowen, 2005c, para. 13), and again, specific to law schools when he wrote in an email, “This weekend I had the opportunity to join Tulane law students in thanking representatives from more than 20 law schools around the country who hosted our students in the aftermath of Katrina” (Cowen, 2006g). In addition, Dr. Cowen thanked Tulane students who returned to campus Spring 2006 and assisted the city of New Orleans with recovery when he wrote in an editorial:

Heroes can come in unexpected places and with unexpected faces. I witnessed some of the most selfless and courageous behavior in the days following the hurricane that I could have imagined. I saw Tulane undergraduates with emergency medical training working 20 hour days to rescue people and provide relief…it was a humbling experience, an amazing experience, and I am filled with more gratitude than I can express. (Cowen, 2006c, para. 20)

Dr. Cowen thanked students and also frequently thanked faculty, staff, and parents for their patience, his senior administrative team, and staff, alumni, and friends. During his commencement speech in May 2006, Dr. Cowen stated:

I see you, Tulane students…every one of you has my love and admiration…I see our faculty and staff…I adore you and I love you and I thank you…and I see the parents and friends of our students who are graduating today…you are our believers. Thank you for your trust and for making our miracle a reality.

(Cowen, 2006a, para. 5)
It is possible President Cowen used ingratiating to build positive connections between himself, current and future stakeholders and to maintain Tulane’s reputation in the higher education community.

Victimage is a bolstering technique in which the institution’s leaders explain how it too is a victim of the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Dr. Cowen reminded the Tulane community several times throughout the year following the hurricane that Tulane was suffering. Almost eight months after the hurricane, Dr. Cowen wrote in an editorial:

We had experienced the trauma of a major hurricane followed by catastrophic flooding. We had watched our city fall into despair, desperation, lawlessness. We had seen our students, faculty members, and administrators displaced for months. We had fought to survive against the odds, repaired what at first seemed irreparable, and faced staggering financial losses. (Cowen, 2006c, para. 2)

Sharing this story reminded President Cowen’s audience of how serious the hurricane was and how deeply it impacted the Tulane community, perhaps in an attempt to garner sympathy for their situation.

Another possible reason for using bolstering through victimage may be to remind stakeholders of the financial need the institution faces as a result of the crisis. In a July 2006 letter to the campus community written almost one year after the hurricane, Dr. Cowen wrote:

Preparing the budget for this year has been a challenging process because we are working with so many variables that are mostly out of our control, such as the pace of recovery and the repopulation of New Orleans, the state of medical care in
New Orleans and the effect it has on our clinical operations, and the perception of New Orleans in the eyes of all of our constituents. (Cowen, 2006j, para. 6)

And, in a letter from the president on the one year anniversary of when Hurricane Katrina struck the city of New Orleans, Dr. Cowen wrote:

When all was said and done, Tulane sustained property damage of at least $160 million from Katrina, about $125 million in lost research assets, library and fine arts collections and building contents, and an operating loss totaling about $100 million for the fiscal year that just ended. These figures are in line with our previous projections…. As we begin the new fiscal year we forecast an operating loss of $31 million, approximately 5 percent of our operating budget. (Cowen, 2006e, para. 4)

Reminding others of the financial impact the hurricane had on Tulane may have been a conscious strategy employed by President Cowen, not only to explain budget shortfalls and justify difficult budget decisions, but also to remind stakeholders of the need for financial donations.

It is unclear whether President Cowen intentionally incorporated crisis response strategies recommended by SCCT. Regardless, in the year following Hurricane Katrina he spoke about the crisis as if the institution were a victim of it, which aligns with SCCT suggestions. Additionally, Dr. Cowen’s discourse was consistent throughout the year; in other words, he did not communicate about the crisis as if it were different types. Consistency is recommended by SCCT so that crisis responders do not confuse their audiences (Coombs, 2007).
Additional Themes for Tulane University and Hurricane Katrina

Positive outlook. In addition to framing devices and crisis responses recommended by SCCT, other themes emerged from Dr. Cowen’s discourse in the year following Hurricane Katrina. Woven throughout the data were expressions of reassurance, optimism, and confidence. In an interview for the Chronicle of Higher Education, less than one month after the hurricane, Dr. Cowen stated, “We will be back in the spring. We’ve got to be ready…. We have enough resources to go on for a long time” (as cited in Selingo, 2005a, para. 7). A few days later in a separate interview, when addressing concerns about the safety of the campus, President Cowen said, “Experts from our School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine are very confident that any environmental-health issues will be resolved well in advance of the opening of our spring semester” (Cowen, 2005c, para. 15). It is possible President Cowen wanted to ease concerns about campus safety and Tulane’s ability to recover.

In other types of discourse, President Cowen shifted his positive outlook regarding the university’s recovery to his own objectives. During an interview with a local newspaper, when Dr. Cowen was asked how Tulane would overcome the challenges of the hurricane, he replied, “I have absolutely no intention of allowing this disaster to jeopardize our future and dreams for the university” (as cited in “Tulane University sets,” 2005, para. 3). Another expression of President Cowen’s own confidence in the university’s recovery came in written form to the Tulane community. In an internal email, Dr. Cowen wrote:
Katrina did not destroy us because of the courage and sheer determination of so many who would not accept defeat no matter what obstacles or challenges stood in the way…. Yet, despite our challenges, I remain steadfast in my optimism and enthusiasm for the university’s future. (Cowen, 2006g)

Later in the same email to the campus community, Dr. Cowen stated, “I am very optimistic about the future of our teaching, research, and community….” (Cowen, 2006g). This shift in discourse to his individual confidence in the university’s recovery may have been an effort to reassure Tulane stakeholders of his leadership and that he had control of the situation.

Dr. Cowen’s optimism did not fade in the year following Hurricane Katrina. Almost one year after the hurricane, Dr. Cowen wrote in an email to the Tulane community, “We have beaten the odds and look to the future with confidence, determination, and a sense of realistic hope born from our strength under fire” (Cowen, 2006h). It is possible President Cowen’s statement conveys a “we did it” message and a positive outlook for the university’s future in an attempt to reassure current and future stakeholders of the university’s solid future.

**Better than before.** Another theme, similar to optimism and confidence, was “we will be better as an institution than we were before the crisis.” For example, less than one month after the hurricane, Dr. Cowen stated during an interview:

I encourage all of the displaced students to return to the university in the spring, and let others know that Tulane University is managing this crisis in a way that will make it an even stronger and more distinctive institution. (Cowen, 2005c, para. 21)
Dr. Cowen expressed a similar sentiment in an email to the Tulane community:

Retaining and even enhancing our status among the nation’s most prestigious academic institutions and remaining financially stable in the wake of Hurricane Katrina will require historic change and vision. I am extremely optimistic that the Tulane of the future, which will begin in January, will be positioned to be as academically strong as ever and even more distinctive. (Cowen, 2005b)

Dr. Cowen continued his description of a new and improved Tulane University during his convocation speech in January 2006 when he welcomed students and staff back to campus and said, “Today starts a new chapter in our story, one that I expect will be better and even more promising than what came before it” (Cowen, 2006f, para. 15) Additionally, at the end of the Spring 2006 semester, during Dr. Cowen’s commencement speech, he stated:

And we are signaling today, to all those in this arena, to those watching outside and to all Americans, that we are determined to persevere, to triumph and to see a stronger Tulane University within a stronger New Orleans. And we will not give up until that happens…. And we are going to be a stronger and more vibrant university because of this disaster. (Cowen, 2006a, para. 12)

In this discourse, President Cowen defined the hurricane not as a crisis, but as an opportunity to change for the better. Perhaps he wished to influence real and lasting change, erase perceptions of poor leadership during the response, or rebuild the institution’s reputation, or shift his focus from short-term to long-term recovery.

**School spirit.** A third theme that emerged from the data was fostering and promoting school spirit. In the weeks following the hurricane, Dr. Cowen spoke of
“...raising the Tulane flag and celebrating the Tulane spirit” (as cited in “Tulane fans to celebrate,” 2005, para. 2), he exclaimed during convocation, “We are all Tulanians!” (Cowen, 2006f, para. 6), and he frequently described Tulane as the “Tulane community.” Creating school spirit is important because it sets a positive tone, encourages a common bond, and helps students feel accepted and included (Abraham, 2014). It is possible President Cowen wished to strengthen students’ connection to Tulane after Hurricane Katrina so that they would return to and remain at the institution. If students perceived they were members of the Tulane family, they may be less likely to leave.

**Financial need.** In the days, weeks, and months following the hurricane, Dr. Cowen frequently mentioned a need for financial assistance. Less than one month after Hurricane Katrina, he made an appeal for donations during a press conference, “Money donated to this [recovery] fund will be used to support all activities required to rebuild the university. These funds are absolutely necessary if the university is to rebound from this tragedy” (Selingo, 2005a, para. 23). Approximately one month after that, Dr. Cowen reminded the community of continued need when he said in an interview, “As a private university we are unlikely to receive any significant government support for our recovery. To secure our future and stem our losses, we need to raise funds in unprecedented amounts” (“Tulane university sets,” 2005, para. 10). Dr. Cowen continued to mention the need for donations several months after the hurricane. At one point there was a perception that the impacted colleges and universities would be able to cover their financial losses without donations from individuals. Dr. Cowen addressed this in his quarterly Focus on the Presidency column when he wrote:
Unfortunately, there is some misperception that affected colleges and universities can cover the majority, if not all, of their losses through insurance, government subsidies, or use of their endowments. I know of no affected university, including Tulane, with resources adequate to cover a disaster of this magnitude without additional assistance. (Cowen, 2005a, para. 10)

Over six months after the hurricane struck, Dr. Cowen continued to appeal for donations to assist in the hurricane recovery. In a personal letter from the president to the campus community, he wrote:

If I had to name the single biggest hurdle that we have to overcome, it’s financial…. I don’t usually use this letter to appeal for support, but I am doing so now. If you have ever been inclined to support Tulane or to increase your level of giving, there has never been a better time or a better cause. (Cowen, 2006d)

Fundraising is an HEI president responsibility (Ikenberry, 2010), but Dr. Cowen’s continued appeal for financial support from stakeholders may have signaled a higher level of concern that friends of the university were incorrectly assuming Tulane’s losses were covered. It is possible Dr. Cowen wanted to remind those who had the ability to donate to hurricane relief funds of Tulane’s financial challenges.

Case Two Description: University of Iowa and the Great Flood of 2008 Environmental Crisis

On June 16, 2008, after months of near-record spring rains and snowmelt from heavy winter snowfall, several Midwestern rivers, including the Iowa River, overflowed and broke their levees in numerous locations. In what would later be called the Great Flood of 2008, seven states were severely impacted, highways and roads were closed,
towns were evacuated, and 12 deaths were directly attributed to the disaster. It was one of the top 10 worst natural disasters in U.S. history that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was involved with (Mason, 2014).

Iowa appeared to be the state hardest hit by the flood. Officials at the University of Iowa, a public research university of approximately 25,000 students located in Iowa City on the Iowa River, had been monitoring the situation for days prior to the flood, and attempted to prepare by placing more than one million sandbags near the river bank. Unfortunately sandbagging was not enough to hold back the flood waters, and as a result, more than two million square feet of building space was under water, causing nearly $1 billion in damages to the campus infrastructure and facilities (Mason, 2014).

Sally Mason was the University of Iowa President during the flood and recovery. President Mason, a first generation college student, graduated from the University of Kentucky in 1972 with a Bachelor’s degree in Zoology, a Master’s degree in Biology from Purdue University in 1974, and Ph.D. in Biology from the University of Arizona in 1978. She started her career at the University of Kansas as a professor, then became Associate Dean and later Dean of the university’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. In 2001 Dr. Mason accepted a position as Provost of Purdue University, a role she held until 2007. In August 2007, she became the 20th president of the University of Iowa, and its second female president. When the Great Flood of 2008 hit the University of Iowa campus, Dr. Mason had assumed the presidency only 10 months prior (Mason, 2014).

I chose this case because of the massive devastation and financial impact the flood had on the university. Due to the university’s close proximity to the Iowa River, university officials had flood plans in place, and even though this particular flood was
anticipated, its strength was underestimated, which challenged flood preparation efforts and caught university leadership by surprise. Moreover, Dr. Mason was not only new to the University of Iowa, she had been an HEI president for only a few months before the flood, and I was curious to investigate how her post-crisis discourse compared to that of other, more experienced presidents managing similar crises.

Data for President Mason was limited to spoken discourse, and included quotes or transcripts from 10 press conferences and interviews, and transcripts from eight speeches. Some of the speeches were in front of smaller audiences such as the Joint Service Clubs luncheon or a women’s leadership series, while others were in front of larger audiences such as the Board of Regents or those in attendance at undergraduate commencement. I was not able to locate written discourse in the form of emails, editorials, or articles authored by Dr. Mason. Findings are now presented with respect to framing devices, SCCT, and other emergent themes.

**Framing Device Findings for University of Iowa and the Great Flood of 2008**

**Metaphor.** President Mason used several framing devices in her discourse the year following the flood, but the one she used most often was metaphor. Each time Dr. Mason used a metaphor it was during speeches, and each metaphor described the strength and fortitude of the university community. For example, during her undergraduate commencement speech, President Mason said:

> Former United States Senator from Wyoming Alan Simpson once said of one of his colleagues, ‘He’s a million rubber bands in his resilience.’ So during the flood
we all had to find our resilience in our flexibility—we were a strong university community of a million rubber bands. (Mason, 2008b, para. 8)

Dr. Mason’s metaphor could have helped the listener imagine the university community’s flexibility in a concrete and relatable way, as a set of rubber bands. It is possible she also made this comparison because rubber bands stretch but do not easily break under tension, and snap back into place once the tension is released, which may have been similar to President Mason’s resolve for the university to stretch but not break under the tension of the crisis. It is possible Dr. Mason also wished to relate the university’s resilience and ability to return to pre-crisis operations to a rubber band that returns to its original shape after being pulled.

Almost one year after the flood, Dr. Mason used another metaphor to remind her audience of the catastrophe when she said, “We formed a line of unity against the flood, and many even sacrificed time protecting their own homes in order to help others” (Mason, 2009b, para. 7). It is possible President Mason compared the members of the campus community to a line of unity to convey an image of solidarity and togetherness in a common goal to conquer the flood waters. In the same speech, Dr. Mason used a metaphor to connect the flood with economic challenges by stating, “I believe the Iowa character has helped us in our recovery from last year’s flood and will help us emerge even stronger than before. And it will help us weather the economic storm we now face” (Mason, 2009b, para. 5). President Mason may have compared the university’s current economic situation to a storm because a storm is what brought the flood to the campus to begin with. If listeners connected the seriousness of the university’s financial situation with that of the flood, they may have decided to donate funds.
**Story.** President Mason used another framing device, story, to describe post-flood events. A few months after the flood occurred, she opened a speech with the following story:

As I think back on this summer, there are many moments that I recall. I still vividly remember the call from Governor Culver asking if we needed help protecting the campus. Within hours, the National Guard was at our doorstep. I remember I had a good laugh with our student body president, Maison Bleam, who looked at me while we were sandbagging together and said, “This wasn’t in my job description, was it in yours?” (Mason, 2008a, para. 3)

This particular story took the listener back to the time the flood waters first threatened the university, and possibly reminded listeners in a lighthearted way that Dr. Mason was relatively new to the university community, which may have helped ease any negative perceptions regarding the way in which President Mason handled the crisis.

**Argument.** Just after the flood, the university’s research facilities were moved to temporary buildings, which provided accommodations, albeit limited, for faculty to continue their scholarly work. However, four months after the flood, researchers had not yet received permission to return to their permanent research locations. Dr. Mason advocated for faculty by using the argument framing device to encourage quicker clean-up efforts when she stated, “The researchers know this situation is temporary, but the disruption has gone on too long” (Kelderman & Mangan, 2008, para. 8). President Mason continued by presenting reasons why conducting research in a temporary facility was challenging. This may have been a situation in which President Mason was concerned that the university could lose grant funding if research became stalled, or
perhaps she was still proving herself to the faculty at her new institution that she was on their side.

**Feeling statements.** Dr. Mason appeared to use feeling statements in her discourse in the first few days after the flood, but not in the weeks and months following. For example, the day after the flood, Dr. Mason said during an interview, “I got tears in my eyes when I saw what was happening” (“Hundreds ordered to flee,” 2008, para. 16). Feeling statements bring an element of relatability to a leader (Fairhurst, 2011), so it is possible President Mason shared this emotional response to the flood with her audience so they could feel connected to her.

**Category.** Category is a framing device in which a subject is included within a particular class or group (Fairhurst, 2011). Dr. Mason used category to describe the behavior and uniqueness of members of the university community after the flood. For example, during her undergraduate commencement speech, Dr. Mason stated, “And you are very special because you are our first class to finish your education post-flood…. You will always be a very special group of graduates from the University of Iowa” (Mason, 2008b, para. 5). Perhaps President Mason used this particular category because she wished to create a bond within the group of graduates about their flood experiences. Moreover, universities depend on alumni for assistance with recruitment and donations, so it is possible Dr. Mason used this opportunity to create a connection between this group of students and the university so that they in turn would help the university.

**Repetition.** Dr. Mason used the repetition framing device during her undergraduate commencement address when describing the level of involvement students had after the flood:
Maybe you stood on the front lines of the sandbag patrol, shoveling sand or heaving bags in the hot sun to build a flood wall. Maybe you helped move precious library materials or valuable technological equipment to safer ground. Maybe you provided meals to exhausted workers or shared your living quarters with displaced flood victims. Maybe you volunteered your time to raise money for flood relief, or maybe you gave yourself. (Mason, 2008b, para. 7)

President Mason mentioned some possible ways in which students may have contributed after the flood, and by repeating the phrase “maybe you…”, Dr. Mason left open the possibility of other types of contributions, thus including everyone in her speech. Repetition may have made this particular portion of President Mason’s speech more memorable (Fairhurst, 2011). Just as in the category framing device, it is possible Dr. Mason wanted to take this opportunity to help students form connections to the university community.

**Framing devices not present in the data.** Dr. Mason did not appear to use the framing devices analogy, contrast, spin, catchphrase, or three-part list in her discourse the year following the flood. Since analogy compares a subject’s likeness to another, and contrast compares a subject in terms of what it is not (Fairhurst, 2011), it is possible Dr. Mason avoided these particular framing devices because she did not want to minimize campus community members’ emotional trauma by portraying the flood experienced at the University of Iowa as similar to other HEIs. She may have wanted the crisis her institution suffered as unique or maybe greater than others to elicit feelings of sympathy from her audience so that they would remember the university community as victims.

Moreover, leaders who use spin are often perceived as insincere (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996),
and since Dr. Mason was in her first few months of her tenure as president when the flood impacted the university, she may not have wanted to risk earning a reputation of being disingenuous by using spin in her discourse.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory Findings for University Of Iowa and the Great Flood of 2008**

**Instructing information.** A flood is a natural disaster which, according to SCCT theory, is a crisis type that falls under the victim cluster and as such, SCCT recommends leaders incorporate instructing information, adjusting information, with optional strategies of bolstering through ingratiation and victimage in their post-crisis discourse (Coombs, 2007). Dr. Mason used all of these, and only these, strategies in her discourse the year following the flood. Instructing information should be provided early because it is intended to tell stakeholders what to do in order to protect themselves from the crisis, and as stated earlier, gives the perception leaders have the situation under control (Coombs, 2007). President Mason provided instructing information during a press conference the day of the flood when she said, “We are not through this by any means. The water is very, very high. If the buildings take on more water, they could become unstable. It is a very volatile situation. Do not return to campus” (Gomez, Bello, & Keen, 2008, para. 39). During a crisis, stakeholders want to know details about the events unfolding and how the crisis may impact them (Coombs, 2007), and it appears as though President Mason accomplished this in her discourse.

**Adjusting information.** Adjusting information responses include expressing concern for victims and providing additional information about what happened, lessons learned, and any corrective action the institution will take in order to avoid a similar crisis
in the future. Further, offering adjusting information helps stakeholders emotionally process the crisis events (Coombs, 2007). Dr. Mason incorporated adjusting information in the form of updating the campus community and expressing concern for their safety by communicating her worries regarding the stability of the campus buildings. President Mason was quoted in a newspaper article as saying, “As we got deeper and deeper into our tunnels and started to look at our infrastructure, we got more and more worried about things we were seeing” (Mangan, 2008c, para. 8). President Mason’s worry about the safety of the physical structures on campus not only informed stakeholders they still could not return to campus, but also showed she cared about people’s well being. It is also possible Dr. Mason was attempting to present evidence to justify completely rebuilding certain areas of the campus. Several months after the flood, Dr. Mason incorporated adjusting information into her discourse when she described plans to gather additional information and incorporate corrective action. During a speech to the university community, she stated:

I have appointed an internal campus task force to advise the administration on our flood recovery, including experts on flood hydraulics in our own backyard from the University of Iowa’s globally recognized Hydroscience and Engineering program. We also continue to work with external flood mitigation experts.

(Mason, 2009a, para. 27)

By establishing an official task force to keep communication open and stating her intention to make structural improvements to avoid a similar crisis, President Mason may have given the impression she cared about the recovery and those impacted. It is possible her discourse may have eased any fears individual members of the campus community
had about the structural integrity of the campus buildings or what was being done for the recovery.

**Bolstering.** As stated earlier, SCCT recommends leaders incorporate bolstering strategies to build a positive connection between the institution and stakeholders through either praise or explaining how the institution too was a victim of the crisis (Coombs, 2007). In her discourse, Dr. Mason assumed a bolstering posture through praise and ingratiation by expressing her appreciation to the university community often. The day campus flooded, Dr. Mason thanked first responders and evacuees by stating, “They have met the worse challenge that Mother Nature could throw us, and they have done so with courage and conviction” (Mangan, 2008a, para. 7). Thanking and complimenting first responders not only showed appreciation for their hard work and dedication, but also may have reminded stakeholders of the difficult task they had to assist victims.

During undergraduate commencement, President Mason acknowledged sacrifices made by the university community when she said, “For everyone who has contributed something—whether it be labor, time, treasure, or even just faith and dedication in your university—we thank you from the bottom of our hearts” (Mason, 2008b, para. 7). Dr. Mason showed her appreciation to individuals for donating money, but also made a point to mention donations of labor, time, faith, and dedication to the institution. This may have caused a larger group of constituents to feel included and appreciated, not just those with the financial means to donate.

Using victimage to describe how the institution too is suffering from the crisis is another SCCT recommendation to bolster image and create connections with other crisis victims (Coombs, 2007). Throughout the year following the flood, Dr. Mason used
opportunities to remind her audience that the University of Iowa community was a victim. For example, she described the challenge of faculty continuing their research after their buildings and facilities were ruined by the flood when she stated a few days after the tragedy, “It’s devastating to the people doing research in there. Some of them will probably have to walk away from research that has been many years in the works, and they’ll have to start over” (Mangan, 2008c, para. 12). Perhaps President Mason wished to remind the greater higher education community of the University of Iowa’s research challenges to lower expectations to a reasonable level regarding grant or scholarly research contributions in the months after the flood.

Throughout the year after the flood, President Mason continued to remind external stakeholders of the impact the flood had on the university. About six months after the flood first impacted the University of Iowa campus, Dr. Mason began a speech to a group of external stakeholders by saying:

Since June, we at the University of Iowa have had to make many sudden changes and think quickly about new accommodations for thousands of faculty, staff, and students. As you know, that's because the Iowa River overflowed its banks and flooded much of our campus. (Mason, 2008b, para. 4)

By listing the specific groups and including the number of campus community members impacted, President Mason reminded her audience of the level of devastation that occurred at the university, and also created a connection with others who may still be personally recovering from the flood.
And, almost one year after the flood, even though national news of it had probably ended, Dr. Mason postured the university as a continued victim of the flood by stating in her commencement address:

Although today is a day of great celebration, we also remember that the past year has been difficult for our campus and for our country. Last summer, we experienced unprecedented flooding on our campus and in communities throughout Iowa. Today, we are still recovering. (Mason, 2009c, para. 3)

Although this was not a direct appeal for financial assistance, perhaps President Mason wished to use this opportunity to remind the University of Iowa family and friends of their continued need for aid.

President Mason communicated about the crisis consistently throughout the year following the flood, and incorporated the crisis response strategies recommended by SCCT. Thus, her communication aligned with SCCT recommendations.

**Additional Themes for University of Iowa and the Great Flood of 2008**

**Positive outlook.** In addition to framing devices and responses recommended by SCCT, Dr. Mason’s discourse in the year following the Great Flood of 2008 contained other themes. After the flood, Dr. Mason often expressed reassurance, optimism, and confidence in the university’s ability to recover. This may have been an attempt to ease fears regarding the future of the university or to convey a message that she had control of the situation. For example, just a few days after the flood, when campus was still under water, President Mason stated in an interview, “There’s a lot of work to be done, but we’re up to the challenge” (Mangan, 2008b, para. 19). Even though Dr. Mason said,
“we’re up to the challenge,” she had just begun her tenure as president of the university when the flood hit campus, so it is possible she was attempting to assure stakeholders that she, in particular, was up to the challenge of leading through the flood crisis.

As a new president, Dr. Mason had the opportunity to set the tone regarding the university’s attitude and outlook during the flood recovery. During a speech to the university community, President Mason said, “The University of Iowa itself is now in the process of seizing opportunities for renewal rather than wallowing in grief over problems” (Mason, 2009c, para. 12). Her positivity may have provided a positive example to those who may have felt overwhelmed by the clean-up and rebuilding processes ahead.

**Better than before.** Part of Dr. Mason’s optimism included statements that the university would recover and be even better than it had been before the flood. For example, during a speech Dr. Mason stated, “We need to examine and understand how we will live with the Iowa River. But we have the opportunity to move forward and rebuild the university better than it has ever been” (Mason, 2008a, para. 5). It is possible President Mason hoped her confidence and optimism in the university’s future would take hold and spread throughout the campus community.

During undergraduate commencement, approximately six months after the flood, President Mason again expressed confidence in the university’s future when she said, “Many of you here with us today still gave much of yourselves to make sure that the university survived and could come back better than ever” (Mason, 2008b, para. 7). This particular statement implied that the University of Iowa accomplished its goal to create a new-and-improved institution. Making this statement to a group of undergraduates
during commencement may have provided a positive memory of their time at Iowa and strengthened student connections and loyalty to the university.

Almost a year after the flood, in two different speeches within the same week, Dr. Mason shared her vision of a stronger University of Iowa. First, to a group of external stakeholders she said, “Our recovery will take years to complete. But we will come out stronger, as a university community and as a physical campus” (Mason, 2009a, para. 27). While the overall tone of President Mason’s statement was optimistic, putting a years-long timeline on the flood recovery may have been her attempt to manage expectations regarding her leadership and ability to deliver results. In her second speech that same week, Dr. Mason stated, “I believe the Iowa character has helped us in our recovery from last year’s flood and will help us emerge even stronger than before” (Mason, 2009b, para. 4). President Mason may have attributed the university’s comeback to stakeholder’s assistance and character in order to create positive connections between the university and its community members.

**School spirit.** Dr. Mason wove images of camaraderie and school spirit throughout her discourse in the year following the Great Flood of 2008. For example, in a speech during a service clubs luncheon, she said:

If you’re a Hawkeye alum, and I know many of you are, you probably know that one of our school songs is “On, Iowa!” which begins, “On, Iowa, proudly at the fore. On, Iowa, forever more.” This is truly how I am feeling about our great institution after the challenges of the historic flooding we faced this past summer.  

(Mason, 2008a, para. 2)
Dr. Mason, a new president to the University of Iowa, connected lyrics of the university’s school song to her pride in the institution’s recovery and current position since the flood. She may have done this to show stakeholders she had socialized herself to the university and its culture, or perhaps to build feelings of connection, confidence, and pride with alumni in the audience.

During her undergraduate commencement speech, President Mason mentioned how special the group of graduates was. She explained that because they were the first to graduate post-flood, they would always be a special group to her and to the university.

Dr. Mason took the opportunity to weave an element of school spirit into this part of her speech when she stated, “And thank you, as graduates of this magnificent institution, for being, once and always, the greatest of Iowa Hawkeyes!” (Mason, 2008b, para. 13).

President Mason may have sought to build a special connection with this special group of graduates to the institution so they would have positive memories of their experience at the university and not dwell on the impact the flood had on them.

**Post-crisis accomplishments.** President Mason took her optimism and positive outlook a step further by frequently mentioning her pride in the university’s accomplishments despite the flood setback. For example, Dr. Mason praised the institution’s ability to offer a full range of courses after the flood, and to a record enrollment. During a speech just four months after the flood, she stated:

> We have come an extraordinarily long way at the University of Iowa in these past months since the flood. Today, while we continue the process of reconstruction, we are halfway through a semester that enrolled over 30,000 students—an all time record. We have the third largest entering class in our history. Of the 5,500
incoming freshmen and transfer students we welcomed this year, only two that we are aware of canceled their registration because of the flood. We are housing all the students who need it, and we are offering all the classes we promised.

(Mason, 2008a, para. 4)

It is possible President Mason wished to assure stakeholders of her ability to lead the university through the crisis and recovery, or perhaps she hoped to restore confidence with stakeholders that the university would make a full recovery.

During President Mason’s undergraduate commencement address, she again praised the university’s post-crisis accomplishments when she said:

Despite the historic challenge of 20 campus buildings and much of our infrastructure being out of commission as of mid-June, we were able to finish the summer term, open the fall semester with every class we promised, and celebrated the largest enrollment at the University of Iowa ever. (Mason, 2008b, para. 4)

Even though this information is similar to the previous quote, Dr. Mason had a larger audience for undergraduate commencement. Perhaps President Mason wanted to share this positive news with a larger constituent base which included students, parents, and soon-to-be alumni so that they too would feel confident and positive about her leadership during the flood and recovery.

**Case Three Description: California State University - Northridge Earthquake Environmental Crisis**

On January 17, 1994, southern California was struck by a 6.7 magnitude earthquake. At the time, it was considered the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history, with damages estimated near $30 billion. Throughout Los Angeles, 114,000 buildings
were damaged, three highway overpasses collapsed, 9,000 people were injured, and 72 died. The city was without power and water for days following. Many residents chose to leave the area instead of rebuild, further impacting economic recovery (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b).

The earthquake’s epicenter was just one mile away from the California State University Northridge (CSUN) campus, a public university of about 35,000 students, one of the largest campuses based on enrollment in the California State University system. Even though the earthquake lasted only 20 seconds, all 107 buildings of the CSUN campus were either damaged or destroyed. Two students, who lived in a first-floor apartment near campus, were killed when the apartment building collapsed. Costs to repair the damage sustained to the campus reached $400 million. In spite of the damage, CSUN started their spring semester just four weeks late, but taught classes in temporary locations such as tents, trailers, and even outdoors while buildings were repaired or rebuilt (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b).

When the earthquake struck, Blenda Wilson was president of CSUN. Dr. Wilson grew up in a small town in New Jersey and earned a full scholarship to study English and Secondary Education at Cedar Crest College. After she earned her Bachelor’s degree, she earned a Master’s degree in Education from Seton Hall and a Ph.D. in Higher Education from Boston College. Prior to CSUN, Dr. Wilson held high school teaching positions and worked in non-profit organizations. She became the first female chancellor of the University of Michigan-Dearborn, and held that role for four years before assuming her role as the first female and African American President of CSUN in 1992 (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b).
I chose this case because, at the time the earthquake occurred, it was considered the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history and since the earthquake hit so close to CSUN, the damage to the campus was devastating. The financial impact on CSUN put the institution’s future at risk. The federal government provided CSUN only $63 million of the approximately $400 million needed to rebuild, thus, CSUN resources that had been saved for growth and development had to be used to rebuild just to get back to where the institution was before the earthquake (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b). Due to the financial challenges and the quick temporary reopening of the university, I was curious to learn if Dr. Wilson’s discourse contained messaging that was different than the other cases.

Data for this particular case was limited to email communications from President Wilson to the campus community and quotes from interviews and press conferences. I was not able to locate any formal, planned speeches such as commencement or convocation. This may be due to the date of the crisis, January 17, 1994. The years 1994 through 1995 may have been before college and universities started archiving speech transcripts and publishing them on websites, and before sites such as YouTube captured videos of speeches.

**Framing Device Findings for California State University-Northridge Earthquake**

In the year following the earthquake, President Wilson’s discourse did not appear to contain any of the eleven framing devices (Fairhurst, 2011). This may have been because the amount of data I was able to collect was limited to email communication, press releases, and interviews, there were no transcripts of speeches available to analyze.
It is possible that Dr. Wilson incorporated framing devices in other types of discourse that I was not able to locate.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory Findings for California State University-Northridge Earthquake**

**Instructing information.** President Wilson used crisis response strategies recommended by SCCT that align with the natural disaster crisis type (Coombs, 2007). First, Dr. Wilson provided instructing information in the form of directions and plans for re-opening of campus. For example, the day after the earthquake, when asked in an interview about timing for starting the spring semester, President Wilson explained, “The spring semester was scheduled to begin on January 31 but will be delayed several weeks” (McCurdy, 1994a, para. 17). Even though Dr. Wilson did not provide an exact date for the start of the semester, communicating about the delay at that point may have given the campus community a sufficient update for the time being. A few days after this interview, she provided more detailed information regarding the semester’s start date in addition to news about housing and facilities:

> Spring term will be starting February 14, two weeks later than scheduled; we expect 22,000 students—17,000 of them registered before the earthquake. We’ve made arrangements for students who lost their off-campus housing to attend CSU campuses near their families’ homes. We’ll have trailers all around campus and eight or nine buildings fixed up for offices and programs like student union, student health, athletics. (G, 1994, para. 11)

Giving instructing information helps a community to know what to expect, which relieves stress and uncertainty (Coombs, 2007). Moreover, President Wilson appeared to
convey that she had already made plans, had control of the situation, and would be able to serve students for the spring semester.

**Adjusting information.** Providing adjusting information in the form of expressing concern is another recommendation from SCCT for leaders managing natural disasters (Coombs, 2007). Dr. Wilson expressed concern that the mental anguish of living through an earthquake and its aftermath would impact the campus community. During an interview, she stated, “My worry at this time is the damage people are feeling in their personal lives” (McCurdy, 1994b, para. 21). Stakeholders may have felt reassured to know their president cared about their own situations and recovery.

Another type of adjusting information includes providing stakeholders with updates about the current situation (Coombs, 2007). Many CSUN buildings were destroyed as a result of the earthquake, and when recovery efforts were underway, there was a concern about student records. It is important to note that the earthquake occurred in 1994, before student records were kept online with virtual backup. When asked about the status of student records in computer systems that had been destroyed, President Wilson informed her audience by saying, “Our highest priority is to gain access to the data so students can register for classes and so they can get to graduate on time” (McCurdy, 1994a, para. 19). Even though Dr. Wilson was unable to assure students their records were intact at that point, she conveyed a sense of urgency and a focus on student success and completion.

**Bolstering.** The third and final crisis response strategy for environmental crises recommended by SCCT is bolstering through ingratiation or through victimimage (Coombs, 2007). President Wilson frequently reminded her audience that the university was a
victim of the earthquake by describing the extensive damage. Approximately one month after the earthquake, Dr. Wilson stated in an interview:

All 53 buildings were affected to some degree. A dozen major buildings—generally the tallest ones—had significant damage. A parking structure collapsed. A chemical fire burned out two floors of the science building. The impact on operations was extreme. In those buildings were computers, faxes, copy machines. Since none of our buildings can be occupied yet, we’re operating from tents and trailers. (G, 1994, para. 4)

Perhaps President Wilson reminded her audience that the university continued to suffer from the impact of the earthquake simply to provide updated information, or maybe she hoped the national listeners would remember the extensive damage and provide assistance.

Several weeks after the earthquake, Dr. Wilson further described damage to the campus when she stated:

We’ll need to rebuild a lot, but no entire buildings, with the possible exception of the south library, which is unsound. That parking structure will need to be picked up and taken away. We’ve already taken down the 42-ton pedestrian bridges between science buildings because they’ve become unstable, removed the tower section of Sierra Hall, an eight-story building, and pulled most of the debris off Oviat Library, which looks bad cosmetically, but is structurally sound. (G, 1994, para. 8)

Again it is possible President Wilson’s intent was to provide detailed and updated information about the damage and recovery plans, however, another benefit to using
victimage strategies is to create connections between the organization and external stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). Reminding the public about the extensive damage on campus could have been Dr. Wilson’s attempt to strengthen relationships between CSUN and the citizens of California who were also still suffering.

Finally, almost one year after the earthquake, President Wilson explained how the campus community was still a victim of the natural disaster when she said, “Within the next year, signs of the havoc wreaked by the earthquake should begin to disappear” (Rofe, 1995, para. 13). Since almost a year had passed since the earthquake, it is possible national news was no longer covering it. Dr. Wilson may have taken the opportunity to remind the general public that the California area was still recovering in order to justify needing additional assistance, or to manage expectations in case the university’s financial outlook was unstable.

President Wilson’s communication included instructing information, adjusting information, and bolstering strategies, which align with those recommended by SCCT for environmental crises. Further, her discourse did not include additional SCCT components, which means she communicated about the crisis consistently: as if CSUN was a victim of the crisis and nothing else.

Additional Themes for California State University-Northridge Earthquake

Positive outlook. Themes of reassurance, optimism, and confidence surfaced in President Wilson’s discourse the year following the earthquake. When the campus community continued to express concern about the possible loss of student records and information, Dr. Wilson responded, “Fortunately we made backup tapes of computer
records and stored them in the old south library. All our student records are now on the computers at Cal State Fresno, which is running our registration” (G, 1994, para. 13). These may have been comforting words to students who worried about losing their official records. Additionally, after Dr. Wilson shared this update, campus stakeholders might have become more confident in her abilities to lead the institution through the crisis and recovery.

Later in the same interview, a question arose regarding the ability for CSUN to find enough temporary space to hold classes. President Wilson assured her audience:

The response has been very generous. We have offers of space at Valley College, Pierce, Mission, and Pepperdine’s continuing education center in Northridge. Commercial enterprises have offered mostly skills or supplies. Hughes, for example, gave us several hundred desks and chairs, and Pacific Bell gave us free cellular phones. (G, 1994, para. 17)

Dr. Wilson’s response displayed confidence and a positive outlook with journalists who were perhaps questioning her ability to handle the recovery.

On the one-year anniversary of the earthquake, Dr. Wilson expressed optimism with CSUN’s post-earthquake future when she said in an interview, “…we’re here and we’ve survived the earthquake and morale-wise, that’s been good. There is little construction going on at the moment, and the sense of normalcy on campus should continue to grow” (Rofe, 1995, para. 13). President Wilson’s positive attitude may have assured constituents in her ability to lead the institution, and in CSUN’s potential to fully recover.
Better than before. Dr. Wilson’s positivity included expressions of becoming a better, stronger campus community than before the earthquake. During an interview a few days after the incident, she stated, “The intellectual excitement beyond the drudgery is to figure out how to do some things better than before” (G, 1994, para. 20), and several months later she remarked, “We’re not going to be back to before, we’re going to be better” (Rofe, 1995, para. 6). This became the slogan, “Not just back, better!” and was incorporated into the campus culture throughout recovery efforts and in the years following (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b).

Summary of Environmental Crisis Cases

While no framing devices were present in Dr. Wilson’s discourse after the CSUN earthquake, almost all framing devices were present in President Cowen’s and President Mason’s discourse. The only framing device not present in any president’s discourse after an environmental crisis was spin, which places the subject, in this case the crisis, in a positive or negative light, but can cause a leader to appear disingenuous (Fairhurst, 2011). Moreover, all three presidents appeared to follow recommendations from SCCT regarding crisis response strategies after an environmental crisis. All included instructing information in the form of warnings and directions, adjusting information by either expressing concern or corrective action, and bolstering either by presenting the campus and its community as a victim of the crisis or ingratiation. No other crisis response strategies were present, which means all three presidents provided consistent messages within SCCT recommendations. Finally, additional themes common to all three environmental crisis included expressions of reassurance, optimism, and confidence that the institution would emerge better and stronger than it was before the crisis. School
spirit and acknowledgement of the crisis on the one-year anniversary of the incident were common themes in the president’s discourse after Hurricane Katrina and the University of Iowa flood, but not the CSUN earthquake.

Intentional Crises

Intentional crises consist of conscious, criminal acts, initiated by either a single human being or group of human beings either with an intent to cause harm or as a result of mental illness (Zdziarski et al., 2007). Intentional crises can shake a campus community by creating fear and feelings of unsafety. After crises of this type, the campus community will require emotional healing, thus the president will need to help constituents feel safe, repair and rebuild the institution’s reputation, and instill confidence in the strength of the institution’s future. The following three cases were selected because the impacted institutions sustained either loss of life, loss of reputation, or both. In addition, all three cases changed the way higher education prepared for crisis (Zdziarski et al., 2007).

Case Four Description: Virginia Tech Shootings Intentional Crisis

On April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a 23-year old student in his senior year at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), shot and killed 32 people and injured 17 others in two separate attacks on the campus before he shot and killed himself. The first shooting occurred at approximately 7:00am at West Ambler Johnston Hall, a co-ed residence hall, where Cho shot and killed two students. While first responders attended to the victims, Cho fled the scene. Approximately two hours later, Cho entered Norris Hall, a classroom building primarily for Engineering classes.
He chained the three main entrance doors shut and began randomly shooting students and faculty. In this second attack, 30 people were killed and 17 wounded. Several other students were injured jumping out of windows attempting to flee. At the time, the attack was the second deadliest shooting by a single gunman in U.S. history, and the deadliest shooting on a university campus. Several years prior, Cho had been diagnosed with severe anxiety disorder, but because of federal privacy laws, officials at Virginia Tech were not aware of his condition. Many criticized Virginia Tech administration for not evacuating campus after the first shootings, but officials and first responders thought the first incident was isolated and that students were not in danger (Hincker, 2014).

Virginia Tech opened in the early 1870’s in Blacksburg, Virginia, as a public, land grant university by using funds provided by the Morrill Act of 1872. Many of Virginia Tech’s first presidents served in the Confederate Army, but in 1953, Virginia Tech became the first public institution among the 11 states in the former Confederacy to admit a black student. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, Virginia Tech transformed from a small, predominately white male military school to a co-educational research institution. Today, around 280 undergraduate and graduate degree programs are offered with an overall enrollment of approximately 34,000 students, which makes it the state’s second largest university by enrollment (Hincker, 2014).

Charles Steger was Virginia Tech’s fifteenth president and served in this role from 2000-2014. He earned Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in Architecture and a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and Engineering, all from Virginia Tech. Dr. Steger served as a faculty member, department chair, dean, vice-president, and president at Virginia Tech. During his tenure as president, Dr. Steger created centers for architecture in Switzerland
and Washington, D.C., and a public service office in Richmond, Virginia, and was credited with growing the university’s enrollment and guiding the university through severe declines in federal and state funding. Dr. Steger and his administration were criticized by many outside the university community for failing to take action faster on the day of the shootings. While individuals, groups, and victims’ families called for President Steger’s resignation due to his handling of the crisis, he remained in his role until he retired in 2014 (Hincker, 2014).

I chose this case for several reasons. First, the severity of the tragedy and the amount of press coverage of the crisis resulted in worldwide knowledge about the event. Since the world was watching and discussing the crisis event and recovery, President Steger was probably under a considerable amount of pressure, which may have impacted his response, especially after people began criticizing his decision to wait so long to inform students of the first shooting and to not evacuate campus or cancel classes. Second, this crisis was impactful because it changed the way many HEIs prepared for emergency events, specifically on-campus shootings, because Virginia Tech did not have the technology set up to inform students quickly. They emailed students about the first shooting instead of sending text messages, because that was the only way they were able to communicate with students at that time (Hincker, 2014). Because this crisis changed the way many HEIs set up emergency notifications for students, I was interested to learn more about it.

The data I was able to locate primarily came from spoken, rather than written, discourse. I found four speeches, two press conferences, four interviews each approximately 30-60 minutes long, and four shorter interviews from President Steger in
the year following the shootings. I located one email communication Dr. Steger wrote to
the campus community in the data collection period of one year following the crisis.
President Steger wrote a few articles about the shootings and how they impacted him and
the campus community, but they were not usable in this study because they were written
more than one year after the crisis event.

Framing Device Findings for
Virginia Tech Shootings

I found evidence President Steger used seven of the 11 framing devices in his
spoken discourse: metaphor, story, contrast, argument, feeling statements, category, and
repetition, but the only framing device used in his written discourse was feeling
statements. Dr. Steger utilized metaphor and feeling statements the most often, but with
different patterns. There was a gap between usages of metaphors, he incorporated them
within the first month after the crisis, and then not again until his commemoration speech
on the one-year anniversary of the shootings, yet feeling statements were used all
throughout the year following the crisis.

Metaphor. The day after the shootings, President Steger spoke at Virginia
Tech’s convocation in front of an audience of grieving campus community members. He
used a metaphor when he spoke about the compassionate messages he received when he
said, “The expressions of sympathy and support that are pouring in from all corners of
our nation and from all around the world, literally from around the world, have touched
us” (Steger, 2007a). Describing the support as pouring in from all corners of the country
may have helped create an image of an instant and continuous flow of assistance and
kindness from all areas of the country. If anyone who had already offered support was
listening, they would know their compassion was appreciated.
During President Steger’s commencement speech, almost one month after the shootings, he incorporated a metaphor when describing plans for the Virginia Tech flag to be brought on the next space mission:

Indeed, the Hokie Nation reaches even into space. A special Virginia Tech flag has been designed, at the request of NASA, to be carried into space. It is heartening that these lights of compassion and care have shone through the deep darkness of our suffering. This day is also one of those lights, one of those beacons, guiding us toward the future. (Steger, 2007f, para. 35)

Light can be used as a metaphor for goodness and life. Describing compassion as a light shining through the darkness of suffering, and commencement day as a light guiding the university into the future, possibly provided President Steger’s audience hope for happier times ahead.

**Story.** On the one-year anniversary of the shootings, Dr. Steger was interviewed by the Collegiate Times. During this interview, he reflected on the crisis and told a couple of stories to take the audience back to the day it occurred. When asked what he remembered about the morning of the shootings, President Steger responded:

It was a rapidly changing circumstance. I think as we gathered information on what had happened we began to think about, “OK, what do we do to help this community cope with this crisis?” So, that’s when we began to think about things like the convocation that happened the next day, what we could do to help the families…you have to sort through what exactly is it that you’re dealing with, and that took some time, quite honestly. But as we did that, we began to think about,
how do we do everything we can for these families, but how do we continue to move this institution forward? (Black, 2008, para. 20)

President Steger’s narrative demonstrated how quickly campus leaders focused on the campus community members and victims’ families yet kept the welfare of Virginia Tech in mind too.

Later, during the same interview, President Steger was asked about his interactions with the individual family members of the victims since the crisis. Dr. Steger told a story about how leaders at Virginia Tech communicated with and supported these groups:

As you know, when we first started, we assigned, within the first couple of days, a liaison, one person to work with each family, because it was just impossible, given all the things that were going on—we can’t communicate with 58 people simultaneously. That helped to a degree, and those people did that on top of their existing jobs and whatever else. We also had regular communications with the families, I think we sent out probably 11 or 12 fairly lengthy letters…. (Black, 2008, para. 14)

Dr. Steger continued his story to describe individual phone calls he placed to victims’ families and letters he sent them at Christmastime, the daily contact Virginia Tech’s Office of Recovery and Support had, and the professional counselors that were provided. It is possible this narrative was shared to show how deeply President Steger cared about the families’ recovery and also to inform a wider audience of the level of care each family was receiving.
**Contrast.** On the one-year anniversary of the shootings, President Steger spoke at a commemoration event on campus. During this speech, he contrasted the early days after the shootings to one year later when he said, “Since the blur of those first days, our focus has grown sharper” (Steger, 2008, para. 13). Dr. Steger may have used the contrasting words “blur” and “sharper” to describe the difference between the lack of clarity the university community initially had about the shootings and how they would impact the university’s future, versus an increased clarity in the institution’s outlook.

**Argument.** A few days after the shootings, opinions emerged that Virginia Tech officials could have either done more to prevent the shootings or handled the crisis response differently (Hincker, 2014). During a televised interview, President Steger was asked if it was a fair statement that the Virginia Tech police department made mistakes, and he replied, “I don’t think that’s fair at all. I think they have worked very professionally and handled this as skillfully as anybody might be able to” (Steger, 2007c, para. 12). And later that day, during a different interview, Dr. Steger was asked why university officials did not inform the campus community of the first shooting that had occurred in the residence hall and cancel classes, thus preventing the second shooting. President Steger replied:

> Well whenever you do something like this, particularly, you’ve got 9,000 on campus and you’ve got about 15- or 16,000 in transit on the way to campus, plus over 7,000 employees and 2- or 3,000 visitors. If you don’t do it right, and report misinformation, you have chaos. And so we were trying to manage that process as best we can. Particularly when it was reported that incident was confined to that dorm room. (Steger, 2007d, para. 19)
Dr. Steger presented reasons for the decisions that were made, and defended first responders. Had he not presented these arguments clearly, he may have made the university, or himself, vulnerable to further scrutiny, criticism, or litigation.

**Feeling statements.** President Steger expressed his emotions in his discourse throughout the year following the crisis. For example, the day after the shootings, during his convocation address, he said:

In the last day I have expressed my horror and shock but there are really no words that truly express the depth of sadness I feel. In fact, words are very weak symbols of my true emotions at times such as this. (Steger, 2007a)

At the time, this was the deadliest shooting on a university campus (Hincker, 2014), and the university community, along with the rest of the country, was probably struggling to understand what truly happened and why. When Dr. Steger said words could not describe his sorrow, he likely made connections by stating what many others were feeling.

When Dr. Steger spoke to the university’s newest graduates at commencement less than one month after the shootings, again he expressed his feelings when he told them:

I wish I could reach out and hug each one of you. You are the reason I get out of bed in the morning. You are my passion—the focus of my days and most of my nights…. I could not possibly be more proud of you than I am at this moment. I love you all. (Steger, 2007f, para. 42)

President Steger’s expressions of pride and devotion to his students sent a message to them about how important they were to him, and messages to external audiences set the
tone for the institution’s response to the victims’ families and the care with which he intended to lead throughout the university’s recovery.

**Category.** A category frames a subject in terms of membership to a particular class or group (Fairhurst, 2011). During President Steger’s commencement speech, he spoke about the students and faculty who were killed in the shootings:

They came here from Blacksburg and Roanoke and throughout Virginia, from several other states and the Choctaw Nation, from Canada and Egypt, from Indiana and Indonesia, from Puerto Rico and Peru. They were citizens of the world. Each was gifted and talented and unique. They were Hokies. (Steger, 2007f, para. 9)

Referring to the victims as citizens of the world placed them in a larger group along with external audience members, perhaps making it easier for the general public to connect with the victims throughout their grieving process. Further, the Hokie bird is the official mascot of Virginia Tech, and a Hokie is a Virginia Tech fan. Identifying the victims as Hokies may have helped campus community members remember them as a part of their Virginia Tech family.

**Repetition.** Some leaders use repetition during speeches to help their audience remember key takeaways because they do not have written words to refer to later (Fairhurst, 2011). About four months after the shootings, Virginia Tech had a memorial dedication ceremony, and President Steger started his speech by using repetition, perhaps to explain the purpose of the memorial and goals of the ceremony:

We come together still seeking answers to the incomprehensible. We come to remember that which we cannot forget. We also come together to remember
wonderful, caring teachers and young lives with great promise. We come in the hope that this memorial to the victims of April 16th will help us heal. We come together here at this Hokie stone memorial to share the cherished memories. We come together to pay tribute. (Steger, 2007g, para. 2)

Repeating the phrase, “We come…” gave purpose to the audience and meaning to the dedication site. Later in the same speech, President Steger again used repetition when he said, “Though severely battered by the events of April, we must be strong, we must have faith, we must lead, we must do what we believe is right, and we must not be afraid” (Steger, 2007g, para. 41). These instructions may have provided direction and purpose to those who could have still been struggling with their healing process.

On the one-year anniversary of the shootings, the Virginia Tech community held a commemoration. During President Steger’s speech, he used repetition to describe the journey the campus community had been on to find healing:

We have searched for answers. We have searched for meaning in what is incomprehensible. We have searched for rest in those sleepless hours in the night when the silence is shattered by the barrage of our own thoughts, and we have searched our souls for purpose and direction and peace to calm the turmoil in our hearts and minds. (Steger, 2008, para. 13)

Dr. Steger may have repeated the phrase, “We have searched” to acknowledge the efforts the campus community has made with healing but to recognize that there may never be answers to some of their questions or a definitive end to their grieving process. Using the pronoun “we” provides a connotation of family and togetherness, and may have been used so the audience would know President Steger was still grieving along with them.
**Framing devices not present in the data.** I did not find evidence of spin, catchphrase, analogy, or three-part list framing devices in the data. Spin creates a perception that the speaker is disingenuous (Fairhurst, 2011), and if President Steger was aware of that, he probably avoided using spin because he wanted to appear sincere and honest to internal and external stakeholders throughout the crisis and recovery. Catchphrase frames a subject or situation in familiar terms, and analogy parallels a situation to another. The Virginia Tech shooting was an unprecedented tragedy, there were no familiar terms available to describe or make sense of it, and it was probably not possible to create a parallel between it and any another situation. Any efforts to do so could have come across as dishonoring the victims.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory Findings for Virginia Tech Shootings**

According to SCCT, workplace violence falls under the victim cluster, which gives very little attribution of crisis responsibility to the institution (Coombs, 2007). Therefore, had President Steger followed SCCT recommendations and used only victim response strategies, he would have incorporated instructing information, followed by adjusting information and bolstering through ingratiation or victimage. I found evidence of instructing, adjusting, and bolstering in the data, which will be presented below. However, in the year following the crisis, Dr. Steger’s discourse contained evidence of reputation management, including denial posturing, which is recommended when stakeholders challenge the leader’s response to the crisis; diminishment strategies, which are recommended for accidental crises; and rebuilding strategies, which are recommended for preventable crises. The reputation management strategies chosen by
leaders reflect the amount of responsibility an organization or institution is perceived to have accepted for the crisis. It is possible President Steger incorporated different levels of reputation management in his discourse because he felt internal or external stakeholders perceived Virginia Tech was responsible for the crisis. Regardless, President Steger communicated about the crisis as if it were different types, victim, accidental, and preventable, which may have confused audiences. Quotes from the data and additional interpretations are presented next.

**Instructing information.** The day after the shootings, President Steger held a news conference to provide directions to the campus community about next steps. He stated:

I have some additional information regarding how the Virginia Tech community will move forward and begin recovery in the next hours and days. First of all, Virginia Tech will cancel all classes for the remainder of the week to allow students the time they need to grieve and seek assistance as needed. The university will reopen administrative operations beginning tomorrow. We will close Norris Hall for the remainder of the semester. Staff are currently working to arrange alternate locations for the classrooms and for faculty offices. (Steger, 2007b, para. 3)

It is possible Dr. Steger provided detailed instructions in this venue, as opposed to sending an internal email to the campus community, to show a wider audience he was organized and in control of the situation.

**Adjusting information.** Leaders incorporate adjusting information strategies by expressing concern for stakeholders and stating any corrective action taken (Coombs,
One day after the shootings, President Steger communicated how deeply he cared for the victims’ families when he stated during a news conference:

- We send out our thoughts and prayers to the families and friends of our students.
- And we must begin to work through the process of providing assistance to them.
- It is very difficult for me to express how we feel about what has occurred on campus but I want to assure you that we are doing everything possible to move forward. (Steger, 2007b, para. 1)

Dr. Steger’s sentiments may have helped university community members feel supported and confident they would receive help throughout their grieving process.

Communicating corrective action reduces psychological stress by reassuring stakeholders their safety is important (Coombs, 2007). Less than one month after the shootings, President Steger was asked in an interview what the university was planning to do differently in order to communicate to the campus community in the event of any future crises. He replied:

- We are doing our own internal reviews, not only of the incident itself but of what sort of technologies are available to help us with these problems that we haven’t been using in the past and, you know, are there some things that we can do in the future. Maybe there are even some strategies or technological infrastructure that doesn’t exist today that we can help create. (Hebel, 2007, para. 10)

Even though Dr. Steger did not provide specifics, communicating a plan for change and making improvements to the crisis communication process may have been enough reassurance that action would be taken. Around four months after this interview,
President Steger shared additional information about identifying and supporting students of concern:

The university will be implementing three recommendations to improve the ability to identify problems. Refining and expanding the Care Team, a key student affairs group that identifies and responds to students at risk. Creating a Threat Assessment Team charged with examining the most complex cases of distressed students and empowering it to act quickly when necessary. Expanding the case management capacity by adding case managers to the Dean of Students office to improve follow-up with students and to improve information flow through appropriate units about students at risk. (Haider, 2007, para. 4)

Dr. Steger described these initiatives after it became known that the shooter, Seung-Hui Cho, had shown signs of mental and emotional distress at different points and to different individuals during his time at Virginia Tech. The institution was criticized because it did not have the structure in place for faculty and staff to report concerns to a single area who would then provide support.

Bolstering. In the year following the shootings, Dr. Steger publicly praised and thanked different stakeholder groups for their assistance and support. One day after the shootings, President Steger thanked first responders during his convocation address:

We want to thank all the members, the local, the state, and the federal law enforcement agencies, especially the Virginia Tech police, the Blacksburg police, the Virginia State police, and all the emergency responders who rushed to our aide, who continue to monitor our campus and who have the additional horror of
investigating this catastrophe. We cannot thank them enough for their bravery and for their assistance. (Steger, 2007a)

It is possible Dr. Steger expressed his appreciation because he was attempting to build a positive connection with law enforcement and first responders, groups the university was still heavily relying upon for support.

Later during the same speech, President Steger expressed appreciation to students, families and friends in attendance when he said:

We are extremely grateful that you here in the audience today have come to help us and to help each other. We are thankful for our students and for their friends and families who have offered solace and comfort to one another. (Steger, 2007a)

Thanking students, friends, and families for their support could have helped them feel more included in the university family and may have encouraged them to continue looking after their loved ones.

President Steger expressed appreciation for another group of internal stakeholders, Virginia Tech faculty and staff, during his university commencement address:

We have seen many selfless people and acts in the past few weeks, and we are forever thankful to all for their concern and care. Our faculty and staff deserve a special thank you. While grieving greatly, they wiped their tears, rolled up their sleeves and went to work, doing anything and everything they could to keep us going when we were struck numb. They voluntarily arose early and stayed late into the night. They were magnificent in the most difficult of times. (Steger, 2007f, para. 16)
By publicly thanking faculty and staff in this way, Dr. Steger brought positive attention to two stakeholder groups that audience members may not have realized were working so hard to assist and support during the crisis recovery.

**Denial.** As stated earlier in this section, President Steger incorporated crisis response strategies that did not align with recommendations for a workplace violence crisis. After the public became aware that Cho, the shooter, had a history of mental and emotional health issues, leaders at Virginia Tech were criticized for letting him slip through the cracks, not identifying his struggles and offering him support. Some questioned whether the crisis could have been avoided if the university had done more for Cho. During an interview, President Steger was asked if Cho should have even been enrolled at Virginia Tech. He replied:

> Whether Cho should have ever been in a large college—or any college—is a legitimate question. When people did reach out and try to help, he rebuffed the system. He hid his homicidal tendencies from mental health professionals throughout his life. (Haider, 2007, para. 7)

Dr. Steger may have been attempting to shift the focus and blame back on Cho’s decisions and remove any connection between Cho and the university’s level of responsibility, a crisis response strategy SCCT recommends when a leader’s crisis management is being challenged. It is possible President Steger incorporated denial strategies because he felt Virginia Tech’s policies were being questioned.

**Diminishment.** Even though the Virginia Tech shootings are categorized as a victim crisis by SCCT, President Steger incorporated diminishment strategies in his discourse after the crisis, which SCCT recommends only after an accidental crisis occurs
(Coombs, 2007). Diminishment strategies attempt to excuse the institution from any wrongdoing and minimize the organization’s responsibility for the crisis. Four days after the shootings, President Steger was asked during an interview why campus was not evacuated after the first shootings occurred in the residence hall, thus preventing the second shootings in the classroom building. He replied:

They felt the incident was confined to that building, so we closed that building immediately, surrounded it with security guards, cordoned off the street, and notified all the students in the building. And we felt that was appropriate at that point. (Steger, 2007d, para. 3)

It is possible Dr. Steger was attempting to manage perception that the university was responsible for the second shooting, which had more casualties than the first, because campus police did not evacuate.

Four months after that interview, the public was still questioning Virginia Tech leadership’s decision to not evacuate campus after the first shootings and accused the university for being responsible for the second shootings. President Steger attempted to minimize the university’s responsibility for the shootings when he stated:

Nobody can say for certain what would have happened if different decisions were made. However, to say something could have been prevented is not to say it would have been. Moreover, it is entirely possible that this tragedy, horrific as it is, could have been worse. (Haider, 2007, para. 11)

At that time, this was the deadliest shooting on a university campus in American history. Attempting to defend the actions campus police took and diminish the tragedy by stating that it “could have been worse” may have caused a negative reaction. It is unclear if Dr.
Steger created such a reaction, but it is important to note this was the last instance I found in which he used diminishment strategies.

**Rebuilding.** SCCT recommends leaders use rebuilding strategies in order to restore trust by providing compensation such as money or other gifts to victims of a crisis (Coombs, 2007). However, these strategies are recommended only after a preventable crisis, not after a victim crisis such as workplace violence. One year after the shootings, President Steger conducted an interview in which he described compensation given to the victims’ families:

> Donors from around the country and around the world gave us a little over $8.4 million, and we chose to use that to help the families. Lots of these families were in very difficult straits even before, and we felt the best thing to do was to use that money to help them. So, none of that money was used for any university issue. So, we distributed $8.4 million and we spent another $12 million on top of that.

(Black, 2008, para. 12)

Throughout the year following the shootings, Virginia Tech was criticized for not identifying Cho as a student suffering from mental and emotional health issues and allowing Cho to be enrolled, and of the way campus police handled the crisis after the first shootings occurred in the residence hall. Some stakeholders even called for President Steger to resign. Perhaps at this point President Steger was attempting to manage perceptions by communicating about the crisis as if it were preventable and in some way acknowledge mistakes were made.

In the year following the shootings, Dr. Steger incorporated crisis response strategies that align with a victim crisis, an accidental crisis, and a preventable crisis. It is
possible that his response to the crisis came across as inconsistent. Had President Steger been consistent with his crisis response, perhaps the public would not have been so critical of his leadership after the crisis.

As stated earlier in this section, President Steger communicated about the crisis differently throughout the year according to SCCT. First, he incorporated SCCT strategies to suggest Virginia Tech was a victim of the crisis, which was the recommended communication path; however, he also communicated about the crisis as if it was both an accident and preventable. SCCT recommends crisis responders communicate in ways that are consistent with the crisis type and maintain consistent communication (Coombs, 2007), but Dr. Steger did not appear to follow these recommendations.

**Additional Themes for Virginia Tech Shootings**

In addition to framing devices and SCCT strategies, I found emergent themes in President Steger’s discourse the year following the shootings. Themes, examples, and interpretations are described below.

**School spirit.** In the first few months after the shootings, President Steger used the phrases, “We are Hokies,” “The Hokie Spirit,” “The Hokie Nation,” and, “We are Virginia Tech.” For example, during Dr. Steger’s commencement address less than one month after the crisis, he incorporated these four phrases into his speech a total of 13 times (Steger, 2007f). In addition, President Steger used the university’s motto in an email he sent to campus community members five days after the shootings. He wrote, “Together, we pledge our collective commitment to these principles in the spirit of our
motto, Ut Prosim (That I may serve). We will prevail…we are Hokies!” (Steger, 2007)

Finally, during President Steger’s speech at the memorial dedication ceremony, he said:

> It is most fitting that this tribute is of Hokie stones—stones that have been strengthened by the pressure they have withstood for eons…. These Hokie stones represent a foundation and a link from one generation of Hokies to another. And so it will be with the Virginia Tech family. (Steger, 2007g, para. 4)

As mentioned earlier, the Hokie bird is Virginia Tech’s school mascot. Referring to audience members as Hokies may have given them a sense of belonging and connection to the university during a time they may have felt lost or perhaps even betrayed by the university. Students and other internal stakeholders could have expected Virginia Tech leaders to keep them safe during their time on campus. After the shootings it is possible campus community members did not feel safe or protected. President Steger may have promoted school spirit in the months following the crisis to reestablish feelings of togetherness and security.

**Community.** In addition to promoting school spirit, Dr. Steger spoke of the “Virginia Tech community,” “The Virginia Tech family,” and the “university community” throughout the year following the shootings. In nine different speeches, beginning the day after the crisis up through the one-year anniversary, President Steger mentioned “community” and “family” 30 times. It is possible President Steger wished to strengthen stakeholders’ sense of belonging at a deeper level than he did through promoting school spirit, perhaps in order to help them cope with their emotions after the shootings. It is also possible Dr. Steger was concerned that stakeholders would place
some blame for the crisis on the university, so he may have promoted family and community early and often to build strong relationships and restore trust.

**Acknowledge pain and need for healing.** After loss, it is important to acknowledge the pain, grief, and sorrow others are experiencing and allow time and space for healing (Abraham, 2014). President Steger recognized the pain campus community members were experiencing during his commencement speech less than one month after the shootings:

Yet today our celebrations and our joy are subdued in recognition of the great tragedy that befell our university…our minds still reel from the violence and our hearts still ache for those slain and injured and their families and friends. We know the emotional wounds may be even harder to heal. (Steger, 2007f, para. 2) It is possible Dr. Steger wished to show how deeply he cared about and understood his audience members.

On the one-year anniversary of the shootings, President Steger spoke at the commemoration ceremony, and during his speech, he acknowledged the probability that the campus community was still struggling with pain:

Neither the searing heat of summer nor the icy winds of winter has relieved us of our pain…. And so we gather here at the symbolic heart of this university, perhaps with the hope of alleviating some of that sadness—some of that pain…. We pay tribute to [students’] families for creating such a loving and nurturing home environment, which allows them to continue to heal, both physically and emotionally…. We once again offer our condolences and our pledge of support in
the hope that, in some small way, this may help you bear the great sense of loss
that you endure each day. (Steger, 2008, para. 4)

President Steger’s recognition of the campus community’s grief, appreciation of those
offering support, and reminder that the university too could support individuals may have
helped his listeners feel valued.

The three additional themes of school spirit, community, and acknowledgement of
pain and healing that appeared in President Steger’s discourse all had a common thread—
President Steger attempted to strengthen campus community members’ feelings of
belonging and create positive connections with the institution.

Case Five Description: Penn State
University and Jerry Sandusky
Sexual Abuse Intentional
Crisis

On November 5, 2011, former defensive football coordinator Gerald Sandusky
was charged with 40 criminal counts of using his position in the Penn State football
program to sexually abuse 10 boys over a 15-year period. The boys were involved in a
charity organization Mr. Sandusky started to help troubled and disadvantaged boys. On
November 9, 2011, the scandal became public, and several senior-level administrators
were either fired or resigned, accused of covering up the scandal and failure to report
suspected child abuse. Among those fired were football coach Joe Paterno, who had
served as head coach since 1966, and university president Graham Spanier. A few weeks
later, Penn State announced former FBI director and attorney Louis Freeh would lead a
group in an independent investigation into the university’s level of responsibility. In July
2012, after interviewing over 400 people and interviewing over 3.5 million documents,
Judge Freeh released his findings in a 267-page document, referred to as the Freeh
Report, which showed senior leaders at Penn State knew about, and covered up, Mr. Sandusky’s inappropriate and illegal actions with the boys. Less than two weeks later, the NCAA announced sanctions against Penn State as a result of the scandal, which included a $60 million fine, a ban of any post-season football for four years, the loss of football scholarships, and the cancellation of all football wins from 1998-2011, which reversed former football coach Joe Paterno’s legacy as the winningest coach in major college football. After standing trial, Mr. Sandusky was found guilty of 45 counts of sexually abusing 10 boys over a 15-year period and was sentenced to 30-60 years in prison (Penn State Scandal Fast Facts, 2018).

Founded in 1855, Penn State University is a public, land-grant, research university with several campuses throughout Pennsylvania. University Park is the flagship campus, and with an enrollment of approximately 45,000 undergraduate and graduate students, it is one of the largest universities in the United States. In addition, Penn State has the world’s largest dues-paying alumni association and an endowment of $3.5 billion. Penn State joined the Big Ten athletic conference in 1991 and, while competitive in several different sports, is most known for its football program (O’Rourke, 2014).

When Penn State’s president, Graham Spanier, was forced to resign on November 9, 2011, he was replaced by Rodney Erickson, who was executive vice president and provost of Penn State before assuming the president role. At the time it was unusual for a president of a major research university to be promoted from within, but the Board of Trustees did so in an attempt to maintain stability during a tumultuous time. Before President Erickson began his tenure at Penn State, he graduated with Bachelor’s and
Master’s degrees from the University of Minnesota and a Ph.D. from the University of Washington. Dr. Erickson began his academic career at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and joined the faculty at Penn State in 1977. He moved into an administrative role in 1995 as dean of the Graduate School, then became Provost in 1999. Dr. Erickson served as president from November 2011 until June 2014 (Penn State Presidents, 2018).

While Jerry Sandusky’s abuse spanned a period of 15 years, it was made public on November 9, 2011 (Penn State Scandal Fast Facts, 2018). Starting on this date and through the year following, President Erickson’s discourse included 11 interviews, four press conferences, and three town hall meetings, for which I either found written transcripts or video that I transcribed. In addition, I found 14 emails and postings Dr. Erickson wrote to the Penn State community, and nine quotes in newspapers.

I chose this crisis because of its magnitude, that it was widely publicized, and because of the fallout following Mr. Sandusky’s arrest and conviction. I was curious to learn what President Erickson’s discourse contained because he was quickly and unexpectedly moved into his first president role under extremely difficult conditions. For example, Penn State’s student body and alumni network was angry Joe Paterno was fired and that a statue of him that had been standing outside the football stadium for years was removed (O’Rourke, 2014). This crisis also impacted the broader higher education community. It served as a reminder to other institutions the importance and the responsibility upper administrators have, to create a campus culture in which every stakeholder knows what to report, when to report, who should report, and how to report any concerning behavior, and the accountability and duty administrators have when they receive reports (O’Rourke, 2014).
Framing Device Findings for Penn State University and Jerry Sandusky Sexual Abuse

I found evidence that President Erickson used seven of the 11 framing devices: metaphor, story, contrast, spin, argument, feeling statement, and repetition. A few of the framing devices were used during specific times the year following the crisis. For example, feeling statements were used the first week after Dr. Erickson was named president, but not after that. The only time Dr. Erickson used argument was twice within the few days after the Freeh report was published and the NCAA sanctions announced. Of all framing devices, Dr. Erickson used spin most frequently, but he did not start using it until after the Freeh report and NCAA sanctions were announced.

**Metaphor.** In the first days after Dr. Erickson was named president, he sent an email to the Penn State community in which he wrote, “Right now, the nation’s eyes are upon us, looking at where we will go from here” (Erickson, 2011b, para. 3). It is possible President Erickson used this particular metaphor to his internal stakeholders to caution them that their actions and reactions were being watched, and perhaps judged. President Erickson may have been attempting to control the situation and not let it get worse than it already was. Almost two weeks after being appointed president, Dr. Erickson posted a message on the university website which began, “In the last two painful weeks, Penn State has been shaken to our foundation” (Erickson, 2011g, para. 1). President Erickson may have been acknowledging the trust that was lost and the questioning of beliefs that was occurring within the campus community.

When the crisis first became public, head football coach Joe Paterno volunteered to resign at the end of the upcoming football season, but instead he was forced to resign
immediately, which angered current students and alumni (O’Rourke, 2014). Moreover, in late July 2012, the Freeh report uncovered proof that Joe Paterno knew about Mr. Sandusky’s illegal and immoral activities with boys and that several incidents had taken place in the university’s football locker room (Penn State Scandal Fast Facts, 2018). A few days after the Freeh report was released, President Erickson announced that a 7-foot statue of Joe Paterno that had stood for 11 years outside of the football stadium would be removed, further angering students and alumni. President Erickson used a metaphor when he addressed his decision in a written press release when he expressed, “The Joe Paterno statue has become a lightning rod of controversy and national debate and a source of division and an obstacle to healing in our university and beyond” (Erickson, 2012e, para. 1). A lightning rod is a metaphor that can be used to describe a person or situation that attracts criticism and takes attention away from more serious issues. President Erickson may have been attempting to explain that the statue’s presence was distracting the campus community from healing and moving forward.

**Story.** I found evidence of one story President Erickson told in the year following the crisis, and it occurred in a speech given close to the one-year anniversary of when the crisis first broke. In a speech to the National Press Club, President Erickson said, “To begin, let me take you back to last year when Penn State received the repugnant news that a former assistant coach had molested young boys, in some instances on our campus….” (Erickson, 2012i, para. 9). He continued to give a timeline of the events as they unfolded and the challenges they presented to him, and concluded with examples of academic successes Penn State students and faculty experienced during the year, in spite of the scandal. President Erickson could not control the beginning of the story, but may
have told the ending the way he did in order to control the takeaway for his audience: that Penn State was resilient and was not going to allow the scandal to tarnish their reputation or future.

Contrast. Leaders use contrast when they want to compare a subject to what it is not (Fairhurst, 2011). During an interview, President Erickson said, “It grieves me very much when I hear people say ‘the Penn State scandal.’ This is not Penn State. This is ‘the Sandusky scandal.’ We’re not going to let what one individual did destroy the reputation of this university” (Huckabee, 2012, para. 12). This interview occurred just two months after the crisis became public, so President Erickson may have been unsure of the university’s status and may have feared its reputation would be damaged beyond repair. Perhaps Dr. Erickson attempted to separate Penn State from the scandal by contrasting the university with the person who committed the crimes.

Spin. Spin places a subject in a positive or negative light. It is recommended leaders use spin with caution because audience members recognize it quickly and perceive the leader is insincere or attempting to control the narrative (Fairhurst, 2011). President Erickson used the spin framing device more than any other president in this study, starting toward the end of July when the Freeh report was published and NCAA sanctions were announced. For example, in President Erickson’s press release response to the NCAA sanctions imposed on the university, he said:

Penn State will move forward with a renewed sense of commitment to excellence and integrity in all aspects of our university. We continue to recognize the important role intercollegiate athletics provides for our student athletes and the wider university community as we strive to appropriate balance academic and
athletic accomplishments. Penn State will continue to be a world class educational institution of which our students, faculty, staff, and alumni can be justifiably proud…. Against this backdrop, Penn State accepts the penalties and corrective actions announced today by the NCAA. With today’s announcement and the action it requires of us, the university takes a significant step forward.

(Erickson, 2012f, para. 10)

President Erickson may have been attempting to influence the public’s reaction to the sanctions by pointing out the university’s strengths and assuring the public the punishment enforced by the NCAA would not damage Penn State’s future.

Also toward the end of July, Dr. Erickson used spin to attempt to situate the crisis in a positive context. In a Washington Post opinion piece, Dr. Erickson wrote:

As I look ahead, I see a university that prevails. I see a community that has learned from this experience in the most painful and personal of ways…. Irrevocably changed by the lessons of the past, the community joins together to become a passionate voice for the victims of child abuse and for the courage in each of us to stand up to protect society’s most vulnerable. (Erickson, 2012g, para. 9)

President Erickson may have been attempting to draw negative attention away from the Freeh report, which showed Penn State officials did not have a structure in place to protect the children who were being abused by Mr. Sandusky, by trying to bring positive attention to Penn State’s new mission as a result of the scandal: to become a national leader in child abuse prevention, which could be perceived as a positive outcome from the crisis.
Argument. President Erickson used argument to justify why he agreed to the sanctions imposed by the NCAA. In a Washington Post opinion piece, he wrote:

Since the (Freeh) report was published, accepting responsibility has come to take on an additional meaning. This week the NCAA imposed unprecedented penalties on the university. These include a $60 million fine, the loss of football scholarships, a ban on postseason play and the forfeiture of all wins between 1998 and 2011. Many have questioned how I could agree to such sanctions. Let me be clear I did not suggest this punishment, and I do not take its repercussions lightly. But I believe that the alternative—a multi-year ban on football—would have been far more detrimental to the healing process of our students and alumni. (Erickson, 2012g, para. 4)

President Erickson had already been criticized for accepting the punishment, and may have feared the strong alumni network and supporters of the football program would have started questioning his leadership unless he explained the factors behind his decision to accept the NCAA sanctions.

Feeling statement. Dr. Erickson used feeling statements in the first three days after he was named president, but not after that. The feelings expressed were those of sympathy and remorse. For example, during a press conference on November 11, 2011, just two days after he became Penn State’s president, he said, “My heart aches for the victims and their families, and my mind searches for answers…. I can’t begin to tell you the depth of feeling and heartache that I have for these individuals and their families” (Erickson, 2011d). This was Dr. Erickson’s first president role, and he was quickly and unexpectedly moved into the position, perhaps with little to no training. It is possible
President Erickson was coached to stop using feeling statements because of unintended consequences or perceptions they may have on the audience, such as weak leadership or the admission of responsibility.

**Repetition.** President Erickson used repetition in a message he posted on the university website on December 6, 2011, less than one month after the crisis went public:

> Penn State is an outstanding academic institution, and we demonstrate this every day. We are defined by our commitment to exceptional teaching. We are defined by our $805 million research enterprise...we are defined by our leadership and contributions in the arts and humanities. And we are defined by our service work...Penn Staters are defined by our hard work and accomplishments, and there’s still great demand to be part of our community. (Erickson, 2011i, para. 5)

By repeating the phrase, “we are defined by,” President Erickson attempted to divert attention away from the crisis at hand, and reminded his audience of Penn State’s accomplishments in order to preserve the institution’s reputation as anything other than the home of the Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse scandal.

President Erickson again used repetition in another message posted on the university website just after the Freeh report was published. The message was entitled, “Moving forward from the Freeh Report” and described President Erickson’s vision of how Penn State could use the report as an opportunity to learn from their mistakes and change the culture at the university to better incorporate the values of honesty, integrity, and justice. Dr. Erickson wrote, “All of this will take time. Time to heal. Time to comprehend. Time to trust. Time to transform. Time to regain what has been lost, and time to move forward” (Erickson, 2012c, para. 7) President Erickson may have been
attempting to emphasize that a transformation in culture would be a long process and to manage expectations from external stakeholders who may have wanted to see change happen quickly.

**Framing devices not present in the data.** I did not find evidence of catchphrases, analogy, category, or three-part list in the data. Catchphrases frame a subject in familiar terms and analogy parallels a subject to another (Fairhurst, 2011), and since this crisis was unprecedented, it is possible there was no way to describe it as common or make it relatable to any audience. Similarly, category frames a subject in terms of membership in a class or group (Fairhurst, 2011). President Erickson often spoke of the university’s academic and research achievements, possibly to distract from the crisis, and he may not have wanted to group his institution with others. It is possible Dr. Erickson wanted to remind his audience of the uniqueness and strong reputation of Penn State as an academic, research, and service institution.

**Situational Crisis Communication**

**Theory Findings for Penn State University and Jerry Sandusky Sexual Abuse**

As discussed in Chapter II, SCCT categorizes crises into one of three types (Coombs, 2007). The victim cluster includes crises such as natural disasters and workplace violence, and stakeholders view the institution as having little to no responsibility for the crisis. The accidental crisis cluster, for which stakeholders attribute low institutional responsibility, includes accidents or product harm caused by technical error. The third cluster of crises is called preventable, and includes organizational misdeeds such as immoral or illegal acts. In a preventable crisis, stakeholders believe the institution engaged in behaviors that led to the crisis and hold the organization
responsible for causing it (Coombs, 2007). Even before the Freeh report provided
evidence Penn State officials knew Mr. Sandusky participated in illegal behavior with
minors on campus, and before Mr. Sandusky was found guilty, stakeholders associated
Mr. Sandusky’s unlawful acts with Penn State and held the institution responsible.
Therefore, the public’s perception was that this was a preventable crisis. According to
SCCT, leaders managing a preventable crisis should provide instructing information in
the form of warnings and directions, offer adjusting information by showing concern and
describing corrective action, and attempt to manage the institution’s reputation by using
diminishment and rebuilding strategies together, and bolstering strategies (Coombs,
2007). In the year following the crisis, I found evidence President Erickson used
adjusting information, diminishment and rebuilding strategies, and bolstering. Instructing
information was not present in the data, perhaps because President Erickson perceived
there was no immediate threat to the campus and therefore no need to tell the campus
community how to protect themselves from danger.

**Adjusting information.** President Erickson provided adjusting information by
expressing concern for the victims and in the form of describing corrective action the
university would take as a result of the crisis. For example, just two days after the news
media started reporting on the story and Dr. Erickson was named president, he
communicated his concern for the victims when he said during a press conference:

Well clearly the most troubling aspect is the victims who were abused. I can’t
begin to tell you the depth of feeling and heartache that I have for these
individuals and their families. There have been lives that have been very, very
severely impacted by this. And that is my first consideration. There are victims there. And we need to be mindful of them. (Erickson, 2011c)

Showing compassion for the victims is not an admission of guilt, but may have assured the audience that he was aware of the seriousness of the situation and would act in the best interests of the victims.

Adjusting information can also take the form of taking corrective action to describe what the institution is doing to manage the crisis and ensure it will not happen again (Coombs, 2007). The same day President Erickson held the press conference in which he spoke about the victims, he sent an email to the university community outlining a five-part promise. Dr. Erickson wrote:

President Erickson’s promise to the Penn State community: 1. I will reinforce to the entire Penn State community the moral imperative of doing the right thing the first time, every time…. 2. As I lead by example, I will expect no less of others…. 3. Penn State is committed to transparency to the fullest extent possible given the ongoing investigations…. 4. We will be respectful and sensitive to the victims and their families. We will seek appropriate ways to foster healing and raise broader awareness of the issue of sexual abuse. 5. My administration will provide whatever resources, access, and information is needed to support the special committee’s investigation. I pledge to take immediate action based on their findings. (Erickson, 2011b, para. 4)

Sending this email just two days into President Erickson’s tenure may have been an attempt to assure the campus community he had control of the situation.
The day Mr. Sandusky was found guilty of abusing the boys, President Erickson posted a message on the Penn State website that contained adjusting information by both showing concern and describing corrective action. Dr. Erickson wrote:

Today Penn State learned that a verdict was reached in the case of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania v. Gerald Sandusky. Mr. Sandusky was found guilty of 45 of the 48 charges filed against him. The legal process has spoken and we have tremendous respect for the men who came forward to tell their stories publicly. No verdict can undo the pain and suffering caused by Mr. Sandusky, but we do hope this judgment helps victims and their families along their path to healing…. The university has already established a confidential counseling process for victims of Mr. Sandusky’s conduct, and that process remains open.  

(Erickson, 2012b, para. 1)

It is possible that when the news media reported the guilty verdict, stakeholders were reminded of Penn State’s involvement and responsibility, and may have blamed individuals at Penn State for causing the crisis. President Erickson may have attempted to stay ahead of negative reaction by expressing care and concern for the victims and describing supports he put into place for them.

**Diminishment strategies.** Used alone, diminishment strategies can create a perception the leader believes the crisis was accidental (Coombs, 2007). However, used with rebuilding strategies, diminishment can help repair the institution’s reputation in a preventable crisis (Coombs, 2007). President Erickson attempted to minimize the damage associated with the crisis during a town hall meeting with alumni when he said, “I will not allow this great university and its long historic legacy as a leader in higher
education to be defined by this horrible tragedy” (Erickson, 2012a, para. 4). It is possible
alumni were worried about the impact the crisis would have on the institution’s
reputation, and President Erickson may have hoped his words would ease their fears and
continue to support him through the crisis.

Two months after the crisis broke, before the Freeh report was published and
before Mr. Sandusky was convicted, President Erickson may have been attempting to
minimize Penn State’s association with the crisis when he said during an interview, “It
grieves me very much when people say, ‘The Penn State scandal.’ This is not Penn State.
This is ‘The Sandusky scandal.’ We’re not going to let what one individual did destroy
the reputation of this university” (Huckabee, 2012, para. 12). It is possible Dr. Erickson
tried to rename the scandal in an effort to reduce Penn State’s association and perceived
responsibility for the crisis.

After the Freeh report and Mr. Sandusky’s conviction were publicized, President
Erickson posted a message on the Penn State website in which he minimized the damage
the crisis had on the university:

This crisis has not and will not detract from the quality of education and research
for which Penn State is known. There has been no faculty attrition as a result of
this scandal. Applications are at an all time high, and admissions numbers are
remarkably strong. The current fundraising campaign is running ahead of
schedule, and this past year’s contributions were the second highest they’ve ever
been. (Erickson, 2012d, para. 4)

Posting this message on the university’s website made it accessible to a wide audience.
Perhaps President Erickson was attempting to convey confidence in the institution’s
future so that prospective students would still apply, potential donors and alumni would feel comfortable contributing financially, and candidates for faculty and staff positions would feel confident joining the institution. Dr. Erickson may have been safeguarding the university’s future by assuring the public it was unharmed by the crisis.

Rebuilding strategies. A leader can attempt to rebuild the institution after a crisis by offering compensation to the victims or by apologizing for the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Rebuilding strategies are recommended when the crisis is perceived to have been preventable (Coombs, 2007). President Erickson offered compensation to Mr. Sandusky’s victims in a written posting on the Penn State website when he wrote:

The university plans to invite victims of Mr. Sandusky’s abuse to participate in a program to facilitate the resolution of claims against the university arising out of Mr. Sandusky’s conduct. The purpose of the program is simple – the university wants to provide a forum where the university can privately, expeditiously and fairly address the victims’ concerns and compensate them for claims relating to the university. (Erickson, 2012b, para. 5)

President Erickson could have communicated this offer privately and directly to the victims, but instead, he posted this message in a public place, accessible to a wide audience. It is possible he wanted others to know he was doing this more than he wanted the victims to know so that he could preserve the university’s reputation. Perhaps Dr. Erickson wanted the public to perceive Penn State as doing the right thing for the victims in the form of compensation, even though the public perceived the institution as doing the wrong thing by covering up Mr. Sandusky’s actions.
Another rebuilding strategy is apology. Only once in the data collected did President Erickson offer an apology to the victims. After the Freeh report was published which provided evidence Penn State officials knew about Mr. Sandusky’s behavior but did not act on it, President Erickson was a guest on Face the Nation. During the interview, Dr. Erickson was asked what he wanted to say to the children who were molested. He replied “Well, we’re deeply sorry and sad, regretful that this happened at our university” (Erickson, 2012h, para. 14). Even though President Erickson did not take full responsibility for the crisis on behalf of Penn State, nor did he ask forgiveness, it was an apology, possibly an effort to repair the institution’s reputation with his listeners.

**Bolstering.** Leaders who use bolstering strategies seek to build a positive connection with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). I found evidence President Erickson praised stakeholders several times the first few weeks after the scandal broke, but less often after that. In a press conference two days after Dr. Erickson was named president, he said, “I want to thank the board of trustees for your leadership and guidance through this difficult time. Your deliberations and decisive actions have now set a course for the university’s future” (Erickson, 2011d). President Erickson may have been expected to thank the board for their guidance and actions just two days after they removed the previous president and appointed him. Showing his appreciation publicly could have been a political move to establish a solid, trusting relationship between him and the board.

Two weeks after the crisis became public, and just before Thanksgiving, Dr. Erickson thanked a wider stakeholder group in a video message when he said:
In this season of giving thanks, we are grateful to our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends who continue to support Penn State. We applaud the athletes and fans for their sportsmanship and unity. We appreciate all who have led by example, especially those seeking to raise awareness of child abuse. They embody the true character of Penn Staters. (Erickson, 2011h)

It is possible that, this soon after the scandal broke, there were many questions unanswered and rumors swirling. Perhaps many stakeholders questioned their loyalty to Penn State. President Erickson may have wanted to thank those stakeholders who remained supportive in addition to reminding others that not everyone had abandoned the institution. It is possible Dr. Erickson was attempting to maintain a positive connection with all stakeholders by thanking those who stayed with him as well as inviting back those who had left.

I found evidence President Erickson communicated about the crisis as if it had been preventable, which aligns with recommendations by SCCT. It is unclear whether Dr. Erickson was aware of SCCT, or any other crisis response theory. It is also unclear if President Erickson believed the crisis was preventable. It is possible he felt the university was partially at fault, but perhaps he was reacting to public perceptions that Penn State was at fault for the crisis and responded accordingly.

Additional Themes for Penn State University and Jerry Sandusky Sexual Abuse

Early in the year after Mr. Sandusky’s sexual abuse became public, President Erickson’s discourse contained themes of moving forward and accepting responsibility.
Moving forward. Two days after being named president, Dr. Erickson created a video message to the campus community. In it, he explained that the campus would be changed as a result of the crisis, but he encouraged the university to move forward. He said, “Although we cannot go back to business as usual, our university must move forward” (Erickson, 2011a). That same day, he sent an email to the campus community in which he wrote, “Today I am outlining my promise to the Penn State community, which includes the naming of an ethics officer and a commitment to transparency as the university moves forward” (Erickson, 2011b, para. 2). These were the first messages President Erickson sent to campus community members. The phrase, “moving forward” associates with continuing, learning, and improving. It implied Dr. Erickson was conscious and aware of the past but wished to move toward something new. Contrast this with the phrase, “moving on,” which connotates a desire to forget the past. President Erickson may have used the phrase, “moving forward” purposely in order to inspire positivity and the need to learn from mistakes.

Five days after being named president, Dr. Erickson posted a message on the Penn State website which read:

Today we are back to class and the business of running this university. I urge you to refocus on your educational goals and remain mindful of the five promises I have made to the Penn State community as we move forward. (Erickson, 2011e, para. 6)

Once again, early in President Erickson’s tenure he spoke of moving forward, a phrase that may have influenced his audience to acknowledge what happened but also look to the future with hope of brighter days ahead. This phrase may also have been an attempt
by Dr. Erickson to instill confidence in his ability to lead and advance the university in spite of the challenges the scandal brought.

**Accepting responsibility.** In the first several weeks after the scandal broke, President Erickson stated his intentions to accept responsibility and do the right thing. During an interview with ABC News a few days after the crisis became public, Dr. Erickson was asked if he was prepared to accept responsibility for what happened to the boys. He replied:

Yes, we certainly are. We understand that there will be lawsuits that will be filed. And we’re certainly prepared to do the right thing for all of the victims…. The university will make every effort to do the right thing…. We’re going to do everything we can to make things right. (Erickson, 2011f, para. 2)

It is possible President Erickson was attempting to stay ahead of any possible early rumors or concerns that Penn State would disassociate itself from the crisis. He may have been reassuring external stakeholders of his intentions.

Two months after the crisis began, President Erickson held a town hall meeting with alumni to explain his and the Board’s decision to fire head football coach Joe Paterno instead of placing him on administrative leave. During the assembly he said to the audience, “There are some things that happened here, if true, we need to take responsibility for. If there are victims, by God, we need to do right by them. We need to see that they get justice” (Erickson, 2012a, para. 16). In this example, it is possible Dr. Erickson wanted the alumni to sympathize with the victims instead of focusing on the firing of Joe Paterno. In that moment, alumni, who are also financial supporters of the university, felt President Erickson did the wrong thing by firing Joe Paterno. Dr.
Erickson may have wanted to emphasize to the alumni group that, even though he was perceived as treating Joe Paterno unethically, he was treating the victims of the crisis morally and ethically.

**Case Six Description: Florida A&M University Band Hazing Intentional Crisis**

Florida A&M University, also referred to as FAMU, is well known for its marching band. Formed in 1892 with 100 members, the band became known as the Marching 100 and has been credited with influencing showmanship and performance style of other bands across the country. Today the band has over 400 members and has performed for college football bowl games, NFL championship games, the Olympics, and two presidential inaugural celebrations, has been featured in movies and national television commercials, and performed for two presidential inaugural celebrations (Cooper, 2012).

On November 19, 2011, after performing at an away football game to which the band traveled in several charter busses, drum major Robert Champion took part in a hazing ritual called “crossing bus C,” in which he was made to run from one end of the bus to the other while other band members hit and kicked him. Each time he fell before reaching the other end, he was stomped, picked up, and forced to start the run over again. At one point Champion left the bus to vomit, but was forced back onto the bus again. He collapsed and died one hour after the incident occurred. His death was ruled a homicide, caused by blunt trauma to the body which caused severe internal bleeding. Twelve people were arrested on felony hazing and manslaughter charges, of which three were convicted, making it one of the largest hazing incidents in the country at that time. As
the police investigation unfolded, a culture of hazing within the band was revealed. Years prior to the night Robert Champion died, the band director was aware hazing was a problem, and attempted to end it multiple times over the years by requiring band members to attend anti-hazing workshops and sign pledges. Despite his efforts, in 1998, a band member suffered kidney failure after he was paddled more than 300 times, and in 2001, a similar incident left another band member hospitalized. Three weeks before the night Robert Champion died, another band member was beaten so badly she couldn’t walk, and on the bus ride to the football game the night Champion died, another band member was beaten to the point she couldn’t perform that evening. The incident caused a nationwide focus on hazing and was the first known marching band hazing death ever in the United States (Cooper, 2012).

James Ammons, who was Florida A&M’s president at the time and had already been president there for four years, resigned eight months after the hazing death occurred under criticism for not taking a strong enough action after the incident. Dr. Ammons grew up in Florida and earned his Bachelor’s Degree in Political Science from Florida A&M, and his Master’s and Ph.D. from Florida State University. Dr. Ammons began his teaching career in 1977 at the University of Central Florida, then joined the faculty at Florida A&M in 1983. Just one year later, he was promoted to Assistant President for Academic Affairs at Florida A&M and moved to other administrative positions at the university. By 1995 he was named Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs. In 2001, Dr. Ammons left Florida A&M for a Chancellor position at North Carolina Central University, but in 2007, he returned to Florida A&M to become its tenth president. On July 11, 2012, in the wake of the hazing crisis, President Ammons announced he would
retire in October, but on July 16, 2012, the Board of Trustees voted to make his resignation effective immediately. He was succeeded by Larry Robinson, who had been at Florida A&M since 1997 when he started as a faculty member. Dr. Robinson moved into administrative positions at Florida A&M starting in 2003, when he was named Provost. He served as interim president of Florida A&M from 2012 until 2014, and again from 2016 until 2017. In 2017, he was named president of Florida A&M, a position he holds currently (Florida A&M University, 2019).

Florida A&M University, also known as FAMU, was founded in 1887 as a land grant college in Tallahassee, Florida, and became a university in 1953. Originally designed to meet the needs of the underrepresented, today FAMU is the only historically black university in the state university system of Florida and the fifth largest in the United States by enrollment, which is approximately 10,000 students. In athletics, Florida A&M competes as a Division 1 school, and academically, they offer more than 50 bachelor’s degrees. In 1999 Florida A&M was recognized as awarding more bachelor’s degrees to African Americans than any other institution in the United States (Florida A&M University, 2019).

In the year following Robert Champion’s death, Dr. Ammons was FAMU’s president for approximately eight months and Dr. Robinson served as interim president the remaining four months. Under President Ammons’ tenure, I found transcripts from two speeches, five interviews, and two press conferences, one written website statement, and quotes or interviews from 22 different newspaper articles from the day the crisis occurred through his resignation in July 2012. I obtained transcripts from three interviews and quotes from 11 different newspaper articles by Dr. Robinson for the four-
month period he was interim president, from July 2012 through the one-year anniversary of Robert Champion’s death.

I chose this case because it is one of few instances in which the president was replaced several months into the crisis as a result of perceived poor leadership. I was curious to learn if Dr. Ammons’ discourse incorporated framing devices, SCCT recommended strategies, or other emergent themes differently than other presidents who led crises but did not resign within the year following. Also, this case was unique in that it started a national conversation about hazing on HEI campuses and expectations of administrators who lead on campuses where hazing occurs. It may have impacted the way other HEI presidents react to known hazing incidents or what they may do to prevent hazing.

**Framing Device Findings for Florida A&M University Band Hazing**

During President Ammons’ tenure in the eight months following the hazing death, I found evidence his discourse contained catchphrases, argument, repetition, and feeling statements. The only framing device I found in President Robinson’s discourse his first four months as president was feeling statements.

**Catchphrases.** Leaders who use catchphrases frame a subject in terms that are familiar to the audience (Fairhurst, 2011). Twice in the eight months following the hazing death, Dr. Ammons spoke about his intent to end hazing at FAMU. Less than two weeks after Robert Champion died, President Ammons was quoted in a newspaper as saying, “I pledge to stamp out hazing at FAMU” (Bluestein, 2011 para. 11). Several months after that, in a presentation to the Board of Trustees, Dr. Ammons again said,
“We’re going to have a compassionate approach to stamping out hazing from this campus and this culture” (Ammons, 2012c). Even though President Ammons’ phrase was recognizable and conveyed an image of bringing an abrupt end to hazing once and for all, his choice of words was unfortunate and thoughtless. It was determined Robert Champion’s cause of death was blunt force trauma, a result of being beaten. Using the word “stamping” may have reminded Dr. Ammons’ audience of stomping or trampling, similar actions that killed Robert Champion.

**Argument.** A couple of weeks after Robert Champion died, President Ammons suspended the Marching 100 from all performances. Some external stakeholders, such as alumni, were concerned about the financial impact this would have on the university and the band’s reputation. President Ammons defended his decision during a press conference when he said, “I think we need to stop and give ourselves the opportunity to find out the facts. And until we do I just don’t think it’s appropriate to have the band performing and representing the university” (Fineout, 2011b, para. 8). Since it was evident some members of the Marching 100 were directly involved in Robert Champion’s death, Dr. Ammons may have wanted to cancel their performances until he found out additional information.

About six months after Robert Champion’s death, President Ammons was asked during an interview if he was the right person to lead the institution through the crisis. Dr. Ammons defended his leadership by answering:

I want to say to you that there are other issues around Florida A&M other than hazing. Although we are deeply, deeply concerned about it, there are many other facets to this institution than the Marching 100. And the Board of Trustees over
five years ago asked me to come and provide leadership to the university and that’s my plan to continue as long as the Board would like for me to continue.

(Ammons, 2012b)

Even though President Ammons was attempting to convince his audience he was an affective leader, his words may have incriminated himself by revealing the existence of additional issues and problems at the institution. Moreover, the Marching 100’s fan base may have been offended that Dr. Ammons minimized their importance and value to the university when he stated there are “other facets” to Florida A&M other than the band.

**Repetition.** Leaders use repetition to emphasize a point and to increase the chances their audience will remember it (Fairhurst, 2011). In the months after Robert Champion died, President Ammons used repetition in his discourse. For example, during an interview about six months after the incident, President Ammons was asked what the most disappointing or most shocking revelation that had come out of the investigation so far. He replied:

That it happened. That it happened. We have spent a lot of time on education, on support for the band to eradicate hazing…. The fact that just two days before the band left for that trip, there was a conversation with the band about their behavior. And the fact that it happened, is not only disappointing, it’s heartbreaking…. The fact that it happened, that a student lost his life as a result of it, it’s just heart wrenching. (Ammons, 2012a)

It is possible Dr. Ammons intended to highlight his concern about the incident, but he may have inadvertently drawn attention to the fact that he was unable to manage the
hazing problem, which could have grown under his leadership, and led to the event that caused Robert Champion’s death.

Approximately one month before Dr. Ammons was asked to resign, he gave a speech at a Board of Trustees meeting at which he said:

I am deeply concerned about the culture at Florida A&M University. I am deeply concerned about the image of our university…. And I am deeply concerned about our reputation of Florida A&M University. And I also must say that I am deeply concerned for the Champion family for their loss…. (Ammons, 2012c)

Repeating the phrase, “I am deeply concerned” may have been an attempt to honestly portray the current climate at the institution so that the Board would understand the seriousness of the situation. However, it is possible President Ammons undermined his own ability to lead the institution through the crisis. This speech was given seven months into the crisis, it is possible the Board expected Dr. Ammons to have been past concern and into management and recovery.

**Feeling statements.** The first few days after the hazing incident, Dr. Ammons used feeling statements several times to express his emotions. For example, in a news release he said, “We are deeply saddened by this loss. Our hearts and prayers go out to Mr. Champion’s family. This is a major loss for our student body, the Marching 100, and the university” (“Florida A&M University Family Mourns,” 2011). These words may have been expected or anticipated by the president’s audience.

A few days later, President Ammons held a press conference and communicated different feelings when he said, “I’m very disappointed that we are at this point in the life of this university and we are here in 2011 dealing with an issue that should have been
long, long past on our campus” (Fineout, 2011a, para. 12). It is possible Dr. Ammons was attempting to take a tough stance, but instead he may have conveyed a lack of understanding and knowledge of cultures and events that were occurring on his own campus.

When Dr. Robinson became interim president in July 2012, he used feeling statements during his first interview:

I’m just happy to be able to serve the university in the ways that I have so far…. I think based on what I’ve heard from the trustees and particularly the faculty senate, students, and student government association president that they firmly believe that I can do that and I’m really happy to have the endorsement from them. (Robinson, 2012)

Since this was his first interview and his first few days in the role, President Robinson may have been attempting to convey feelings of positivity, change, and confidence to his audience. This was the only usage of a framing device I found in the data for Dr. Robinson in the four-month period he served as interim president from July 2012 through the one-year anniversary of Robert Champion’s death. It is possible President Robinson used framing devices past the one-year anniversary, but discourse past this point was not collected in this study.

Situational Crisis Communication
Theory Findings for Florida A&M University Band Hazing

None of the members of the Marching 100 who conducted the hazing incident called “crossing Bus C” stated they meant to kill Robert Champion, they claimed his death was accidental. One band member, who was known as the “president” of Bus C,
was convicted of manslaughter, which means there was no preconceived intention to kill Mr. Champion. Regardless, the beating Robert Champion endured was a malicious, criminal act and could have been avoided, thus SCCT categorizes this as a preventable crisis with perceptions that the university was responsible, and recommends leaders provide instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management through rebuilding by itself or combined with diminishment strategies. In this case, instructing information was not found in the data, possibly because there was no need for constituent groups to protect themselves from any harm, but evidence of adjusting information was found, and diminishment strategies were found alone, not in combination with rebuilding strategies as recommended. In addition, denial strategies are not recommended for preventable crises, yet President Ammons incorporated them.

Adjusting information. President Ammons offered adjusting information in the form of expressing concern for Robert Champion’s family, and all campus community members, in the days following the crisis. For example, during an interview, President Ammons stated, “Our number one priority is the health, safety, and well-being of our students. And with this tragic situation that we have involving the death of Robert Champion, our hearts just go out to his family” (Borger, 2011). As the investigation unfolded, it became clear hazing had been an ongoing problem at the university over the years, and specific incidents had injured other members of the Marching 100. While President Ammons’ words were probably intended to ease fears of campus community members, it is possible they were perceived as disingenuous.
Another way President Ammons provided adjusting information was by describing corrective action the institution would take as a result of the crisis. A few days after Robert Champion died, Dr. Ammons promised:

I vow to convene a task force to determine if there are any unauthorized and questionable activities associated with the culture of the Marching 100. The purpose of this review is not to establish culpability of individual band members in this particular case, but rather to determine whether there are patterns of behavior by the band—or members of it—that should be addressed at the institutional level. (Levs, 2011, para. 8)

The authorities conducted a thorough investigation on which the press reported, and President Ammons did not provide any updates regarding his task force in the discourse found, so it is unclear whether this promise was kept.

Approximately one month before the Board of Trustees asked President Ammons to resign, he provided an update during a Board meeting in which he said:

And so you have my commitment to stay focused on this issue and put Florida A&M University in a leadership position nationally, and to deal with this issue and once and for all eradicate this culture, this campus culture at Florida A&M University of hazing. We have begun this process, we had a workshop, a hazing workshop in December at our Board meeting, and we’re going to have a workshop this afternoon with concerns for anti-hazing…. So this afternoon we’re going to offer some short term strategies that will address the issues that have helped this destructive activity known as hazing to continue. (Ammons, 2012c)
It is possible the Board questioned Dr. Ammons’ leadership due to his admission of the existence of a hazing culture that had continued under his tenure as president. In addition, it is possible the Board was unimpressed with the action taken; a workshop presented to the Board could have been viewed as ineffective, insufficient, and offered to the wrong audience.

**Denial.** As stated earlier, denial strategies are not recommended for preventable crises, but President Ammons used them in his discourse just after the crisis occurred. During an interview, Dr. Ammons was asked, “A decade ago, five band members paddled (band member) Marcus Parker so brutally his kidneys shut down. In 2004, he was awarded $1.8 million in a civil battery case. Why does this keep happening?” President Ammons replied, “I haven’t seen any evidence that has tied hazing to his death” (“Marching Band Hazing,” 2011). In another interview a few days later, President Ammons was asked, “There have been dozens of students suspended from the band, what more did it have to take? One of your own students asked why did it have to take someone dying?” Dr. Ammons responded, “Every allegation of hazing has been fully investigated and appropriate disciplinary actions have been taken” (Ammons, 2011b). In both of these instances, President Ammons denied the existence of a hazing problem, but later expressed concern for the culture of hazing at Florida A&M. These divergent opinions may have confused Dr. Ammons’ audience and caused them to lose trust and confidence in his ability to lead the institution through the crisis and resolve the hazing issue.

**Diminishment.** When a crisis is perceived to have been preventable, SCCT recommends leaders use diminishment strategies by minimizing the organization’s
responsibility or damage associated with the crisis. Moreover, it is recommended diminishment strategies be used in combination with rebuilding strategies, which were not present in the data. During an interview less than one month after Robert Champion died, President Ammons was asked why the anti-hazing policies FAMU already had in place were not working, and he replied, “One of the things we have found with hazing is that there is a veil of secrecy. This is a culture, not just here at Florida A&M University. It’s on college and university campuses all across America” (Borger, 2011). It is possible Dr. Ammons was attempting to lessen his responsibility for the crisis at his own institution by highlighting the fact that it is a national issue. The message he was attempting to convey may have been, “This is not an issue unique to FAMU or to my weaknesses as a leader, every leader is struggling with this.”

President Ammons attempted to minimize the damage the crisis brought to him personally when he said during a July 2012 press conference:

After considerable thought, introspection and conversations with my family, I have decided to resign from my position as president in order to initiate my retirement on October 11, 2012. Following the presidency, I will continue my work on science, technology, engineering, and math initiatives as a tenured full professor on our great faculty. (“FAMU President Quits,” 2012)

At this point, Dr. Ammons was being criticized for his lack of leadership leading up to, and after, Robert Champion’s death. It is possible President Ammons was attempting to tell his audience that the crisis did not damage him or his career as much as they thought.

Presidents Ammons and Robinson’s post-crisis communication did not align with SCCT recommendations for a preventable crisis; they communicated about the crisis as if
it had been an accident. Moreover, including denial strategies may have confused audiences and sent a message the university was defensive about the public’s reactions.

**Additional Themes for Florida A&M University Band Hazing**

In the year following Robert Champion’s death, Dr. Ammons served as FAMU President for eight months before he was asked to resign, and Dr. Robinson served in an interim president role for four months. I found evidence in the data that both presidents incorporated elements of vague promises and tough talk in their discourse.

**Vague promises.** President Ammons attempted to assure his audience that he had the hazing problem under control, but his plans often lacked substance. For example, during press conferences and interviews held within the first month after Robert Champion’s death, he said, “I am committed to making certain that we end this practice here at Florida A&M University” (Ammons, 2011a), “I am committed to illuminating this dark corner of Florida A&M University and the American culture. Illuminating it and eradicating it” (Sanders, 2011), and, “It is the university’s intent and absolute goal to break the culture of secrecy and conspiracy of silence that has helped to institutionalize hazing, verbal and physical abuse” (Khadaroo, 2011, para. 22). However, President Ammons did not explain how he intended to accomplish his goals, nor did he provide updates or specific follow-up information regarding his progress. A few months after the crisis, Dr. Ammons offered a couple of updates on steps the university had taken, but they too were vague and disconnected from his earlier promises. During an interview, President Ammons said, “We are vigorously working to eradicate hazing from FAMU and doing everything in our power to ensure an incident like this never happens again”
(“Prosecutors Charge,” 2012), but there were no specific examples of what the university was doing. President Ammons’ ambiguity may have led to the campus community’s concern about his ability to lead the institution through the crisis and the eventual Board of Trustee’s vote of no confidence against him.

When Dr. Robinson became interim president in July 2012, he was interviewed within the first few days of taking office. He was asked, “There is a concern that you not continue with the status quo. How do you not continue with the status quo?” President Robinson offered an unclear response:

Well I think that all has to emanate from a plan, and there’s a lot to think about that we need to get to work on at the university, and some of those things are fairly obvious, you know we have some issues around hazing or anti-hazing we need to continue working on, and you know, even in those things we’re not going to be doing business as usual. We talked about that a little bit this morning prior to the meeting. So there are going to be a lot of things that we do fairly aggressive and they’re going to be different than the way we’ve done them in the past…. (Robinson, 2012)

Dr. Robinson was unable to offer specific information on how the university was going to do things differently under his leadership. It is possible that this was Dr. Robinson’s first interview as president and this question could have taken him by surprise, but almost two months later, he offered a press release and stated, “We will continue to enact change, positively empower our students and provide resources going forward to ensure that we provide a safer and healthier environment for learning” (“FAMU Students,” 2012, para. 4). President Robinson did not explain what change would be enacted, how students
would be empowered, or what resources would be provided. It is possible that if the campus community was looking forward to more action with new leadership, they may have been disappointed.

**Tough talk.** Even though Dr. Ammons and Dr. Robinson did not offer specific plans to eradicate the campus culture of hazing, they explained there would be penalties for any student who continued the behavior. For example, a few days after Robert Champion’s death, President Ammons said in an interview, “There will be no retaliation against anyone who cooperates with the investigation, but there will be serious consequences for anyone who tries to impede it” (Levs, 2011, para. 13). It is possible Dr. Ammons confused his audience by combining this assertive discourse with a lack of action. In addition, Dr. Robinson also communicated there would be consequences for students who continued hazing when he said in his convocation address, “If in fact (hazing incidents) do occur, I just want everyone to know that our actions will be swift, and they will be decisive” (“FAMU Students,” 2012, para. 6). However, Dr. Robinson’s warning lacked specifics, and may have been perceived as an empty threat. Like Dr. Ammons, President Robinson could have undermined his own leadership by describing consequences without specifics along with additional lack of clarity when describing his crisis management plans. The campus community could have perceived their new leader as disorganized or lacking in the leadership skills essential to move the university forward.

**Summary of Intentional Crisis Cases**

Three of the 11 framing devices were used by all presidents after each crisis affected their institution: argument, feeling statements, and repetition. Each president
presented an argument to justify decisions made during crisis recovery, perhaps to stay ahead of possible criticism, or address disapproval from internal or external stakeholders. Feeling statements used were typically to express care and concern for victims and their families, which may have portrayed the presidents as approachable, authentic, and trustworthy individuals. Repetition was used in both written and spoken discourse, possibly to stress a point or help the audience remember key ideas. None of the presidents used analogy or three-part list. Analogy describes how a situation is similar to another and may have been avoided after intentional crises because the presidents did not want to minimize their institutions’ situations, recovery, or the emotions of their own campus community members. Three-part lists can be used to help audience members remember important points, but repetition can also be used for this reason. It is possible the presidents did not happen to have three items in any type of list for their audience to remember, but used repetition instead to stress main ideas.

Instructing information is the first type of crisis response strategy recommended by SCCT and includes the crisis leader giving stakeholders information on how to protect themselves from harm (Coombs, 2007). The day of the Virginia Tech shooting, President Steger provided instructing information, perhaps because it was unclear if there was still a threat on campus. However, the campus communities were not in immediate danger the day the Penn State sexual abuse crisis broke, or the day Robert Champion died at Florida A&M University, which may explain why Presidents Erickson and Ammons did not give instructing information. All presidents provided adjusting information by expressing concern for victims and their families and by outlining corrective action the institutions would take to prevent a similar crisis from happening again. Presidents
Steger and Erickson provided concrete action, but President Ammons’ explanations of corrective actions were vague, which may have contributed to the Board of Trustees asking him to resign. Even though denial strategies were not recommended, Presidents Steger and Ammons used them, perhaps in an attempt to refuse responsibility for the crisis. All three presidents attempted to diminish the damage the crisis caused their institution, which is a strategy recommended by SCCT. Presidents Steger and Erickson spoke about compensation the university offered the victims or their families and praised stakeholders for their behavior during and after the crisis. Only President Erickson apologized for the crisis. If each president had followed SCCT recommendations, President Steger would have communicated about the Virginia Tech shootings as if the institution had been a victim, yet his discourse included elements to suggest the crisis was both accidental and preventable, which may have confused his audience. President Erickson communicated about the Penn State sexual abuse scandal as if it was preventable, which may have aligned with the public’s perception. Presidents Ammons and Robinson communicated about the hazing death as if it had been an accident, which may not have aligned with the public’s perception; in addition, they included denial strategies, which are not recommended in SCCT (Coombs, 2007).

Other emergent themes were unique for each of the three crises in this category. President Steger often spoke of community and acknowledged the time and effort the campus community would require to heal after the shootings. President Erickson spoke of moving on and accepting responsibility for the university’s role in the sexual abuse scandal. Presidents Ammons and Robinson spoke about severe consequences students would suffer if they continued hazing, but were unable to offer clear and specific plans to
eradicate hazing on their campus. In both the Penn State and Florida A&M crises, the presidents attempted to minimize the crisis on their campus by mentioning sexual abuse and hazing, respectively, were national problems and were not unique to their institutions.

**Accidental Crises**

Accidental crises include both facility failures, which are events or situations caused by mechanical failure, and crises caused by human error (Zdziarski et al., 2007). While the outcome of either of these crisis types might be serious injuries or fatalities, the original intent was not criminal. For the purposes of this research study, these two crisis types were combined into one because often, after a crisis occurs, it is difficult to determine whether the original cause of the crisis was due to mechanical failure or human failure. As with intentional crises, accidental crises often cause emotional turmoil and feelings of unsafety, but since no one person or entity is to blame, anger can often become misdirected (Zdziarski et al., 2007).

**Case Seven Description: Texas A&M Bonfire Collapse**

**Accidental Crisis**

It was a 90-year old Texas A&M University tradition to build a large bonfire structure and light it the night before the annual Thanksgiving weekend football game against rival University of Texas. Thousands of students started building the Fall 1999 bonfire in August, and by November, the structure stood 40-50 feet tall, consisted of around 5,000 logs, and resembled a three-tiered wedding cake. At approximately 2:40am on November 18, 1999, the structure toppled while approximately 70 students were working on it. Eleven current students and one former student died, and 27 others were
seriously injured. After the incident, many of the victims’ families filed lawsuits against Texas A&M and senior level officials, as well as university president Ray Bowen.

President Bowen was born in Texas and earned B.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Mechanical Engineering from Texas A&M. He served on the faculty at the Air Force Institute of Technology, Louisiana State University, and Rice University. He moved into an administrative role as the Dean of the School of Engineering at the University of Kentucky and served in this role from 1983 until 1989. From 1991 until 1994, Dr. Bowen served as Provost and then Interim President of Oklahoma State University. He began his role as the twenty-first President of Texas A&M in 1994 and continued until 2002. After the bonfire collapse, Dr. Bowen was commended for forming an independent investigation into the cause of the collapse and remaining transparent throughout the process (Paterson et al., 2007).

Founded in 1871, Texas A&M University is a public, land grant, research university located in College Station, Texas. With an enrollment of over 60,000 students, Texas A&M is the largest university by enrollment in Texas and the second largest in the country. The Texas A&M System, which includes Texas A&M and ten other Texas universities, has an endowment valued today at over $11 billion, among the top ten largest endowments of public universities in the United States. Texas A&M athletic teams, known as the Aggies, compete in the Division I Southeastern Conference. Texas A&M campus culture is rich with tradition, and includes an official school greeting, a unique class ring, a monthly silver taps ceremony, the 12th man in football, and the building of the annual bonfire (Paterson et al., 2007).
I located transcripts from speeches President Bowen gave during two memorial services, one from the day the bonfire collapsed, and the other on the one-year anniversary. I also located transcripts from a speech Dr. Bowen gave during a tree planting ceremony to honor the students and alumni who died in the collapse. In addition, I found either written transcripts or video, which I transcribed, of 18 press conferences, five interviews, and 11 short video clips or quotes in newspapers. The written discourse authored by President Bowen I obtained were two written statements provided to the campus community.

I chose this crisis for my study because it is considered one of the best managed crises in higher education (Lawson, 2014). I was curious to learn if President Bowen’s discourse contained different elements than other presidents managing crises on their campuses, because if it did, it may have impacted the perception that it was handled so well. Conversely, if President Bowen’s discourse was not much different than other presidents', there may have been other unknown reasons why higher education scholars and practitioners feel he was an effective leader throughout the crisis (Lawson, 2014).

**Framing Device Findings for Texas A&M Bonfire Collapse**

In President Bowen’s discourse the year following the bonfire collapse, I found evidence that he used five of the 11 framing devices: contrast, catchphrases, argument, feeling statements, and repetition. Contrast and catchphrases were only used once each, and President Bowen used argument to justify decisions made about the bonfire. Feeling statements were used the most often and for a longer duration throughout the year.

**Contrast.** President Bowen did not use contrast to compare the bonfire collapse to something unlike it, but he used it to contrast his conflicting feelings about whether
Texas A&M should continue the bonfire-building tradition. During a press conference, Dr. Bowen said:

My heart wants to have a bonfire. My brain gives me the problem… I’ve said in a number of forums, if I had to let my heart make the decision, we’d have a bonfire. My heart will not make the decision. My brain has to make the decision.

(Ward & Gamboa, 2000, para. 9)

Building the bonfire was a 90-year old tradition, and Texas A&M is a university rich with tradition. It is possible alumni and current students were pressuring President Bowen to continue the bonfire tradition. Additionally, President Bowen is a graduate of Texas A&M and there may have been an expectation that he side with keeping the bonfire, since he was involved with it as a student and had knowledge of the custom’s importance and impact. On the other hand, the crisis resulted in 12 deaths and 27 injuries, so it is possible people not closely affiliated with Texas A&M expected an end to the tradition because they may have thought it had become too dangerous, or was not worth risking other deaths or injuries. President Bowen possibly had two groups with strongly opposing views on the continuation of the bonfire and may have felt it necessary to present the difficult decision before him as being pulled in opposite directions.

**Catchphrase.** I found evidence President Bowen used a catchphrase once in the year following the bonfire collapse. During an interview conducted less than one month after the crisis, Dr. Bowen was asked if he had any information or comment regarding rising concerns about the safety of that year’s bonfire construction. Dr. Bowen replied, “I’m trying to keep at arm’s length of the necessary analysis that is taking place” (“Professors, Former Students,” 1999, para. 16). Using such a familiar phrase may have
been President Bowen’s attempt to portray himself as relatable to his audience, but also
could have been an effort to avoid answering the question.

**Argument.** A few days after the bonfire collapse, The Arizona Republic
newspaper published a cartoon linking the crisis to the deadly 1993 burning of a
compound in Waco, Texas and a 1998 racist hate crime involving burning crosses. The
newspaper’s editor retracted the cartoon, wrote a personal apology to President Bowen
and sent a check for $10,000 for the recovery fund. President Bowen refused the
donation and presented the following justification in a response to the editor:

Texas A&M University will not allow itself to become an agent for The Arizona
Republic as it tries to manage the public criticism it is receiving. For this reason,
and out of respect for the victims of the bonfire tragedy, Texas A&M University
will not accept money from The Arizona Republic. (“Texas A&M Rejects,”
1999, para. 2)

Even though The Arizona Republic received over 2,000 complaints about the cartoon, it
is possible President Bowen felt the need to present a clear explanation as to why he
returned the donation which would have assisted victims’ families.

President Bowen presented another argument to explain why he authorized
spending up to $1 million to fund the independent inquiry into what caused the collapse.
During an interview, President Bowen said:

We lost our students, we have an obligation to the families to provide good
information about what caused the bonfire stack to fall. Other universities have
spent as much on inquiries into wrongdoing in their athletic programs. The
money will not come from state appropriations, but from such things as
investment earnings and profits from self-supporting A&M enterprises such as the bookstore. That fund recently held as much as $20 million, and our annual operating budget is about $800 million. (Ward, 2000, para. 23)

Dr. Bowen could have been attempting to address possible criticisms at an early stage rather than allow concerns, and disapproval, to grow. In his argument, President Bowen included other dollar amounts available to the university, possibly to provide context and reassure constituents that the university could self-fund and afford the expense.

**Feeling statements.** President Bowen used this framing device most often in the year following the bonfire collapse, and the majority of feelings expressed were those of grief and sadness about the crisis. For example, the day the logs collapsed, the university held a student-led memorial service, at which Dr. Bowen spoke. During his speech, President Bowen said:

> For the Texas Aggie family and the world, this has been a day of unspeakable grief and sorrow. We’re all trying to cope with this tremendous loss of life and the pain and suffering. Words are just not adequate to express the deep sympathy and emotions we have on an occasion such as this. (“Texas A&M Students Gather,” 1999)

Throughout the year President Bowen mentioned the pain and suffering friends and family of the victims and other members of the campus community were experiencing. On the one-year anniversary of the crisis, Dr. Bowen said at the memorial service:

> We get caught up in the rush of daily responsibilities, and then all of a sudden these thoughts come back at us. Someone will call, or we’ll encounter one of the members of the families that lost their son or daughter. It brings back all those
horrible, horrible images and all the sadness. It’s just below the surface. We think we’re past it to a degree, but we’re not. (Moran, 2000, para. 4)

Dr. Bowen’s discourse may have reaffirmed people’s sense of belonging and feelings of those who were also still grieving. He may have helped campus community members relate more closely to him, and to one another.

**Repetition.** President Bowen used repetition during the memorial service held the day after the bonfire collapsed when he said:

All of us cried as we watched our loved ones being removed from the stacks of logs. We prayed that all would be alive, but they were not. We prayed that all of the injuries would be minor, but they were not. We prayed that our agony and our grief would end quickly, but it has not. (“Texas A&M Students Gather,” 1999)

Repeating the phrase, “We prayed that…” may have encouraged campus community members use faith to help them work through feelings of shock and loss and could have caused them to realize they shared common feelings of grief and sorrow with one another and with President Bowen.

About six months after the bonfire collapse, President Bowen held a press conference to announce his decision on the future of the bonfire-building tradition. He used repetition when he said:

If we have a bonfire, it will be a student activity…. All activities carry a certain risk. There are legal risks. There are financial risks. There are alcohol risks. There are injury risks. All of these things are issues that a successful university has to assess and manage. These risks are some of the many factors I will have to consider. (Liffick & Johnston, 2000, para. 9)
It is possible stakeholders external to the university communicated their opinion to President Bowen that continuing the bonfire would be too dangerous, and the president may have been attempting to point out that any activity carries a certain amount of uncertainty and danger. This may have been an attempt to justify President Bowen’s decision to continue the bonfire tradition at the university.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory Findings for the Texas A&M Bonfire Collapse**

According to SCCT, leaders managing accidental crises should incorporate into their discourse instructing information to tell community members what to do to protect themselves during the crisis, and adjusting information in the form of expressing concern or describing corrective action in order to help community members cope with the crisis (Coombs, 2007). In addition to these strategies, SCCT recommends leaders manage the institution’s reputation by incorporating diminishment strategies in order to minimize the institution’s responsibility for, and perceived association with, the accident (Coombs, 2007). Optional communication response strategies include bolstering through praising stakeholders, reminding the community of the institution’s past good works, or describing how the institution is a victim of the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

**Instructing information.** I did not find evidence in the data that President Bowen incorporated instructing information in his discourse after the bonfire collapse. The log stack took less than one minute to fall, and afterward, even though the students involved were either trapped or injured, the rest of the campus community was not in danger. Dr. Bowen did not have reason to issue instructions so that the rest of the community could protect themselves from harm.
**Adjusting information.** After the bonfire collapse, President Bowen incorporated adjusting information into his discourse in both ways, by expressing concern for victims and their families and by describing corrective action the university would take to ensure a similar crisis would not happen again. The day of the crisis, Dr. Bowen was asked during a press conference if he was fearful of lawsuits that may be filed as a result. He communicated care and concern for the victims’ families when he replied:

> Regrettably, in our society, in everything that we do, you have to worry about the possibility of a lawsuit, but I wouldn’t want to, in any sense, burden the parents of our young people who endured this tragedy with the belief that somehow we’re positioning our activities relative to them. We are with them, heart and soul in every way, and our job is to be sure that they understand that this university, all of its whole community, is deeply hurt and harmed and we’re sharing their tragedy with them. That’s the only thing that’s important now. (Lin, 1999, para. 23)

It is possible President Bowen’s audience could have perceived this communication as disingenuous or as somehow trying to stand with the victims’ families so that they would feel more like part of the university family and not pursue legal action. However, after this press conference, President Bowen ensured the public that the firm hired and charged with investigating the cause of the collapse had no affiliation with Texas A&M because he wanted a fair and impartial examination. This act, combined with President Bowen’s communication above, may have convinced anyone who doubted his sincerity that he was genuinely concerned for the victims and their families.
Several months after the bonfire collapse and resulting investigation, Dr. Bowen announced the corrective action the university would take to reduce the risks and dangers involved with building future bonfires:

Let’s talk about design. We will have a design prepared by licensed professionals…. We will have a bonfire which is not like some of the historical bonfires, a single stack…. The bonfire will have a construction plan prepared by licensed professionals. The construction time will be limited to two weeks. We will not have work after midnight and before sunrise…. We’ll have an expanded university oversight…. It’s our decision that we will not have a cut site…. I don’t think it would surprise anyone, we will not have a bonfire this year.

(Kagan, 2000b, para. 20)

This type of corrective action may have been communicated in order to build trust with the campus community so that stakeholders would feel safer about students working on future bonfires.

**Bolstering.** I did not find evidence that President Bowen incorporated diminishment communication strategies after the crisis, but I did find evidence of bolstering through ingratiating and praising stakeholders. For example, the day of the bonfire collapse, Dr. Bowen stated during a press conference, “I want to thank all the people that have been calling our university to get information, and I appreciate the outpouring of sympathy that’s been given…. We thank them for the special concern that they’ve shown our students” (Kagan, 1999, para. 2). It is possible President Bowen was attempting to build positive connections to the external community to garner support and open communication lines. Dr. Bowen may have recognized that it may have been
difficult for external stakeholders to understand the bonfire tradition and events that may have led to the collapse.

The day President Bowen announced the changes that would occur to the planning and building of future bonfires, he praised stakeholders when he said:

I want to thank everyone that’s taken time to write over the last six weeks or so, everyone that’s taken the time to send me emails…. To the extent that those of you in the room participated I want to extend you my thanks…. Sometimes we forget how blessed we are about having such sensible, well informed young people giving us advice, and we appreciate their role. (Kagan, 2000b, para. 1)

Dr. Bowen knew he was about to announce major changes to the bonfire tradition. He may have taken the time to compliment stakeholders in order to make it easier for them to cope with the potentially upsetting news he was about to deliver.

If Dr. Bowen had communicated about the crisis as if it had been an accident, he would have incorporated instructing information, adjusting information, and diminishment strategies, with optional bolstering content (Coombs, 2007). However, I did not find evidence of diminishment in President Bowen’s discourse, which means he communicated about the crisis as if Texas A&M had been a victim of the collapse. It is unclear how President Bowen’s audience reacted to or perceived his communication, but it did not align with SCCT recommendations.

**Additional Themes for Texas A&M University Bonfire Collapse**

**Horror.** Out of the 38 pieces of data analyzed, President Bowen described the bonfire collapse as “horrible” or “a horror” in 11 different pieces of discourse. For example, in an interview the day after the crisis, Dr. Bowen said, “We want to make sure
this horror never visits our campus again” (“Investigation Into,” 1999, para. 12). Six months after the incident, during a press conference describing changes to future bonfire building plans, President Bowen said, “The reason we are here today is because of the horrible event that took place on our campus” (Liffick & Johnston, 2000, para. 5), and one day later during an announcement, he stated, “…I’d like everyone to understand that the magnitude of the bonfire disaster affected my decision greatly. Given that horror I think a tough decision is a reasonable decision” (Kagan, 2000b, para. 15). Finally, on the one-year anniversary of the bonfire collapse, President Bowen said during his speech at the memorial service, “…it brings back all those horrible, horrible images and all the sadness” (Moran, 2000, para. 4). By President Bowen consistently choosing the words “horrible” and “horror” throughout the year to describe the incident, he acknowledged it was terrifying and shocking. He could have chosen those particular words to help stakeholders process the trauma by acknowledging their feelings. Using the same words, even one year after the incident, may have been Dr. Bowen’s attempt to extend patience and understanding for the length of time needed to heal.

**Desire to seek the truth.** Within one day after the bonfire collapsed, President Bowen expressed the need to find out what caused the logs to fall. During a press conference the day after the incident, Dr. Bowen said, “We need a study, we need an analysis. And those answers that will come from that study are really important answers, and that’s what we’ll be doing in the future” (Bowen, 1999). Dr. Bowen communicated a desire to be fair and transparent with the investigation, which may have been an attempt to restore trust that was lost with stakeholders and to help them feel safe and confident in his ability to be an honest leader. After a reporter asked if the team conducting the
analysis would be internal or external, President Bowen replied, “The investigative task force can not be led by someone that would be perceived, rightly or wrongly perceived, somehow protective of our interest” (Copelin, 1999). The decision to hire an external, independent firm to lead the investigation into what caused the collapse may have been perceived as President Bowen being open to the possibility that the collapse may have been the university’s fault, but if it were, that he would not try to cover up any wrongdoing.

**Community.** Several times throughout the year following the crisis, President Bowen spoke of family, community, and the Aggie spirit. A day after the bonfire collapse, Dr. Bowen said during a press conference:

> Like a lot of universities, we’re a family. And when members of the family are lost, everybody understands that it hurts. There’s a lot of sadness. There’s an effort of the community to help each other, to come together. We have a thing here we talk about, the Aggie spirit. The Aggie spirit is something that brings us all together for a common purpose, to keep focused on our education and what we can do to keep the Aggie community together, keep it important. All of us have lost members of our family. (Bowen, 1999)

President Bowen’s references to family and community could have been part of an effort to unite the campus community and create a sense of belonging in order to help community members process their feelings of grief. It may also have been an attempt to create solidarity within the internal stakeholder group in case external stakeholders questioned the bonfire tradition’s safety and practicality.
Case Eight Description: Oklahoma State University Plane Crash Accidental Crisis

On January 27, 2001, the Oklahoma State University (OSU) basketball team played the University of Colorado in Boulder, Colorado. The team traveled to and from the game in three small airplanes. After the game, on the way back to OSU, one of the planes crashed in a field near Strasburg, Colorado, about 40 miles east of Denver. All eight passengers and two crew members on board were killed: two student athletes, a student manager, a sports information coordinator, an athletic trainer, a basketball staff member, two media personnel, and two pilots. The crash site was over 1,000 miles from OSU, which made communication and oversight of the crash investigation challenging. Each of the ten families was assigned their own OSU counselor to answer questions, address needs, and assist with travel arrangements. Two memorials were built, one at the crash site and one on the OSU campus. Later it was learned that alumni sometimes donated small airplanes to the university for athletic teams to use to travel to and from games, and the pilots, while licensed, were part-time pilots who donated their time to the university. Many people criticized the university for having inadequate travel policies, which were evaluated and revised after the crash (Paterson et al., 2007).

Oklahoma State University was founded as a land-grant institution in Stillwater, Oklahoma, on December 25, 1890. First known as Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, in 1957 the institution changed its name to Oklahoma State University. Today, OSU has a total undergraduate enrollment of around 20,000 students, and its athletic teams compete in NCAA Division I as part of the Big 12 conference (Paterson et al., 2007).
At the time of the plane crash, OSU’s president was James Halligan. Born in Moorland, Iowa, Dr. Halligan earned B.S., M.S, and Ph.D. degrees in Chemical Engineering from Iowa State University. He taught at Texas Tech and the University of Arkansas, and served in administrative roles as the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Interim Chancellor at the University of Arkansas. He was president of New Mexico State University from 1984-1994, then became Oklahoma State University’s 16th president, serving from 1994-2003. After retiring from OSU, Dr. Halligan served in the Oklahoma State Senate from 2008-2016 (Paterson et al., 2007).

I located four news releases, and transcripts from seven press conferences, four interviews, a speech from a memorial service that took place three days after the crash, a commencement speech, and a speech from a memorial dedication ceremony that occurred seven months after the crash, all provided by President Halligan within the year following the crisis. I chose this crisis because of the emotional and financial support Dr. Halligan offered victims’ families after the crash. For example, children of the deceased were offered automatic admission and free tuition to OSU, and victims’ families were given access to free counseling services and transportation to and from the crash site and campus (Paterson et al., 2007). Another challenge was that, after the crash, many students and athletic team members were fearful of air travel, which made transportation to away games difficult (Paterson et al., 2007). I was interested to learn if President Halligan’s discourse addressed any of these issues.
Framing Device Findings for Oklahoma State University Plane Crash

I found evidence of three framing devices in President Halligan’s discourse the year following the plane crash, catchphrases, feeling statements, and repetition, but none were used often. Catchphrase was used once in the initial days following the crisis, but not after that. Feeling statements were used the most, and all throughout the year, and repetition was used once, a few days after the crash.

**Catchphrase.** Once in the days following the plane crash, Dr. Halligan used familiar terms when describing the crisis. Four days after the crisis, OSU held a memorial service on campus to honor the victims and support their families. During his speech, President Halligan said, “We have assembled here today, and I hope the families can sense, since Sunday when we got together and tried to get our feet under us, we have worked very hard to put this together for you...” (Halligan, 2001). The phrase, “tried to get our feet under us,” referred to searching for solid footing or stable ground, but using such familiar terms to describe the university community’s struggle following the crash may have made Dr. Halligan appear more relatable. Dr. Halligan was speaking to the victims’ families, who were in the audience, and it is possible they did not know him well. President Halligan may have wanted the victims’ families to feel comfortable around him so that he could build a relationship early on between himself, them, and OSU since there would be increased communication and support between them in the near future.

**Feeling statements.** The day the plane crash occurred, Dr. Halligan said, when he announced what happened, “This is indeed a very sad day for Oklahoma State
University” (“Air Tragedy,” 2001, para. 11). During the memorial service a few days later, Dr. Halligan said during his speech, “I must share with you that this is the saddest thing I have ever done” (Halligan, 2001). In interviews, President Halligan also spoke about how difficult it was when he saw the plane at the crash site and called that experience “unbelievably sad” (“Plans for OSU,” 2001, para. 6). While sadness is an appropriate emotion for such a tragedy, I was surprised President Halligan did not use words to describe stronger emotions, such as heartbroken, dismayed, or despondent. His sentiment of sadness, while appropriate, may have come across as insufficient.

**Repetition.** During President Halligan’s speech at the memorial service, he said to the victims’ families, “We are trying to encircle you with our love to show you that we care, to show you that these people made a big difference to us at OSU” (Halligan, 2001). Later, during the same speech, Dr. Halligan said again, “We are trying to encircle you with our love so that you know we truly care” (Halligan, 2001). By repeating this phrase, it is possible President Halligan wanted the victims’ families to feel supported by the OSU community and for that support and care to be their main takeaway from the service. The word “encircle” is similar to “surround,” and Dr. Halligan repeating, “encircle you with our love,” may have made a connection with the families of being surrounded by love, or even figuratively being embraced or hugged by the campus community during their time of grief.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory Findings for Oklahoma State University Plane Crash**

A plane crash is an accident, and SCCT recommends leaders managing accidental crises incorporate instructing information and adjusting information into their discourse,
and manage reputation through diminishment strategies, with optional bolstering content (Coombs, 2007). I did not find evidence President Halligan provided instructing information in his discourse, which include warnings and directions to community members during the crisis on how to protect themselves from harm. The airplane crashed in a field over 1,000 miles from campus, so no one on campus was in imminent danger or needed to seek safety. This may explain why President Halligan did not find it necessary to include this type of communication.

Adjusting information. President Halligan incorporated adjusting information in his discourse throughout the year following the crisis, including expressions of concern and corrective action taken to avoid a similar incident. For example, in a statement provided to the press the day after the crash, Dr. Halligan said:

We have ensured that our counseling staff is available to all the players to try to address their psychological needs…. Our concern at this time is in particular of the families of those involved, that has been our primary concern…. For now, it is our intent to focus on the families involved and the players to make sure they are appropriately supported. (“Air Tragedy,” 2001, para. 12).

Not only was President Halligan providing support for the victims’ families, he also included the players on the other two planes in his expression of concern. It is possible the players were grieving the loss of their teammates and friends, but also may have been struggling with survivor’s guilt. President Halligan’s discourse indicated he immediately provided for the needs of both of these constituent groups.

Even when President Halligan learned some of the victims’ families were taking legal action against the university and the pilot, he voiced care and concern about them.
In an interview, when asked for his thoughts about the law suits, President Halligan replied, “We want to support the families in every way possible as some of them take actions in an attempt to find the most definitive answers possible and to find peace through those answers” (“University Forms,” 2002, para. 15). His response seemed to convey his understanding that litigation may have been part of the families’ healing process.

After the crash investigation results were announced, Dr. Halligan described steps OSU would take to ensure safer travel for athletic teams:

Developing guidelines with the potential to become the national standard for student athletic team travel is not only a prudent response to last year’s tragedy, but one more way OSU and the families can honor the ten men we lost…. What I think has merit is to retain a consultant who would review the credentials of all aircraft we use in the future to make sure whenever we put a student on an aircraft it meets all the requirements of the FAA and make sure it’s safe and make sure the records are up to date. (“University Forms,” 2002, para. 5)

President Halligan may have described this corrective action in order to reassure current and future families their children would be safe when traveling with the university.

**Rebuilding.** I did not find evidence of diminishment strategies such as excusing or justification in President Halligan’s discourse, but there was evidence of rebuilding by offers of compensation or gifts. During the memorial service a few days after the plane crash, President Halligan gave a speech and said to the victims’ families:

To the widows who are here, I’d like to say to you simply, we want your children to attend OSU. There will be a place for them at OSU. We will, we will provide
for their education. You may be assured of that. We want your children to come here and be part of this family. It is important to us. Terribly important to us.

(Halligan, 2001)

Because this offer was given a few days after the plane crash, some of the audience members may have perceived this as a genuine, authentic gesture, but others may have thought of it as a means of creating feelings of indebtedness or preventing families from pursuing legal action against the university.

During a press conference just before graduation, Dr. Halligan announced, “What we would like to do is give a representative of each victim’s family—if they choose to attend—a diploma during graduation. I think in interacting with the victims’ families, it will be a very meaningful experience” (McNeill, 2001, para. 8). Again, a gift like this may have been perceived as a thoughtful token by some, but self-serving by others.

If Dr. Halligan had communicated about the plane crash as if it were an accident, he would have attempted to manage the institution’s reputation by using diminishment strategies. I did not find evidence of diminishment in President Halligan’s discourse, however, I found evidence of rebuilding. Thus, President Halligan communicated about the crisis as if it had been preventable, which may not have aligned with his audience’s perceptions of a plane crash.

**Additional Themes for Oklahoma State University Plane Crash**

**Community.** In the year following the plane crash, President Halligan’s discourse contained themes of family and community. During Dr. Halligan’s memorial service speech, he spoke directly to the widows of the victims and said, “We want your children to come here and be a part of this family…. You and your family are a part of
us in a way that words cannot describe” (Halligan, 2001). The widows had just lost family members, so it is possible President Halligan’s words were meant to comfort and assure them that they still had a family in OSU. During President Halligan’s graduation speech, he said, “We will never forget that Oklahoma State University lost ten members of our family on January 27, 2001 in a tragic plane crash” (“Three Crash Victims,” 2001). Perhaps Dr. Halligan was attempting to remind his audience OSU was a place where students, faculty, and staff were members of not just a campus community, but a family, and would feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.

**Drawing awareness.** In the year following the plane crash, President Halligan called attention to things he and the university were doing for the victims’ families. For example, the day of the crash, President Halligan said, “We’ve made a sincere effort to contact members of the family of the individuals who were on the plane...to make certain we contact appropriate members as quickly as possible” (“Air Tragedy,” 2001, para. 13). The next day, during a press conference, Dr. Halligan mentioned, “We have contacted the family members who needed to be contacted personally to let them know that all of OSU’s resources are open to them during this time” ("Oklahoma State Players," 2001, para. 10). That same day, during a press conference, he stated, “We will plan an appropriate memorial service to recognize their contributions” (“OSU-Bound Jet,” 2001, para. 12). While it is important to update the public on the situation and what is happening soon after the crisis, President Halligan’s discourse appeared to go beyond facts and included details that drew awareness to his actions specifically. During the memorial service four days after the crisis, Dr. Halligan’s speech contained several references to things he and his wife, Ann, were doing:
Over the last few days, I have tried to talk with individual members of each of the families…. I will at an appropriate time dedicate a memorial in this facility…. I have been in contact with a landowner in Colorado. Ann and I will shortly go to Colorado. We will make arrangements for a memorial at that site. We will invite you to be in attendance when we dedicate that memorial. (Halligan, 2001)

To summarize, soon after the crash, Dr. Halligan drew attention to his efforts to contact the victims’ families, plan a memorial service, offer counseling services to the families and free tuition for their children, give families a diploma during graduation, and build a memorial on campus and another at the crash site. During an interview seven months after the crash, again President Halligan mentioned things he and his wife had done for the victims’ families when he said, “Since the crash, we’ve gone to the homes of all of their widows and played with their children. We are not going to forget” (Marcizewski, 2001, para. 18). If President Halligan did these things simply because he wanted to offer the families support, I am not sure he would have talked about them publicly. It is possible President Halligan mentioned these actions because he wanted others to know or because he wanted credit for his efforts.

Close to the anniversary date of the crisis, President Halligan released a statement in which he explained, “The anniversary date will be an emotionally challenging time for those closest to the victims, and the families have asked us not to plan a large scale public ceremony” (Trougakos, 2002, para. 13). Dr. Halligan may have mentioned this because he wanted the public to know that, while he wished to plan a memorial event on the anniversary of the crash, OSU was not going to have one in order to honor the families’
wishes. Dr. Halligan could have made a point to mention this to the press in case people wondered why OSU did not do anything on the anniversary.

Case Nine Description: Seton Hall University Residence Hall Fire Accidental Crisis

At 4:30 am on January 19, 2000, a fire broke out on the third floor lounge of Boland Hall, a residence hall at Seton Hall University. Three first-year students died from smoke inhalation and more than fifty other students were treated for related injuries. The residence hall, which was built in the 1950s, did not have a sprinkler system. Although the fire alarms worked, it was final exam week and there had already been several prank fire alarms set off that week in the same residence hall, so many students did not believe the alarm was real. Given Seton Hall’s close proximity to New York City, the time of day the story broke, and the scope of the tragedy, the fire quickly became national news. After a three-and-a-half year investigation, it was determined the fire was started by two freshmen. They were charged with felony murder but pled guilty to third-degree arson (Brown et al., 2007). I still considered this crisis accidental, because in the year following the fire, its cause was unknown and was thought to have been unintentional.

Seton Hall University is a private, Roman Catholic university located in South Orange, New Jersey, less than 20 miles from New York City. Founded in 1856 as Seton Hall College, it is the oldest diocesan university in the United States. Today, Seton Hall’s undergraduate enrollment is approximately 5,800 students and its graduate enrollment is 4,400 students. In 1867, a fire destroyed the university’s first building, and in 1886, another fire burned down the university’s main building. In 1909, a fire
destroyed several classroom buildings and residence halls. Despite these setbacks Seton Hall persevered, and in 1950 Seton Hall became a university after a rapid enrollment growth (Brown et al., 2007).

When the Boland residence hall fire occurred, Seton Hall University’s president was Monsignor Robert Sheeran, who served from 1995-2010 as the university’s 19th president. Msgr. Sheeran was born in Troy, New York, and in 1967 received a Bachelor’s degree in Classical Languages from Seton Hall. He was ordained a priest in 1970, then earned a Master’s degree in Theology from Princeton Theological Seminary and a Doctoral degree in Sacred Theology from the Angelicum University in Rome. In 1980, Msgr. Sheeran returned to Seton Hall to serve as rector of the seminary. He became assistant provost of Seton Hall in 1987, associate provost in 1991, executive vice chancellor in 1993, and president in 1995. The day Boland Hall residence hall reopened after the fire, Msgr. Sheeran moved into one of the rooms to live alongside the approximately 650 freshmen who lived there (Brown et al., 2007).

I located transcripts consisting of Msgr. Sheeran’s spoken discourse from eight press conferences, four interviews, and excerpts from the funeral Mass, remembrance service, and one-year anniversary memorial service. In terms of written discourse, I located two written statements to the press, an email written to the campus community, and an article Msgr. Sheeran wrote for the Seton Hall University magazine. I chose this case because of the public relations challenges Seton Hall experienced after the fire when the public learned the residence hall did not have a sprinkler system. As a result, legislation was introduced in New Jersey that would require sprinkler systems in all
college and university residence halls, which led to similar legislation in other states across the country (Brown et al., 2007).

**Framing Device Findings for Seton Hall Residence Hall Fire**

I found evidence Msgr. Sheeran incorporated six of 11 framing devices in his discourse the year following the fire: story, contrast, argument, feeling statements, three-part list, and repetition. Framing devices were used throughout the year, starting with the day of the fire and continuing through the one-year memorial service, and were used in both written and spoken discourse.

**Story.** In the Spring 2000 edition of Seton Hall University magazine, Msgr. Sheeran wrote an article about the fire and the students involved, and explained his decision to move into Boland Hall when it reopened. In the article, President Sheeran told a story about when he was a student at Seton Hall:

> I am not exactly a stranger in my new room, since I clearly recall the September morning in 1963 when my father drove me to campus for the first time, and helped me unpack my freshman gear in room 203 of Boland Hall. (Sheeran, 2000, p. 16)

President Sheeran continued to describe what it was like for him to live in Boland Hall as a freshman and how the Seton Hall priests supported him. Msgr. Sheeran may have told this story so that students, who were nervous about moving back into Boland Hall after the fire, would relate with his similar feelings of uncertainty when he was a freshman in Boland. President Sheeran may have also been attempting to reassure students and parents that he would support the students in Boland just as he was supported.
**Contrast and argument.** After the fire, several of the victims’ families hired attorneys to represent them to take legal action against the university for failing to have sprinkler systems installed in the residence halls. The families’ attorneys publicly criticized Seton Hall for not assisting families with medical or funeral expenses. President Sheeran used contrast to distinguish between the families and their legal teams when he said during a press conference, “Today I want to make a simple but important distinction. These grieving families and their attorneys are not one and the same. When attorneys question our compassion and the care and support of this community, I take umbrage” (Westfeldt, 2000b, para. 16). It is possible Msgr. Sheeran used this contrast to defend the university while being careful to not offend the victims’ families. A reporter then asked Msgr. Sheeran to respond to the lawyers’ accusations that Seton Hall did not offer financial assistance to victims’ families. President Sheeran replied, “The reality is this. Three families have lost their sons. No amount of support, financial assistance or pastoral care can ever bring these young men back” (“Seton Hall Facing Lawsuits,” 2000, para. 5). In his attempt to present an argument for why families would not need financial assistance, Msgr. Sheeran did not state whether the college had helped families with these expenses, even after being questioned further. While the argument President Sheeran presented was true, it was perceived as a weak answer and caused Seton Hall to appear unsupportive of the victims and their families.

**Feeling statements.** The first few days after the fire, President Sheeran expressed emotions of his own pain and sorrow. For example, in a press conference the day the fire broke out, Msgr. Sheeran stated, “It is very difficult to find any human words to say at this time. This is a heartbreaking tragedy for Seton Hall University, for our families, for
the Seton Hall family, for the larger family of the state” (Kagan, 2000a, para. 2). In a statement released the next day, President Sheeran said, “There’s no way to express my sorrow over this tragedy” (Reisberg, 2000, para. 11), and during another press conference he explained, “Yesterday was the most painful day in Seton Hall history. In a tragedy of this magnitude, the aftershock of pain and emotion is nearly as traumatic as the event itself” (Fleming, 2000, para. 27). After these first few days, there was no evidence of personal feeling statements found in Msgr. Sheeran’s discourse until the one-year anniversary memorial service when he said, “I was overwhelmed by our tragedy, by the bleakness of that day” (Allen, 2001, p. 5). Expressing the emotions he felt about the tragedy may have helped President Sheeran appear authentic and approachable, and may have helped the campus community and external constituents connect with him because they were possibly feeling similar emotions.

**Three-part list.** During Msgr. Sheeran’s homily given during the one-year anniversary memorial service, he used a three-part list, possibly to help his audience remember his message:

Listen. I ask you to listen very carefully. Not so much to my words, but rather to the silences between my words. Listen, for in those silences are the sounds of miracles, the echo of hearts breaking, the wonder of hearts healing, the love of hearts remembering. Breaking, healing, remembering. (Allen, 2001, p. 5)

Perhaps President Sheeran wanted to acknowledge the grieving process that had taken place within the campus community during the past year, which may have been why he chose to first acknowledge the pain and heartbreak felt, followed by the victims’ physical healing and the campus community’s emotional healing, and ended with remembering
the students who died. President Sheeran’s three-part list seemed to bring his audience to the closure that was needed after the grieving process.

**Repetition.** In addition to using three-part list during his one-year anniversary memorial service homily, President Sheeran used repetition, possibly to help his audience remember key pieces of his message:

In my own images of last January, I see hands. Hands that led frightened students to safety. Hands that tended the injured with a healing touch. Hands that reached out in friendship and consolation. Hands joined together in prayer. When our own hands were too few, when the burden was too heavy for us to bear alone, friends, both old and new, came and stood close by our side. (Allen, 2001, p. 5)

Using and repeating the imagery of hands, which can be a symbol of strength, protection, and friendship, may have been a way for Msgr. Sheeran to praise the campus community for the way they came together to support one another during and after the crisis.

Later during his homily, Msgr. Sheeran again used repetition when offering his audience comfort:

Always this place will speak to us, its message, just one word: remember.

Remember that life is precious, and all too easily lost. Remember that God is close, His heart is breaking, even with our own. Remember that love is strong, stronger than fire, stronger than death. We remember. (Allen, 2001, p. 5)

Repeating the word “remember” may have been President Sheeran’s attempt to help the audience continue their healing process and sustain the memories of the three students who died. Moreover, it is possible Msgr. Sheeran wanted the campus community to remember what happened so that a similar incident would not happen in the future.
Situational Crisis Communication
Theory Findings for Seton Hall
University Residence Hall Fire

It is unclear if President Sheeran intentionally used crisis response strategies recommended by SCCT in his discourse the year following the fire. Even though the fire was an accident, President Sheeran communicated about it as if Seton Hall were a victim of the crisis: he incorporated only adjusting information and bolstering strategies. Had Msgr. Sheeran communicated about the crisis as if it had been an accident, he would have used diminishment strategies such as minimizing Seton Hall’s responsibility or perceived damage associated with the fire, but I did not find evidence of these strategies in the data. President Sheeran and Seton Hall University were criticized for the lack of fire suppressing sprinklers in residence halls on campus, so it is possible the public perceived this crisis as preventable, in which case Msgr. Sheeran should have acknowledged Seton Hall was responsible at some level and incorporated rebuilding strategies such as communicating apology and compensation for the victims and their families (Coombs, 2007). Nonetheless, the only crisis response strategies found in the data were adjusting information and bolstering.

Adjusting information. As stated previously, adjusting information includes expressions of concern and describing corrective action the institution will take to avoid a similar crisis. Two weeks after the fire, President Sheeran released a statement in which he described upgrades to residence halls that would occur:

In order to learn, Seton Hall or anywhere else, students must feel safe. One step in restoring the learning environment is to install sprinkler systems in those residence halls where they do not now exist and to expand the existing sprinkler
systems in the other halls. Our residence halls will be the safest of any group of residence halls of any college in the country. (“Seton Hall University,” 2000, para. 3)

It is possible Msgr. Sheeran was attempting to reassure parents their children would be safer at Seton Hall than anywhere else in order to avoid students withdrawing from the university due to perceptions of unsafe conditions.

President Sheeran also expressed care and concern for the survivors by moving into Boland Hall when it reopened. He explained the reason for this decision in an article he wrote for the Seton Hall University magazine:

Six days after the tragic fire that claimed the lives of three of our students and sent dozens of others to the hospital, I moved into Boland Hall. The reason for this was simple: I believed it was the right thing to do for our students…. I realized that our students would need others to stand by their side, and I believed it was important for me, as leader of the Seton Hall family, to be with our freshmen when they returned to Boland Hall. I also wanted to reassure the parents, not by words but by actions, that Seton Hall is willing to do whatever we can to support their sons and daughters. (Sheeran, 2000, p. 16)

Moving into the residence hall may have been President Sheeran’s way of telling students and parents he would be there to comfort them and help keep them safe. This may also have been an attempt to prevent students from leaving the university for what they perceived as safer residence halls at other institutions.

**Bolstering.** During a press conference the morning of the fire, President Sheeran praised the external community for their support:
We thank so many people for being with us. Many of us who live on campus were there at 5:00 this morning, and we thank you for being with us. We thank you for the support of so many people. Words cannot express what is happening to us now, so thank you all for being with us. (Kagan, 2000a, para. 2)

Bolstering strategies are used to seek a positive connection between the institution and stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). It is possible that by thanking people outside the university community for their support, he was attempting to build a positive relationship with the public.

In addition to thanking external stakeholders, President Sheeran praised students for their actions during the fire. During an interview several weeks after the fire, Msgr. Sheeran said:

While we lost students, we also have some great heroes here. It’s one of the great stories of life, when you least expect it, people turn into heroes. So many students risked their lives. Some students were seriously burned trying to help other students. They are real heroes to us. (Rhoden, 2000, para. 18)

By this date, Boland Hall had reopened and the three families of the students who died were pursuing wrongful death suits against Seton Hall (Brown et al., 2007). It is possible President Sheeran used this opportunity to compliment the students who survived and assisted others in order to help his audience refocus their attention on their courageous actions rather than on the inactions of the university to have sprinkler systems in place.

As stated earlier in this section, I found evidence to support that President Sheeran communicated about the fire as if Seton Hall had been a victim of the crisis. However,
recommendations from SCCT suggest President Sheeran should have incorporated crisis response strategies that align with an accidental crisis.

**Additional Theme for Seton Hall University Residence Hall Fire**

**Offering comfort through faith.** In addition to serving as the president of Seton Hall University, a Catholic institution, Msgr. Sheeran served as a priest. During an interview a few weeks after the fire, President Sheeran said, “I’m primarily a priest. I sit here not only as a president, but as a priest. And I think my first response to the fire was generally ministerial” (“College President,” 2000, para. 6). The first few days after the crisis, Msgr. Sheeran’s discourse contained messages of faith in God. For example, the day after the fire, President Sheeran offered in a statement released to the media:

> The loss of promising young lives, the pain of the injured students and their families, truly is terrible. As people of faith, however, we know God will give us the strength to come through this difficult time, if we ask Him. (Reisberg, 2000, para. 11)

As a Catholic university, community members may have wanted, needed, and expected Msgr. Sheeran to suggest they call upon their faith to help their grieving process.

One week after the fire, the campus community held a memorial service. During Msgr. Sheeran’s remarks, he specifically mentioned the three students who died and talked about the after-life:

> Frank and John and Aaron, we will miss you terribly. May our prayers guide you on your journey to the Lord. And may you enter God’s heavenly Jerusalem where there will be no more darkness or weeping and no more tears…. For Frank, John, and Aaron, the earthly story is over. With Christ, they have broken
through the darkness of death. They see God face to face. (Westfeldt, 2000a, para. 4)

It is possible Msgr. Sheeran focused on his belief that the three victims were now in a better place in order offer comfort to his audience. When a loved one dies, people may find peace when they imagine their loved one is no longer suffering.

During the same memorial service, there was a Mass, and in Msgr. Sheeran’s homily, he again offered comfort to his audience by incorporating faith in God:

Over the coming months and years, we will reflect on many things as we try to let the Lord fill our loss with love. We have some special bond—with Aaron, Frank, and John—and with each other. It is a bond that lasts beyond this life. Here, in the context of faith, we know that this bond is forged, not by us, but by the Lord of love and the Author of life itself. (Allen, 2000, p. 10)

Referring to God as the author of life may have caused Msgr. Sheeran’s audience to connect the students’ deaths to a greater purpose. Many Christians believe God has a plan for us and that He calls us to heaven when our time on earth is over. This idea could possibly have caused the campus community to believe the fire, and resulting injuries and deaths, were part of a larger plan, and was thus not the university’s fault.

**Summary of Accidental Crisis Cases**

Two of the 11 framing devices were used by all three presidents: feeling statements and repetition. All presidents expressed feelings of sorrow and sadness, but in varying degrees. President Halligan used different forms of the word “sad” to describe his feelings, while Presidents Bowen and Sheeran used stronger words such as “heartbroken,” “unspeakable sorrow,” and “grief-stricken.” All three presidents used
repetition in their spoken discourse when talking with campus community members, perhaps to help their audiences remember key elements of their messages.

None of the presidents used the metaphor, analogy, spin, or category framing devices in their discourse. Metaphor and analogy point out a subject’s similarities and resemblances to something else (Fairhurst, 2011). It is possible the presidents did not use these devices because they did not want to minimize the significance of the crisis by portraying it as common. All three of these crises resulted in student deaths, and part of the campus community’s grieving process may have included initial feelings of shock, which may require acknowledging that a tragic event occurred. Had the presidents compared the crises to other events, it is possible they would have offended campus community members or interfered with their healing process. The spin framing device places a subject in a positive or negative light and is perceived as an attempt to influence an audience in order to deliver a preferred message (Fairhurst, 2011). The presidents may have avoided this framing device so that their messages would be perceived as authentic, thus making more positive connections with both internal and external constituents.

As explained earlier, SCCT states accident crises produce low levels of attribution to the institution and recommend leaders managing them incorporate instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management through diminishment (Coombs, 2007). None of the presidents provided instructing information, perhaps because in these cases, the accidents did not endanger the safety of campus community members. All three presidents incorporated adjusting information by showing concern for victims, their families, and survivors of the crises, and described corrective action the
in institution would take in order to prevent the crisis from repeating. The presidents’ expressions of concern did not include overt statements accepting responsibility, so it is possible they were included to help internal and external stakeholders hold less animosity toward the institutions.

None of the presidents incorporated the suggested reputation management strategy of diminishment, which would have included minimizing the institution’s responsibility for the crisis by claiming the institution had no control of the events and minimizing perceived damage associated with the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Presidents Bowen and Sheeran did not incorporate reputation management strategies at all, thus communicating about the crisis as if the institution had too been a victim. President Halligan used rebuilding strategies by discussing compensation and gifts the institution would provide for the victims’ families, which means he communicated about the crisis as if it had been preventable. It is unclear whether the three presidents’ reputation management communication strategies, which did not match those recommended by SCCT, influenced perception of the institutions’ responsibility for the crises.

Additional emergent themes did not appear to be common among all three presidents, however, both Presidents Bowen and Halligan spoke of the importance of family and community. Accidental crises can create feelings of stress and uncertainty within the campus community, and it is suggested that HEI presidents who are leading after a crisis build community and encourage members to heal together (Kuypers, 2007). It is possible Presidents Bowen and Halligan wished to facilitate the healing process on their campuses by reminding community members of the importance of supporting one another.
Student Protest Crises

Student demonstrations and protests can be peaceful and lead to change, but when they escalate to include destruction, violence, and injury to the campus community, they reach crisis level. Recently, students at college campuses have protested the treatment of minority students at their institutions, with some demonstrations growing in size and scope to include national news coverage. Crises of this type can cause physical destruction to campus buildings and emotional damage to the campus community as individuals struggle to understand one another’s perceptions and viewpoints. In addition, after the crisis, there can be feelings of mistrust and frustration if the demonstrations did not lead to significant change.

Case Ten Description: The University of Missouri Student Protests

On September 12, 2015, Student Government President Payton Head expressed his frustration with racial, sexual, and transgender attitudes at the University of Missouri’s main campus in Columbia via Facebook post. The post was widely shared, and on September 24, 2015, students protested due to the university’s inaction from the post. The month of October 2015 included anti-racism rallies, disruptions of African American student groups, vandalism in residence halls, a protest during a homecoming parade leading to police being called to clear the streets, and an order for required student and faculty diversity training. Toward the end of October, a student group calling themselves Concerned Student 1950, in honor of the year black students were first admitted to the university, presented a list of demands to the Columbia Campus Chancellor, Bowen Loftin, and Missouri System President, Tim Wolfe. Both Dr. Loftin
and President Wolfe admitted racism existed at the university campus, but Concerned Student 1950 demands were not met. In November 2015, large-scale student boycotts, hunger strikes, the refusal of black football players to practice or play, and repeated demands by the Missouri Student Association all led to the resignation of Campus Chancellor Loftin and System President Wolfe (Pearson, 2015).

The University of Missouri System is a state university system for four universities: the main campus University of Missouri-Columbia, the Missouri University of Science and Technology in Rolla, the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Created in 1963, today almost 70,000 students are enrolled in the system. Each university is led by a chancellor, and the entire system is led by a president. The University of Missouri-Columbia, the largest and oldest of the four universities in the system, is a public, land-grant, research university whose athletic programs compete at the NCAA Division I level, and was where the incidents and student protests occurred in Fall 2015 (Pearson, 2015).

Tim Wolfe was the University of Missouri System President when the protests occurred. President Wolfe grew up in Columbia, Missouri, earned a Bachelor’s degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia and a Master’s degree from Harvard Business School. He worked in the corporate sector, starting as a sales representative for IBM and moving into various executive positions, including president of Novell Americas. When Mr. Wolfe was appointed president of the University of Missouri System in February 2012, it was the second time a businessman, rather than an educator, became president. He resigned on November 9, 2015, at the height of the protests (Pearson, 2015).
Michael Middleton was appointed interim president of the University of Missouri System on November 12, 2015, and he served in this role until 2017. President Middleton received a Bachelor’s degree from the University of Missouri and was the third black graduate of the University of Missouri’s School of Law. He joined the university’s law school faculty in 1985, and became a deputy chancellor in 2015 (Kingkade, 2015).

I located four statements President Wolfe made to the media and a transcript from his resignation speech, and after Mr. Middleton became president, I found transcripts from three press conferences, one speech to the faculty council, two interviews, two speeches to the board of curators, one written email, and one written statement to the media. I chose this case because of the national attention it received, protests on other college campuses it initiated, and that it led to the resignations of the president and the chancellor. Also, I included this case in my study because the university appeared to struggle to recover from the incident. The university spent $1.3 million on public relations to repair its image, and in the two years following, freshman enrollment decreased 35 percent, and alumni donations declined (Bohanon, 2018).

**Framing Device Findings for University of Missouri Student Protests**

I found evidence President Wolfe used two framing devices before his resignation: argument and feeling statement, while President Middleton used five framing devices: contrast, positive spin, catchphrase, feeling statement, category. Metaphor, story, analogy, three-part list, and repetition were not used by either president.
Contrast. About three months after the protests began, university leadership was criticized for allowing students to have too much influence on the campus’ actions and decisions regarding the crisis. During an interview, President Middleton was asked who was in charge of the university. He replied:

I’ve heard references to inmates running the asylum and animals running the zoo. We are neither an asylum nor a zoo. We are a university. Our students are neither inmates nor animals. They are young adults we are grooming to lead us through the 21st century. This is our university and we are running it. (Knott, 2016, para. 17)

While the media attempted to use these metaphors to point out similarities between students, inmates and animals, President Middleton used the same metaphors to highlight the differences between the groups. Contrast may have been an appropriate framing device to stop references to perceived weak leadership.

Spin. President Middleton used positive spin in both spoken and written discourse to attempt to place the university in a constructive light. For example, during an interview, President Middleton said about the university, “The value we bring to the state of Missouri is remarkable, and none of that has stopped. We are still educating 77,000 students in the state” (Ahern & Kovacs, 2015, para. 39). In a statement provided to the media almost a year after the protests began, President Middleton explained:

We are excited to once again celebrate the University of Missouri System’s core mission of teaching, research and service, our commitment to the constant improvement of the university experience for all of our students, and the
remarkable resilience of Missouri’s premiere public university illustrated by our 177 years of being an asset to the state of Missouri. (Jost, 2016, para. 32)

Reminding the external campus community about the positive contributions the university system was making may have been an effort to take attention away from the protests and perceptions of ineffective leadership.

**Catchphrase.** President Middleton used a familiar phrase during an interview when he said, “Patience is a virtue in situations like this. Just as these problems didn’t evolve overnight, your solutions will not come quickly” (Knott, 2016, para. 9). The phrase, “patience is a virtue” is a common phrase that refers to the integrity a person has who can wait for something without getting upset or showing displeasure. This particular interview took place about three months after the protests began, and the fact that President Middleton was reminding the public of the importance of patience could mean stakeholders were starting to become impatient with the lack of progress.

**Argument.** A few days after the protests began, President Wolfe used argument in his resignation speech:

So the question really is, is why did we get to this very difficult situation. It is my belief we stopped listening to each other. We didn’t respond or react. We got frustrated with each other, and we forced individuals like Jonathan Butler to take immediate action and unusual steps to effect change. This is not, I repeat not, the way change should come about. Change comes from listening, learning, caring, and conversation. We have to respect each other enough to stop yelling at each other and start listening, and quit intimidating each other. (Vandelinder, 2015, para. 7)
It is possible President Wolfe hoped to present a reasoned, rational explanation of how he believed the campus community could do better, move forward and heal. Since this was President Wolfe’s last speech as president, perhaps he had courage to present his diverging view that the campus should handle the situation differently.

**Feeling statement.** Both presidents Wolfe and Middleton used feeling statements in their discourse in the year following the student protests. During his resignation speech, President Wolfe said:

> I am resigning as president of the University of Missouri System today. My motivation in making this decision comes from love…. I truly love everybody here and the very institution, and my decision to resign comes out of love, not hate. (Vandelinder, 2015, para. 2)

Students demanded President Wolfe’s resignation. One student, Jonathan Butler, started a hunger strike and vowed to continue it, and the football team refused to play, until President Wolfe resigned (Pearson, 2015). It is possible Mr. Wolfe was concerned about Jonathan’s health, the university’s reputation, and the lost revenue from the football team’s strike, so he may have felt the best thing to do for the institution was to resign. Perhaps this is why President Wolfe said he was resigning from a place of love, care, and concern for the institution and the campus community members.

When President Middleton assumed the role as interim president, he too used feeling statements, during an interview just a couple of weeks after he was appointed:

> I’m disappointed that we didn’t do what was necessary to avoid the explosion that we recently experienced, but I’m optimistic and happy that I’m now in a position
where I might be able to have more influence on solutions to that issue. (Ahern & Kovacs, 2015, para. 50)

Perhaps President Middleton thought it was necessary to acknowledge his sadness for the situation and the circumstances under which he became president, lest he appear unsupportive of the previous administration. However, President Middleton may have wished to also express his confidence in his ability to resolve the issues and his excitement and appreciation for the opportunity he had been given.

**Category.** When President Middleton was first appointed interim president, he discussed the importance of education and training in diversity issues in order to balance freedom of expression with sensitivity to the experiences of others. During President Middleton’s remarks, he said:

> I think the best way to strike that balance is to educate people on the effects of what they do. I think most people are good-hearted people who don’t want to offend, intimidate or harass a student. I think it’s mostly inadvertent behavior, and I think learning and conversation can get us to the point where we are going to see some change in behavior. (Ahern & Kovacs, 2015, para. 37)

At this point in the protests, it is possible students in groups were blaming other students in groups for perpetuating stereotypes and for certain actions and inactions, which could have put all students in a negative light. When President Middleton categorized most students as “good-hearted people” it was possibly a way for him to establish commonalities and find some common ground among the protestors in order to start making progress toward calming the situation and finding a resolution.
Student protests are not discussed in SCCT (Coombs, 2007), so it is unclear which crisis response strategies should have been used. The student protests were a result of perceptions and frustrations that university administrators should have done more to support underserved minority groups and prevent racial tensions from rising. It is possible that from the student and stakeholder perspectives, the institution was responsible for the crisis occurring and escalating to the levels at which it did, thus making it a preventable crisis. The other two SCCT crisis types, victim crises, in which there is a very little attribution of crisis responsibility placed on the institution, and accidental crises, in which there is a low level of responsibility for the crisis attributed to the institution, would not be appropriate designations. If Presidents Wolfe and Middleton also believed this crisis was preventable, they would have incorporated instructing information to warn potential victims, adjusting information by expressing concern and providing corrective action, and rebuilding strategies in the form of providing victims compensation and offering apology. Regardless of crisis type, bolstering strategies could be incorporated, including reminding stakeholders of the institution’s past good work and praising stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). The data revealed instructing information was not included, but adjusting information, rebuilding strategies, and bolstering were included. Thus, Presidents Wolfe and Middleton incorporated crisis response strategies that aligned with a preventable crisis.

Adjusting information. President Wolfe expressed care and concern for one student in particular, Jonathan Butler, the individual who started a hunger strike and
vowed to continue it until President Wolfe resigned. In a statement to the media, President Wolfe said, “It’s very concerning to me when any of our students’ wellbeing is in jeopardy…. I am very concerned about Jonathan’s health” (“Student on Hunger Strike,” 2015, para. 3). Three days after making this statement, President Wolfe resigned. It is unclear if Jonathan Butler’s continuing hunger strike was a factor in President Wolfe’s decision, but his expressed concern may have given the perception it did. I did not find evidence President Middleton provided adjusting information in the form of communicating care and concern after he was appointed president.

The data did not reveal President Wolfe incorporated adjusting information in the form of corrective action the university would take. However, when President Middleton was appointed, he provided information about corrective action during an interview when he said, “We are really trying to build a world class approach to addressing inclusion, diversity and equity in higher education” (Ahern & Kovacs, 2015, para. 24), but he did not provide specific strategies the institution was incorporating. Later, during the same interview, President Middleton was asked about the university system’s progress in speeding up the discipline process for students found guilty of discrimination or racism. He replied, “I think we have been pretty effective in finding the offenders and taking them before student conduct committees, so that with civil rights enforcement activity, I think we’ve already gotten it beefed up and in place” (Ahern & Kovacs, 2015, para. 29). It is possible President Middleton was attempting to update his audience on his progress to give the perception he had control of the situation.

**Rebuilding.** Managing the institution’s reputation by incorporating rebuilding strategies into discourse is recommended for preventable crises (Coombs, 2007).
Rebuilding strategies can include either compensating victims or issuing apologies. Within a three-day period, President Wolfe offered apologies in two separate speeches. His first apology addressed an incident in which a student protest group calling themselves Concerned Student 1950 approached his car during the University of Missouri-Columbia’s homecoming parade. The group attempted to engage President Wolfe in a dialogue, but he did not respond. He stayed in the car and the driver slowly proceeded along the parade route, and was highly criticized afterward for ignoring the student group. President Wolfe stated the following during a press conference:

Racism does exist at our university and it is unacceptable. It is a long standing, systemic problem which daily affects our family of students, faculty and staff. I am sorry this is the case. I truly want all members of our university community to feel included, valued, and safe. I regret my action at the MU homecoming parade when the Concerned Student 1950 group approached my car. I am sorry, and my apology is long overdue. My behavior seemed like I did not care. That was not my intention. I was caught off guard in that moment. (“Protesters Meet,” 2015, para. 15)

After President Wolfe issued his apology, students continued protesting and calling for his resignation. Three days later, President Wolfe resigned, and during his resignation speech, he said, “I just want to stand before you today, and I take full responsibility for this frustration, and I take full responsibility for the inaction that has occurred” (Vandelinder, 2015 para. 9). While this was not a direct apology, President Wolfe took ownership of his behavior and acknowledged his role in creating the crisis, which is a form of apology, and was considered as such (Tinney, 2011).
**Bolstering.** Reputation management can include reminding stakeholders of the institution’s past good works or praising stakeholders, and is not dependent on crisis type (Coombs, 2007). President Wolfe thanked and praised protesters and a particular student, Jonathan Butler, the individual who started a hunger strike and vowed to continue it until President Wolfe resigned. In a statement made three days before he resigned, President Wolfe said:

> [Jonathan Butler’s] voice for social justice is important and powerful. He is being heard and I am listening. I am thankful for the leadership provided by him and the other student leaders in raising awareness of racism, injustice, and intolerance. This afternoon I also met with representatives of several student groups and I value their input and hear their voices. (“Protesters Meet,” 2015, para. 10)

Bolstering can be used to attempt to build a positive connection with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). Perhaps President Wolfe complimented Jonathan Butler and other student leaders to try to calm the situation, to continue dialogue, to salvage his reputation, or to inform his audience of his efforts.

President Middleton also used bolstering strategies during an interview a few weeks after he was appointed president:

> As we move forward, we must also remind ourselves daily that the university has not changed given the recent events. We have a very rich 176-year plus history of academic excellence and tradition. Let’s remember that the university remains an incredible asset to the state of Missouri and a beacon of hope for all Missourians. (Blatchford & Loutfi, 2015, para. 12)
It is possible that President Middleton was attempting to build a positive connection between the university and stakeholders by shifting focus away from the crisis and reminding his audience of the university’s strengths. This may have been an effort to cause the audience to realize the university system’s long and successful history must mean the institution has done more things right than wrong, thus not being as critical of any perceived missteps with the recent crisis.

There were no other SCCT strategies incorporated in the presidents’ discourse in the year following the crisis identified in the data. The only strategies identified aligned with those recommended for a preventable crisis. Therefore, the data indicates the crisis was communicated about as if the institution had a high level of responsibility for causing the crisis.

**Additional Themes for University of Missouri Student Protests**

**Better than before.** After the protests and the resignation of President Wolfe, President Middleton’s discourse contained messages that the university would recover and come back stronger than it was before the crisis. This theme was also found in all three environmental crisis cases. A few weeks after President Middleton was appointed, during an interview he said, “I am committed to restoring the luster of this university that we all love, and I’m confident that we will come out of this storm in a much better place than where we began” (Blatchford & Loutfi, 2015, para. 8). Making this type of a promise early on in his presidency may have been President Middleton’s attempt to convince his audience he had things under control. It may have also been his way of assuring future students, who may decide to go elsewhere because of the crisis, that the
university would soon be a safe place for them with an improved focus on equity and diversity.

**Moving forward.** Both presidents Wolfe and Middleton referred to moving the university forward after the crisis. During President Wolfe’s resignation speech, he suggested, “We need to use my resignation—please, please—use this resignation to heal, not to hate as we move forward today for a brighter tomorrow” (Vandelinder, 2015, para. 13). Perhaps President Wolfe hoped that a change in leadership would be a substantial event that would allow the university to reset, open dialogue, and make progress forward.

Within the first month after President Middleton was appointed, he referenced “moving forward” in seven different interviews. For example, in one of President Middleton’s first interviews as president, he said:

> We have to understand the ugly, ugly history that permeates everything we do in our institutions in this country. Once we get the truth on the table, I think we’re poised to reconcile our differences and move forward. We’re at an opportune moment to take some giant steps forward to move this issue far beyond where it’s been moved in the past. (Blatchford & Coleman, 2015, para. 7)

In addition to referencing moving ahead as an institution, President Middleton acknowledged the role history may have played in creating the climate at the University of Missouri, which removed blame from individuals or particular groups at the institution. He also mentioned other institutions, which may have caused his audience to realize other universities may be grappling with similar problems, thus removing the perception this was a University of Missouri-specific issue.
In other interviews, President Middleton said things such as, “Trust that we are about the business of moving the university forward…” (Loutfi, 2015, para. 4), and, “We’re addressing our challenges with a determination to move us forward so our great university can get back to achieving its mission….” (Blatchford & Loutfi, 2015, para. 10). Perhaps President Middleton was attempting to restore confidence in the university leadership’s ability to resolve the crisis and lead the institution toward a brighter future.

A few months into President Middleton’s tenure, the university still struggled with the crisis, and its image was further damaged with a report that applications had declined 30 percent (Bohanon, 2018). President Middleton held a press conference to address questions and concerns about the university’s perceived lack of progress. He said, “We must stop trying to fix blame and focus on fixing problems. It’s time to stop looking in the rearview mirror and start looking at the road ahead of us. It’s time to move forward” (Knott, 2016, para. 15). It is possible President Middleton was telling his critics that focusing on the past crisis was not helpful. Incorporating the image of looking in a rearview mirror may have been his attempt to tell his audience that the university had already made progress and was assuring them more growth and improvements were in the university’s future.

**Case Eleven Description: Ithaca College Student Protests**

On November 11, 2015, over 1,000 students at Ithaca College participated in a demonstration to protest recent racial incidents they felt were ignored by College President Tom Rochon. The protests, organized by a group called People of Color at Ithaca College (POC at IC), included a walk-out, rally, and a die-in, during which students laid on the ground in silent protest. Incidents that led up to the protest included
perceived insensitive racial comments made during resident advisor training sessions, perceptions of public safety officers initiating physical altercations with black students, and a fraternity party with a “preps and crooks” theme which suggested attendees either dress like preps by wearing polo shirts and khaki pants or like crooks by wearing baggy pants and bling. However, the single incident that appeared to be the tipping point was when a panel of Ithaca College alumni spoke at an on-campus conference. One of the panelists, a young black woman, said she had a “savage hunger” for success. One other panelist, an older white man, then referred to her as “the savage.” Even though he apologized to her after he learned how his comments were received, student protests intensified, demanded President Rochon’s resignation due to perceived lack of leadership, and held a vote of no-confidence in President Rochon, as did the faculty. President Rochon publicly stated he would not resign, but two months later he announced he would retire in eighteen months at the end of the 2016-2017 academic year (Ross, 2015).

Ithaca College, founded in 1892, is a private, liberal arts college of approximately 6,500 students located in Ithaca, New York. Originally started as a music school, today Ithaca College is best known as a top school for its journalism, media, and entertainment programs, and also for its student run, award winning media platforms including newspaper, magazine, radio, and television outlets (Ross, 2015).

Tom Rochon served as Ithaca College’s eighth president, from July 2008 until June 2017. President Rochon earned Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctoral degrees in Political Science from the University of Michigan. He served on the faculty at Princeton University and Claremont Graduate University, and moved into an administrative role at
Claremont when he became Dean of the School of Politics and Economics. Prior to his role as President of Ithaca College, Dr. Rochon also served as Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer of the University of Saint Thomas (Ross, 2015).

I located six verbal statements and transcripts from two interviews and four formal speeches including commencement, convocation, family weekend, and an address to the student government association. Written discourse located included three authored magazine articles and four written statements. All data collected was within the one-year window after the student walkout and protests on November 11, 2015.

I chose this case because, like the University of Missouri student protests, Ithaca students also demanded their president’s resignation due to perceptions he mishandled concerns about equity and inclusion issues. Ithaca’s crisis included the faculty voting no confidence in President Rochon, which I felt elevated the crisis to a higher level of seriousness. However, unlike the University of Missouri crisis, President Rochon did not resign, but within two months of the student protests, he announced he would retire in 18 months. Since blame and anger appeared to be directed toward President Rochon, I was curious to learn more about his discourse after the crisis.

Framing Device Findings for Ithaca College Student Protests

I found evidence President Rochon used four of the 11 framing devices: story, analogy, argument, and feeling statements. The remaining framing devices, metaphor, contrast, spin, catchphrase, category, three-part list, and repetition were not discovered in the data.
**Story.** Several months after the crisis, President Rochon wrote an article for one of the college’s magazines. The article was about first generation students at Ithaca College. In it, Dr. Rochon told a story about his family and how it impacted his own college experience:

I would not qualify as a first generation student according to the definition employed by Ithaca College; my mother did not go to college, but my father completed his bachelor’s degree at night while I was in high school. Even so, one thing I had in common with first generation students is that neither I nor my parents had a clear sense of what a full-time, residential undergraduate experience would be like. (Rochon, 2016b, para. 2)

President Rochon continued by describing how old movies shaped his ideas and expectations of college, and recounted humorous advice his father gave him the night before he left for his freshman year. Many first generation students come from racial and ethnic minorities, the same groups who accused him of not doing enough to support them, so it is possible Dr. Rochon told this story to portray himself as more relatable to these groups.

**Analogy.** President Rochon drew a parallel between the crisis at Ithaca College and the student protests at the University of Missouri in an article he authored for The Chronicle of Higher Education:

In the wake of decisions by the president of the University of Missouri system and the chancellor of its Columbia campus to step down in the face of similar protests, many people wonder if such resignations will become a trend. At Ithaca College, as well, the focus of student protest has been on me as president, not because of
anything prejudicial I have done but due to a belief that the campus climate is not what it should be and that the buck stops with the president. (Rochon, 2015b, p. 9)

President Rochon pointed out how the student protests at both universities expressed frustration at the president specifically, yet he took the opportunity to defend himself by stating his belief that he did not do anything wrong. It is possible Dr. Rochon was attempting to draw this parallel so that his audience would notice a pattern with student groups placing blame on the office of the president, and not the individual. President Rochon may have been building a case to garner support or sympathy for himself, hoping his audience may come to the conclusion that it is unfair to blame a president who has not personally done anything wrong.

**Argument.** Students criticized President Rochon because he did not end the college’s relationship with Chris Birch, the white man who referred to Tatyana Asside, the black woman, as a “savage” during a panel presentation. Dr. Rochon presented an argument against severing ties during an interview with the editor of the school newspaper:

I’m not actually sure what “cut ties” means. It could mean revoke that individual’s degree. Well we’re not going to do that…. I absolutely disassociate the college from those comments and from feeling that that’s an appropriate way to refer to someone else, especially a person of color, but really anybody, but that’s as far as I’ll go on that…. I’m not in the business of cutting ties with people. (Rochon, 2015a)
The interviewer followed up by asking President Rochon if he would accept future donations from Chris Birch. Dr. Rochon responded:

Look. Let’s back up a step. Chris Birch himself apologized to Tatyana Asside that evening when he was informed how his comments came across. In person, face to face, and subsequently in a phone call…. The fact that those conversations did happen is far more important than whether someone is eligible to donate to Ithaca College in a way that will benefit future students. (Rochon, 2015a)

President Rochon included in his argument a reference to students and how financial donations help them. Perhaps Dr. Rochon was attempting to draw attention away from the individual making the donation and toward the donation itself.

**Feeling statement.** One day after the student protests, President Rochon held an interview with The Ithacan, the college’s student-run newspaper. In his opening remarks, Dr. Rochon incorporated feeling statements when he said:

I am personally committed to working through this process and these issues and making a difference at Ithaca College. Which means addressing directly one of the demands made at the rally, I am in this and I am committed, I love this college and I recognize the depth of the problems we have right now…. (Rochon, 2015a)

The demand Dr. Rochon was referring to in his comment was the students’ call for his resignation. It is possible President Rochon was attempting to tell his audience he was not going to resign due to his feelings of care and commitment to the success of the college. Perhaps Dr. Rochon expressed these feelings so that the protesters would give him an opportunity to work with them on making improvements to the college culture.
Situational Crisis Communication
Theory Findings for Ithaca College Student Protests

As stated earlier, SCCT recommends crisis responders incorporate instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management through either denial, diminishment, or rebuilding strategies in their discourse (Coombs, 2007). Bolstering strategies are supplemental to other reputation management strategies and should not be used alone (Coombs, 2007). In the year following the crisis, President Rochon did not incorporate instructing information, perhaps because there was no immediate danger or threat to the safety of campus community members due to the crisis. However, President Rochon incorporated adjusting information in the form of describing corrective action the college would take in order to ensure a similar crisis would not happen again.

Regarding reputation management, SCCT recommends leaders provide a consistent message and therefore not mix denial strategies with either diminishment or rebuilding strategies (Coombs, 2007). Denial strategies are recommended for preventable crises, and diminishment strategies are recommended for accidental crises. Mixing the two strategies confuses stakeholders and can alter the audience’s perceptions and reactions to the crisis management (Coombs, 2007). It is unclear if President Rochon knew about SCCT recommendations; regardless, I found evidence President Rochon incorporated both denial and diminishment strategies in his discourse, which means he communicated about the crisis as if it were both accidental and preventable.

**Adjusting information.** According to SCCT, adjusting information can take two forms: it can include expressions of concern for the victims, or it can describe corrective action the institution will take to avoid a similar crisis (Coombs, 2007). I did not find
evidence in Dr. Rochon’s discourse that he communicated concern for victims of the crisis, which could include either the protesters or the underserved minority students who felt ignored. However, six months after the crisis, President Rochon authored an article describing corrective action the institution was planning:

The current wave of student activism created the impetus for a set of action items (ithaca.edu/diversity/diversity/) that addressed both diversity and inclusion. The initiatives bring much needed change to our hiring practices, our training of staff and faculty for cross-cultural competency, and the accountability we all share for an inclusive, welcoming campus. (Rochon, 2016a, para. 5)

This was the only evidence I found of President Rochon describing corrective action in the year following the crisis, and the written description did not include detail.

**Denial.** President Rochon did not directly deny the existence of the crisis, but he incorporated strategies to deny his responsibility for it. For example, in an interview with The Ithacan, the college’s student-run newspaper, Dr. Rochon was asked to name two things he would do differently as president if he were able to go back and redo anything. Even though this interview occurred just one week after the student protests, during a time students were calling for his resignation, he offered the following response, “What would be some things I would do differently? I live in terror with the idea that on my gravestone someday will be the sentence ‘He tried to make the flying squirrel the Ithaca College mascot.’ Maybe enough said” (Rochon, 2015a). President Rochon continued to talk about his efforts to find a mascot for the college several years prior, and how he was embarrassed that his suggestion of a flying squirrel was not received well by the student body. The fact that President Rochon did not choose to discuss any of his actions or
inactions that led to the current crisis situation may have been perceived by his audience as denial of responsibility for it.

A few days after the interview, President Rochon again denied his responsibility for creating the crisis in an article he authored for The Chronicle of Higher Education when he wrote:

In the wake of the decisions by the president of the University of Missouri system and the chancellor of its Columbia campus to step down in the face of similar protests, many people wonder if such resignations will become a trend. At Ithaca College, as well, the focus of student protest has been on me as president, not because of anything prejudicial I have done but due to a belief that the campus climate is not what it should be and that the buck stops with the president.

(Rochon, 2015b, p. 9)

At that time, students were calling for Dr. Rochon’s resignation due to perceptions that he personally was apathetic toward their concerns about diversity and inclusion on campus. However, he stated in the article that he had not done anything harmful to create the situation, which may have been perceived as a denial of his responsibility for the crisis.

A form of denial includes scapegoating, which is placing blame for the crisis on some other entity. During a question-and-answer session with Ithaca College’s Student Government Association, President Rochon was asked why he did not do more before the crisis to show he cared about underserved minority students on campus. He replied:

In the last three or so years, I was less of a campus presence than I had been in the prior five years, and there are a number of reasons for that, of which the main one is we launched into a fundraising campaign, and I spent much more time off
campus seeking to lay the foundations for a successful campaign. It’s not as if I was taking extended vacations. (Arnold, 2016, para. 6)

It appears as though Dr. Rochon was attributing his lack of time on campus and attention to minoritized students on the fundraising campaign, therefore, he was blaming the needs of the campaign for his absence. It is possible President Rochon pointed this out in an attempt to tell his audience that, if there hadn’t been a campaign, he would have been on campus more and been able to prevent the crisis.

**Diminishment.** President Rochon incorporated strategies in his discourse to minimize his, and the college’s, responsibility for the crisis. For example, in a statement given to the media a day after the alumni panel event, the event which sparked the protests, Dr. Rochon explained:

In general, the college cannot prevent the use of hurtful language on campus.

Such language, intentional or unintentional, exists in the world and will seep into our community. We can’t promise that the college will never host a speaker who could say something racist, homophobic, misogynistic, or otherwise disrespectful.  

(Griggs, 2015, para. 7)

It is possible President Rochon was attempting to manage expectations of the campus community regarding guests invited to campus, but it is also possible his words were an effort to distance the college from the speakers, thus minimizing perceptions the college was responsible.

President Rochon also used strategies to minimize the damage associated with the crisis. During an interview a few weeks after the protests, when Dr. Rochon was asked about his reactions to the national news media’s depiction of the situation, he replied:
Let’s notice there’s been no destruction of property, no violence or threatened violence against people. I feel that if you had no context whatsoever here, and you just read the headlines, you’d have a different expectation of what is happening here compared to what’s been happening. (Rochon, 2015c)

Downplaying the intensity of the crisis may have been Dr. Rochon’s attempt to draw attention away from his campus and from himself as its leader, which could have reduced stress, anxiety, and scrutiny.

As explained earlier in this section, President Rochon incorporated SCCT response strategies in his discourse that aligned with both a preventable and an accidental crisis. Mixing crisis response strategies can cause confusion and give audiences the perception of inconsistency (Coombs, 2007).

**Additional Themes for Ithaca College Student Protests**

**Opportunity.** President Rochon’s discourse contained two themes in addition to those already mentioned. Dr. Rochon often mentioned opportunity, but in his written discourse only. Specifically, President Rochon talked about the opportunity the crisis provided Ithaca College to make positive changes. For example, in an article President Rochon authored in The Chronicle of Higher Education, he wrote:

> Discussions of racism and other forms of bias are never comfortable and are too often avoided. The current wave of student activism, however, puts these issues front and center, thereby creating the opportunity for campus wide discussions marked by candor and openness to change. (Rochon, 2015b, p. 10)

Dr. Rochon may have been attempting to remind his audience that even though student protests about diversity and equity issues are challenging, they can have a positive
outcome. Perhaps he hoped that if campus leaders approached these types of crises with optimism instead of fear, productive conversations could begin, and a more welcoming and inclusive campus culture could be the result.

**Community.** Throughout the year, President Rochon spoke about community in both his written and spoken discourse. A few days after the protests, Dr. Rochon said in a statement, “…we reaffirm our commitment to making our campus an inclusive and respectful community” (Griggs, 2015, para. 8). In an article for The Chronicle of Higher Education, President Rochon wrote, “Inclusiveness is an important value, but especially so on a highly residential campus and in a tight-knit campus community like that of Ithaca College” (Rochon, 2015b, p. 9). Finally, in his convocation speech almost a year after the crisis, he referred to Ithaca College as a “community” 18 times (Rochon, 2016c). If a college student has a strong sense of community, they feel cared about (Cheng, 2004). It is possible President Rochon was attempting to strengthen campus community members’ sense of community so they would feel valued and would stop accusing him of ignoring their needs.

**Case Twelve Description:**
**Claremont McKenna College Student Protests**

In November 2015, Mary Spellman, Dean of Students at Claremont McKenna College, wrote an email to a Latina student, Lisette Espinosa, in support of an article Ms. Espinosa wrote for the school’s newspaper expressing her frustrations as a minority student on campus. In the email message, Dean Spellman expressed her desire to support students who “don’t fit the CMC mold.” The email became public, and students perceived Dr. Spellman’s words as offensive, insensitive and racist. On November 10,
2015, students participated in a sit-in at the college president’s office and demanded the president fire Dr. Spellman. On November 11, 2015, students participated in a rally, during which Dr. Spellman apologized, yet students started hunger strikes and other campus protests, vowing to continue until Dr. Spellman resigned. On November 12, 2015, Dr. Spellman resigned from her position. During this same time, minority students also expressed frustration and protested because, eight months prior, they had asked for a permanent safe space on campus dedicated to them. At that time, the college president did not have permanent space available so the students asked for a temporary space. The president told students a temporary space was not good enough for the student group and vowed to move forward with creating a permanent space. By November 2015, neither a permanent nor a temporary space had been created, thus fueling minority students’ frustrations that Claremont McKenna was not inclusive (Watanabe, 2015).

Claremont McKenna College is a private, liberal arts college located in Claremont, California, near Los Angeles. It was founded in 1946, first as a men’s college, and became coeducational in 1976. Today the college enrolls approximately 1,300 undergraduate students. During the protests, Hiram Chodosh was the president, and still serves in this role today. He is the fifth president of Claremont McKenna and has served in this role since 2013. President Chodosh was born in New Jersey, earned a Bachelor’s degree in History from Wesleyan University in 1985, and a law degree from Yale University in 1990. President Chodosh practiced law for three years before joining the law school faculty at Case Western Reserve University, where he taught for 13 years. In 2006, President Chodosh became Dean of the law school at the University of Utah,
and held this position until 2013, when he left to become the President of Claremont McKenna College (Claremont McKenna College, 2019).

I located five email updates President Chodosh wrote to the campus community, transcripts from one interview, transcripts from his commencement and convocation speeches, and video I transcribed from the student protest rally during which he spoke. I chose this case because, unlike the protests at the University of Missouri and Ithaca College, the protests at Claremont McKenna did not lead to the president’s resignation or retirement. Even though the dean of students resigned as a result of the Claremont McKenna protests, and the crisis made national news, the president stayed in his position, so I was interested to learn if President Chodosh’s discourse contained different elements than the other two student protest cases.

**Framing Device Findings for Claremont McKenna College Student Protests**

I found evidence President Chodosh used the argument, feeling statement, and repetition framing devices in his discourse the year following the crisis. Argument and repetition were used only in spoken discourse, but feeling statements were incorporated in both spoken and written discourse.

**Argument.** The day after students held a sit-in protest in President Chodosh’s office, they held a rally calling for Dean Spellman’s resignation. President Chodosh spoke at the rally, not with prepared remarks, but in order to answer many students’ questions and to address their concerns. At one point, a student reminded President Chodosh that eight months earlier, they talked about the college creating a temporary safe space for minority students, but President Chodosh had said a temporary space was not
good enough for them and vowed to create a permanent space, but then gave them nothing. The student expressed frustration that eight months later, minority students did not have a temporary or a permanent space. President Chodosh presented an argument for his perceived inactions:

You will remember too that we had two other parts of that conversation. And one had to do with creating spaces throughout the campus for support. And you’ll also remember that we have to have the proper, professional staff support, which is another thing that you have requested that we desperately need. Those two things have to coexist, and they have to be in concert. And I’ve been committed to that and we will do that. (Chodosh, 2015a)

Even though President Chodosh used argument to defend himself, his explanation was not accepted by students at the rally. Students were not confident that he would move toward creating either a temporary or a permanent safe space for them. It is possible that because students did not see action over an eight-month period, they were critical of President Chodosh’s renewed commitment.

**Feeling statement.** During the same student rally on November 11, 2015, President Chodosh expressed emotion when he said, “This is a very emotional moment for our college, and a very important one. I can’t begin to reinforce the voices that I’ve heard. I’m personally moved by them” (Chodosh, 2015a). At this point in the rally, students were expressing anger, frustration, and calling for Dean Spellman’s resignation, some were vowing to not eat until the dean resigned. Perhaps President Chodosh acknowledged the emotions that were being expressed in order to calm down the crowd.
When President Chodosh said he was personally moved by their voices, it may have been meant as a compliment, but was possibly an attempt to pacify the protesting students.

**Repetition.** During President Chodosh’s commencement speech in May 2016, six months after the protests, he used repetition when addressing the graduates:

Today we look back and forward, we look around and within, we are sad to leave and excited to get going. We celebrate, we recommit, we listen, we shout some more, we gather, we commence. We conclude, we go to move, and to be moved. We give thanks, and we search for meaning and guidance as our graduates cross the stage today. (Chodosh, 2016)

Even though President Chodosh was not speaking directly about the protests, he may have been referencing them when he said, “we shout some more.” By repeating the word “we,” President Chodosh may have created feelings of community and togetherness with his audience. It is possible he was attempting to remind his audience of the partnerships that can exist between administration and students, and to erase their memories of the conflict and resentment they had toward administration.

**Situational Crisis Communication**
**Theory Findings for Claremont McKenna College Student Protests**

As explained earlier, SCCT recommends crisis response leaders incorporate instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation management strategies based on the crisis type (Coombs, 2007). I did not find evidence President Chodosh incorporated instructing information in his discourse, perhaps because there was no imminent danger about which to warn campus community members, but there was evidence of adjusting information. The only reputation management strategy used was
bolstering in the form of President Chodosh praising and reminding stakeholders about
the college’s past good works. Because this was the only reputation management
strategy used, President Chodosh communicated about the crisis as if the college had
been a victim of it, which may not have aligned with stakeholders’ perception of the
college’s level of responsibility.

Adjusting information. Within a week after the protests, President Chodosh
twice provided corrective action the college was planning to ensure it was working
toward creating a more inclusive environment. Both communications were given via
email messages to the campus community. The first email message was sent the day
after the protests, and contained the following message:

In full alignment with the conversations with our students, we have highlighted a
number of institutional needs and action steps—much foundational work has been
done across the college and in the climate committee…. As I promised yesterday,
I want to set forth today key, concrete actions we have taken, highlighting those
of primary concern to students. (Chodosh, 2015b, para. 3)

President Chodosh continued by outlining several of the new initiatives. He provided
four paragraphs of information regarding student affairs, two related to academic affairs,
and two paragraphs devoted to campus dialogue. Five days later, President Chodosh sent
a second email to the campus community to provide updates on the initiatives. This
communication included five paragraphs related to student support and collaboration
initiatives and five paragraphs describing free speech and active listening proposals and
plans (Chodosh, 2016c).
Bolstering. In the year following the crisis, President Chodosh took opportunities to praise stakeholders and remind them of the college’s past good works, but he did not incorporate this strategy until six months after the crisis. During President Chodosh’s commencement speech on May 24, 2016, he said:

We are grateful for the continuing legacy of leadership at the college. But mostly we are thankful to two extended families here today. First, our internal college family, the faculty and staff of the college, who supported and challenged, shaped and championed for our 2016 graduates every single day of their four years here…. Second, we are especially thankful to our students’ families….

(Chodosh, 2016)

Thanking stakeholders may be a typical component in commencement addresses, and because these words were spoken over six months after the crisis, it is unclear whether or not President Chodosh was attempting to manage the crisis through ingratiation. Nevertheless, President Chodosh’s references to “family” may have caused his audience to feel a sense of belonging and perceive the college as a group of caring, supportive individuals, as opposed to an institution divided by race, which may have been the president’s goal.

President Chodosh’s discourse included elements to suggest he perceived Claremont McKenna had been a victim of the student protest crisis. Even though student protest crises are not specifically mentioned in SCCT, it is unlikely they would be categorized as a victim crisis type.
Additional Themes for Claremont McKenna College Student Protests

Yielding. Several times in the week following the crisis, President Chodosh’s demonstrated submissive, pliant leadership behavior in his discourse. For example, the day after the student sit-in, protesting students began posting flyers around campus, but they had not gone through the proper procedures to have the flyers approved according to college policy. President Chodosh instructed campus employees to keep the flyers in place. In an email written to the campus community, President Chodosh wrote:

I stand by our students. I support their right to speak out forcefully, and want their voices to be heard. In this extraordinarily important moment for our campus, I have asked that staff disregard our campus posting rules and refrain from removing these flyers until Monday morning to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to read and reflect on these narratives. (Chodosh, 2015b, para. 2)

It is unclear why the president decided to allow students to post the flyers without permission, but it is possible he did not want to cause the conflict to become worse by removing them.

During the student rally that was held the day after the student sit-in, a student in the crowd shouted that they wanted a temporary safe space for minority students on campus with an understanding that they would also get a permanent space. President Chodosh replied, “We will not do a temporary space. We are working on a permanent space” (Chodosh, 2015a). After some additional exchange between students and President Chodosh, few minutes later, the president said, “If you feel that you need a
space tomorrow, we will create that space tomorrow” (Chodosh, 2015a). After continued student objection, the exchange ended when President Chodosh said:

I commit to both a temporary and a formal space, with a condition. That the student leadership of the college work with me and our staff on the development of such a space, the selection of the space, and how we are going to resource the space so that it has the proper level of support. (Chodosh, 2015a)

During the rally, the president’s communication changed from refusing a temporary space to allowing a temporary space with student involvement in its creation. As with the previous example, it is possible President Chodosh decided to accommodate this request to calm students at the rally and prevent the situation from becoming even more intense. It is possible this may have led to a perception of weak leadership.

Less than one week after the sit-in, and a few days after Dean Spellman resigned, President Chodosh sent an email update to the campus community outlining initiatives the college was taking to create a more inclusive environment. Part of the president’s update included the following information:

In light of the current situation the campus climate committee has decided to temporarily expand its membership to ensure a broader representation of students from across the college and to focus its work on developing an inclusive process for campus wide, action oriented conversations. (Chodosh, 2015c, para. 9)

While this may not have been the president’s decision alone, it is possible he approved, or maybe even encouraged, the committee to accommodate more students, possibly in an effort to appease the protesters. President Chodosh’s email closed with, “Our students are teaching us to practice what we preach” (Chodosh, 2015c, para. 11). This statement,
coming from the president, who holds a position of authority on campus, acknowledged the power and influence he gave to the student protesters. It is possible he was still attempting to comply with student requests to calm the situation so that it would not escalate.

After this first week, President Chodosh’s discourse did not appear to include themes of subservience. It is possible that, after the initial week of protests on campus, the unrest subsided and the president felt it was no longer necessary to exhibit a compliant leadership style. It is also possible that after the first week he felt the situation was under control and did not need to continue this type of discourse.

Summary of Student Protest Cases

Each of the presidents in the three student protest cases experienced a different fate: University of Missouri President Wolfe resigned due to the crisis, Ithaca College President Rochon announced his retirement during the crisis yet it did not take effect until 18 months after, and Claremont McKenna College President Chodosh remained in his role, and still serves as the president today, although the dean of student affairs resigned during the height of the student protests. Nine of the 11 framing devices were used by at least one of the three presidents, the only two framing devices not used by any president were metaphor and three-part list. Metaphors are used to portray a situation’s resemblance to something else, and since the student protests started because minority students felt ignored and marginalized, it is possible the presidents did not want to cause students to think that the president perceived their feelings were not unique by comparing them to other situations. The other framing device not used by any of the presidents,
three-part list, may not have been found in the data because there may not have been a grouping of three things any of the presidents wanted their audience to remember.

All three of the presidents used the argument and feeling statement framing devices. Argument was used early in each crisis, to explain why certain decisions were made and to describe the presidents’ perceptions of how the institutions arrived in the place they currently were. Feeling statements were used express sadness for the current situation, love for the institution, and sympathy for minoritized students.

Recommended SCCT theory was used differently by each of the three presidents. University of Missouri President Wolfe and Interim President Middleton communicated about the crisis as if it were preventable, President Rochon at Ithaca College mixed crisis response strategies and communicated about the crisis as if it were both preventable and accidental, and Claremont McKenna College President Rochon communicated about the crisis as if the college were a victim of it. This lack of consistency may be explained because minority student protests are a new type of crisis, so it may have been unclear to each president how they should communicate about them. SCCT theory does not include student protests in their crisis categories, so there is no recommended crisis response for this type of crisis. Nonetheless, it is likely minority students perceived the protests would have been preventable had the institution developed a more inclusive culture, so students may have wanted their presidents to include crisis communication strategies that were aligned with preventable crises.

Additional themes found in the data were unique to all three presidents, but at the University of Missouri and Ithaca College, themes included optimistic elements such as
opportunity to make positive changes, community, and moving forward, while the theme from the president of Claremont McKenna College was that of pliability.

**Summary of Research Question Findings**

**Research Question One**

This section summarizes findings for the first research question, “In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using framing devices in their discourse?” As shown in Table 1, all 11 framing devices were used by the group of 12 presidents. Feeling statements were used most often with 11 out of the 12 presidents incorporating them in their discourse, and most presidents used them multiple times on multiple occasions throughout the year following the crisis impacting their campus. Crises can elicit emotions such as fear, grief, mistrust, and anger, so it is possible the presidents wanted to acknowledge these emotions to build community and support the healing process, and tried to accomplish this by discussing either their own feelings or those of the campus community. The framing devices with the next most frequent usage were argument and repetition, with ten and nine presidents incorporating them, respectively. Argument was used differently in each crisis type while repetition was used most often in formal, planned speeches such as commencement and graduation, possibly to help audiences remember the presidents’ key points.

The framing device used least often by all 12 presidents was analogy, with only one president incorporating it into their discourse. Because analogy frames a subject’s similarities with something else (Fairhurst, 2011), it is possible the presidents avoided this framing device so as not to minimize their challenging situations or the feelings of campus community members.
Table 1  

_Framing Device Findings_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis Type</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Framing Devices Incorporated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental</td>
<td>Tulane University Hurricane Katrina</td>
<td>Metaphor, story, contrast, catchphrase, argument, feeling statement, three-part list, repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Iowa flood</td>
<td>Metaphor, story, argument, feeling statement, category, repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CSUN earthquake</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentional</td>
<td>Virginia Tech shootings</td>
<td>Metaphor, story, contrast, argument, feeling statement, category, repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Penn State/Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse</td>
<td>Metaphor, story, contrast, spin, argument, feeling statement, repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FAMU Marching 100 hazing death</td>
<td>Catchphrase, argument, feeling statement, repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Texas A&amp;M bonfire collapse</td>
<td>Contrast, catchphrase, argument, feeling statement, repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OSU plane crash</td>
<td>Catchphrase, feeling statement, repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seton Hall residence hall fire</td>
<td>Story, contrast, argument, feeling statement, three-part list, repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student protests</td>
<td>University of Missouri</td>
<td>Contrast, spin, catchphrase, argument, feeling statement, category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ithaca College</td>
<td>Story, analogy, argument, feeling statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claremont McKenna College</td>
<td>Argument, feeling statement, repetition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Presidents leading their institutions through the environmental crises, Dr. Cowen with Hurricane Katrina at Tulane University and Dr. Mason with the University of Iowa flood, used a wider variety of framing devices compared to presidents leading other types of crises. Both presidents included metaphor, story, argument, feeling statements, and repetition most in their discourse. As mentioned previously, Dr. Wilson, who was president of CSU-N during the earthquake, did not appear to use any framing devices in her discourse. Dr. Cowen and Dr. Mason used metaphors to describe either the crisis event itself, or campus community members’ courage and efforts during and after the crisis. Stories were used later in the year and included memories and accounts of the crisis events. Argument was used early on after the crisis to express frustration with the destruction the natural disasters created, and as mentioned earlier, feeling statements were used to describe sadness, worry, and pride of the resilience and positive attitudes of campus community members, while repetition was used during formal speeches, possibly to help audience members remember important points.

Presidents leading their institutions through intentional crises, Dr. Steger with the Virginia Tech shootings, Presidents Spanier and Erickson with the Penn State sexual abuse scandal, and Presidents Ammons and Robinson with the FAMU Marching 100 hazing death, all used the argument, feeling statement, and repetition framing devices. Argument was incorporated early after each crisis to defend criticisms of decisions made, while feeling statements were used throughout the year to express feelings of sorrow and sadness for the tragedies. Finally, repetition was used in spoken discourse, possibly as a means to help audience members remember key takeaways, similar to the way repetition was used in other crisis types.
President Bowen with the Texas A&M bonfire collapse, President Halligan with the OSU plane crash, and President Sheeran with the Seton Hall residence hall fire, all accidental crises, used feeling statements and repetition in their discourse. Similar to intentional crises, all three presidents leading their institutions through accidental crises expressed feelings of sadness and grief for the tragedies and incorporated repetition into spoken discourse.

Finally, Presidents Wolfe and Middleton with the University of Missouri, President Rochon with Ithaca College, and President Chodosh with Claremont McKenna College, who led their institutions through student protest crises, all used argument and feeling statement framing devices in their discourse. Argument was used to defend decisions the presidents made, while feeling statements were used to express commitment to the school and minoritized student groups.

Given these findings, I believe presidents use framing devices as tools to influence audience members’ perceptions of their leadership, the institution’s reputation and ability to recover after the crisis, and the crisis event itself. I believe presidents use certain framing devices such as repetition and argument to be viewed as strong, confident leaders who are in control of the crisis situation. Presidents also want to appear authentic, approachable and caring, therefore they use other framing devices such as feeling statements to humanize themselves and emphasize personality characteristics such as compassion and warmth. Story gives presidents an opportunity to mention specific parts of the crisis recovery they want their audience to remember and avoid other parts they want their audience to forget. I believe presidents who lead their institution
through a crisis use framing devices for their intended purpose, which is to provide a lens
through which an audience, in this case a campus community, views an event or a person.

**Research Question Two**

The second research question, “In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using crisis response strategies recommended by situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) in their discourse?” is summarized in this section. According to SCCT recommendations, leaders managing all types of crises should incorporate instructing information to tell stakeholders what to do to protect themselves during the crisis, and adjusting information to express care and concern for victims and describe corrective action taken to avoid a similar crisis in the future. Next, crisis leaders should incorporate reputation management strategies based on the type of crisis experienced: denial, diminishment, rebuilding through compensation or apology, or bolstering. SCCT suggests crisis managers incorporate only instructing and adjusting information for victim crises, diminishment strategies for accidental crises and rebuilding strategies for any preventable crisis. Bolstering can be used independently of the other reputation management strategies (Coombs, 2007). Table 2 provides a summary of the ways in which HEI presidents’ discourse content aligned with communication strategies recommended by SCCT, and will be described in detail in the remainder of this section.

Environmental crises, cases 1-3, are included in the victim crisis category, thus stakeholders attribute very little, if any, responsibility for the crisis to the institution (Coombs, 2007). If the presidents’ discourse aligned with SCCT recommendations, they would have incorporated instructing information and adjusting information in their discourse, with bolstering as an optional strategy. The data showed all three presidents
Table 2

*SCCT Recommendation Alignment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis Type</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Crisis category recommended by SCCT</th>
<th>With which SCCT crisis category did communication align?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental</td>
<td>Tulane University Hurricane Katrina</td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>Victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Iowa flood</td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>Victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CSUN earthquake</td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>Victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentional</td>
<td>Virginia Tech shootings</td>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>Victim, accidental, and preventable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Penn State/Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse</td>
<td>Preventable</td>
<td>Preventable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FAMU Marching 100 hazing death</td>
<td>Preventable</td>
<td>Accidental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Texas A&amp;M bonfire collapse</td>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OSU plane crash</td>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Preventable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seton Hall residence hall fire</td>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student protests</td>
<td>University of Missouri</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Preventable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ithaca College</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Accidental and preventable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claremont McKenna College</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Victim</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
incorporated the recommended strategies, including bolstering. Further, the presidents incorporated only these strategies and no additional ones. Therefore, they all communicated about their crises as if the institutions were victims, which aligns with SCCT recommendations.

The intentional crises included in this study, cases 4-6, fell under two different crisis types. The Virginia Tech shootings were an example of workplace violence, which are victim crises (Coombs, 2007). Therefore, President Steger should have incorporated instructing information, adjusting information, and bolstering in his discourse, which he did. However, President Steger also included crisis response strategies that align with accidental and preventable crises, which means he communicated about the crisis as if it were three different types. This may have confused his audiences and campus community members. The Penn State Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse scandal and the FAMU Marching 100 hazing death were both immoral and illegal acts, which, according to SCCT, puts both of them in the preventable crisis category (Coombs, 2007).

Presidents Erickson, Ammons, and Robinson should have incorporated instructing information, adjusting information, and rebuilding reputation management strategies into their discourse. President Erickson’s discourse about the Penn State crisis aligned with SCCT recommendations. However, with the FAMU Marching 100 hazing death, both of the presidents used denial strategies but should not have, and both communicated about the crisis as if it had been an accident, not preventable. Therefore, it appears as though only President Erickson followed SCCT recommendations.

The accidental crises included in this study, cases 7-9, all fit under the accidental crisis category in SCCT. If Presidents Bowen, Halligan, and Sheeran had incorporated
recommended SCCT strategies, they would have included instructing information, adjusting information, and diminishment strategies. None of the presidents incorporated instructing information, all used adjusting information, and none used diminishment strategies, which means none of the presidents leading their institutions through accidental crises followed SCCT recommendations.

The student protest crises, cases 10-12, were not listed under any of the SCCT crisis types, therefore, it was unclear how presidents should communicate about them if they were to follow this theory. It is likely campus community members perceived these crises were preventable and attributed a high level of responsibility to the institutions for creating the cultures that led to the crises. Only University of Missouri Presidents Wolfe and Middleton incorporated SCCT strategies that align with the preventable crisis type. Ithaca College President Rochon communicated about his crisis as if it were both accidental and preventable, and Claremont McKenna College President Chodosh incorporated crisis response strategies that aligned with the victim crisis type.

All three of the presidents leading their institutions through environmental crises incorporated crisis response strategies that align with those recommended by SCCT. Other than these three, the only other presidents who incorporated SCCT strategies were Presidents Wolfe and Middleton, who communicated about the student protest crisis at the University of Missouri as if it had been preventable.

Considering these findings, I believe environmental crises provide presidents with the most clarity regarding crisis responsibility. Neither HEIs nor presidents are held responsible for causing natural disasters, thus, it is intuitive for presidents to incorporate consistent language that does not attribute blame to themselves or their institutions, and
audiences accept these messages because they too believe the institution was not responsible for the crisis. On the other hand, I believe crises for which the campus community attributes either partial or complete blame on the president or institution are more difficult. Presidents may change their messages in response to audience reaction, trying different approaches until they gain favor, or they may be unclear themselves who is to blame.

**Research Question Three**

This section summarizes findings for the third research question, “What were other primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis?” As shown in Table 3, the presidents who led their institutions through an environmental crisis incorporated common themes in their discourse of optimism, positivity, and messages that their institutions would rebound from the crisis and be better than before. It is possible the presidents wanted to ensure current and future students that their institutions were not only functioning but were also sound, safe, and worthy of enrollment. Presidents from intentional crises did not have common themes between them: President Steger’s discourse incorporated elements of school spirit and community, while Dr. Erickson’s included messages of accepting responsibility and moving forward, and Presidents Ammons and Robinson included tough talk about punishments for students caught hazing in their discourse, but their plans to eliminate hazing lacked specifics. Accidental crisis presidents’ discourse included similar themes of community-building, perhaps because campus communities were caught off guard by the crises and possibly needed a leader to bring them together to grieve, like members of a family experiencing an unexpected death might. Finally, the
Table 3

*Other Emergent Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis Type</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Additional Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental</td>
<td>Tulane University Hurricane Katrina</td>
<td>Positive outlook, school spirit, better than before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Iowa flood</td>
<td>Positive outlook, school spirit, better than before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CSUN earthquake</td>
<td>Positive outlook, better than before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentional</td>
<td>Virginia Tech shootings</td>
<td>Community, school spirit, acknowledge pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Penn State/Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse</td>
<td>Move forward, accept responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FAMU Marching 100 hazing death</td>
<td>Vague promises, tough talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Texas A&amp;M bonfire collapse</td>
<td>Family, seek truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OSU plane crash</td>
<td>Family, community, drawing awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seton Hall residence hall fire</td>
<td>Comfort through faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student protests</td>
<td>University of Missouri</td>
<td>Better than before, move forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ithaca College</td>
<td>Community, opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claremont McKenna College</td>
<td>Subservience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
discourse of the presidents who led their institutions through student unrest due to frustrations with perceived campus cultures that lacked inclusivity did not have common themes. University of Missouri Presidents Wolfe and Middleton included themes of moving forward and optimism of creating a better institution in their discourse, Ithaca College President Rochon often spoke of community and family, and Claremont McKenna College President Chodosh’s discourse contained elements of subservience to the student protesters.

Based on these findings, I believe presidents value their institutions as communities in which members support one another, like a close-knit family does. Presidents might be motivated to build a sense of community in order to foster feelings of belonging, membership, and loyalty, which can help current students stay at the institution to complete their degrees and create faithful, devoted alumni who donate to the institution and send their family members there. I also believe presidents attempt to convey positivity and optimism so that the campus community and the general public will not lose faith in the president or the institution’s ability to make a full recovery. This is important after a crisis in which enrollment and financial donations are critical to regain footing and direction.

**Research Question Four**

The fourth research question, “What were the primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an environmental crisis as compared to an intentional crisis as compared to an accidental crisis as compared to a student protest crisis?” is summarized next. Presidents leading after accidental crises used a total of seven different framing devices, while presidents leading after the other
crises each used a total of nine per crisis type. Discourse after the environmental crisis cases appeared to have the most alignment with SCCT recommendations and consistent themes, perhaps because there is little responsibility for the crisis attributed to the institution, making post-crisis discourse more intuitive to presidents. President discourse following the intentional and student protest crises included in this study contained the least alignment with SCCT recommendations and least consistent additional themes.

Given these findings, I believe intentional and student protest crises were difficult to discuss and respond to due to shifts in public reaction, media attention, changes in information, or perhaps due to a lack of similar crises presidents could use for guidance. Environmental crises were the most contained, possibly because their start is easily identified and there is little chance community members will suspect intentional wrongdoing or the possibility the president was complicit. Lack of consistency within crisis types also provides evidence more support and training for presidents is needed.

Table 4 provides a summary of all findings for framing devices, SCCT alignment, and other emergent themes, illustrating similarities and differences in discourse content within and between crisis types. This table can be used as an overview or to quickly review all findings presented in this chapter for individual cases and crisis types. The following, final chapter includes discussion, implications, and concluding thoughts.
### Table 4

**Summary of Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crisis Type</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Framing Devices</th>
<th>SCCT Recommendations</th>
<th>Additional Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental</td>
<td>Tulane University</td>
<td>Metaphor, story, contrast, catchphrase, argument, feeling statement, three-part list, repetition</td>
<td>Communication aligned with victim crisis category</td>
<td>Positive outlook, school spirit, better than before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hurricane Katrina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of Iowa flood</td>
<td>Metaphor, story, argument, feeling statement, category, repetition</td>
<td>Communication aligned with victim crisis category</td>
<td>Positive outlook, school spirit, better than before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CSUN earthquake</td>
<td></td>
<td>Communication aligned with victim crisis category</td>
<td>Positive outlook, better than before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentional</td>
<td>Virginia Tech shootings</td>
<td>Metaphor, story, contrast, argument, feeling statement, category, repetition</td>
<td>Communication aligned with victim, accidental, and preventable crisis categories</td>
<td>Community, school spirit, acknowledge pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Penn State/Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse</td>
<td>Metaphor, story, contrast, spin, argument, feeling statement, repetition</td>
<td>Communication aligned with preventable crisis category</td>
<td>Move forward, accept responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FAMU Marching 100 hazing death</td>
<td>Catchphrase, argument, feeling statement, repetition</td>
<td>Communication aligned with accidental crisis category</td>
<td>Vague promises, tough talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Type</td>
<td>Case</td>
<td>Framing Devices</td>
<td>SCCT Recommendations</td>
<td>Additional Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidental</td>
<td>Texas A&amp;M bonfire collapse</td>
<td>Contrast, catchphrase, argument, feeling statement, repetition</td>
<td>Communication aligned with victim crisis category</td>
<td>Family, seek truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OSU plane crash</td>
<td>Catchphrase, feeling statement, repetition</td>
<td>Communication aligned with preventable crisis category</td>
<td>Family, community, drawing awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seton Hall residence hall fire</td>
<td>Story, contrast, argument, feeling statement, three-part list, repetition</td>
<td>Communication aligned with victim crisis category</td>
<td>Comfort through faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student protests</td>
<td>University of Missouri</td>
<td>Contrast, spin, catchphrase, argument, feeling statement, category</td>
<td>Communication aligned with preventable crisis category</td>
<td>Better than before, move forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ithaca College</td>
<td>Story, analogy, argument, feeling statement</td>
<td>Communication aligned with accidental and preventable crisis categories</td>
<td>Community, opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claremont McKenna College</td>
<td>Argument, feeling statement, repetition</td>
<td>Communication aligned with victim crisis category</td>
<td>Subservience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a summary of the study and important conclusions drawn from the data presented in Chapter IV. It provides a discussion of the implications for action and recommendations for further research. Finally, it concludes with key takeaways and final thoughts.

Summary of Study

After a crisis impacts a campus community, internal and external stakeholders rely on the HEI president to successfully lead the institution through the event and recovery (Bion & Hart, 2003; Hincker, 2014). Important post-crisis leadership qualities include strength, visibility, organization, and decision-making, but one of the most essential components is communication (Blumenthal, 1995). Some crisis managers in the corporate sector use framing devices and crisis communication theory as tools to guide their post-crisis discourse, but there is currently a weak connection between crisis communication, higher education, and the HEI president role. The purpose of this study was to explore HEI president discourse after an on-campus crisis, specifically examining ways in which framing devices and recommendations from crisis communication theory are used. The following questions guided the research:

Q1 In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using framing devices in their discourse?
Q2 In what ways were HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis using crisis response strategies recommended by situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) in their discourse?

Q3 What were other primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an on-campus crisis?

Q4 What were the primary messages conveyed in the discourse given by HEI presidents whose institution experienced an environmental crisis as compared to an intentional crisis as compared to an accidental crisis as compared to a student protest crisis?

A post-positivist paradigm provided a lens through which the entire study was viewed. I used comparative case study and content analysis to explore HEI president discourse in 12 different crisis cases that impacted each president’s institution. Crises selected fell under one of the following four types: environmental, intentional, accidental, and student protest. Data included transcripts from speeches, press conferences, interviews, and statements, and written discourse in the form of emails, editorials and authored articles, and was collected starting the day the crisis impacted the institution through one year following.

Major findings include usage of framing devices, strategies recommended by SCCT, and other themes. Framing devices were used frequently and throughout the year following each of the 12 crises, with feeling statements used most often and to describe reactions to the crisis event, and argument used to defend difficult decisions made. Framing devices that compare the subject’s likeness to something else, such as analogy, were avoided, as were positive and negative spin. Presidents leading their institutions through environmental crises used the widest variety of framing devices throughout the year following the events.
Due to the nature of this study, it is unclear if the HEI presidents were aware of the crisis communication strategies recommended by SCCT. Nevertheless, all HEI presidents leading their institution through an environmental crisis used communication strategies that align with SCCT recommendations, while none of the HEI presidents in the intentional or accidental crisis cases incorporated SCCT recommended strategies in their discourse. Presidents leading their institutions through student protest crises were mixed: The University of Missouri presidents appeared to incorporate SCCT strategies in their discourse, while the presidents of Ithaca College and Claremont McKenna College did not.

Additional themes found in the presidents’ discourse of the three environmental crisis cases contained common elements of positivity and optimism. The presidents leading their institutions after the three accidental crises also contained common themes, but these were of family and community. There were no consistent common themes in the presidents’ discourse within the intentional or student protest crisis types.

**Findings Related to the Literature**

**Framing Device Findings Related to the Literature**

Chapter IV presented findings from the data as it related to framing devices, SCCT, and other emergent themes. This section will relate the findings to the literature as outlined in Chapter II. As mentioned in Chapter II, scholarly research connecting framing devices to higher education was light. One dissertation found university presidents use framing devices in their formal speeches (Young, 2013), but a search of the literature did not find any studies examining framing device usage in HEI president discourse after crisis. Thus, this study broke new ground in that it connected framing
device usage to HEI presidents who lead after a crisis event, extending Young’s (2013) work.

**Situational Crisis Communication Theory Findings Related to the Literature**

As discussed in Chapter II, several studies examined crisis responses used by leaders in an organization to determine if the appropriate strategies were used according to SCCT recommendations (Kim & Liu, 2012; Sisco, 2012b; Sisco et al., 2010; Weber et al., 2011). Studies involving crises that fell under a currently existing SCCT crisis category found crisis leaders’ discourse did not correspond with recommended crisis response strategies (Sisco, 2012b; Sisco et al., 2010). In this study, cases 1-3, environmental crises, matched one of the SCCT crisis categories, and found all three HEI presidents’ discourse aligned with SCCT crisis response recommendations. Cases 4-6, intentional crises, and cases 7-9, accidental crises, also corresponded with one of the SCCT crisis categories, but none of the presidents’ discourse in these cases aligned with recommended response strategies.

The literature also contained studies in which the crisis examined did not correspond with any of the SCCT crisis types. For example, financial crises are not specifically listed under any SCCT crisis type, so studies that examined discourse after corporate financial crisis did not explore if leaders’ communication followed recommended SCCT strategies, rather, they sought to determine with which crisis type leaders centered their discourse. One study found a corporation’s leader navigating a financial crisis spoke about the crisis as if it were both accidental and preventable (Cooley & Cooley, 2011), while another determined a leader communicated about his
company’s financial crisis in just one way, as if it had been preventable (Weber et al., 2011). Similarly, in this study, cases 10-12, student protest crises, did not match any SCCT crisis type, so SCCT recommendations were not applicable. Like the Weber et al. study (2011), University of Missouri presidents communicated about their student protest crisis as if it had been preventable, which may have aligned with stakeholders’ perception of the crisis. While the Claremont McKenna College president also communicated about his student protest consistently, he incorporated crisis response strategies that signaled his institution had been a victim of the crisis, which may not have aligned with campus community members’ opinions. Finally, the leaders in the Cooley and Cooley study (2011) and Ithaca College President Rochon incorporated mixed strategies in their discourse, both communicated about their crises as if they had been both accidental and preventable. While it is unclear under which crisis type a financial crisis and student protest crisis falls, SCCT does not recommend leaders mix crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007).

**Other Themes Findings Related to the Literature**

Both scholarly research and non-scholarly advice from higher education leaders suggest HEI presidents disseminate information quickly, acknowledge the need for healing, build community, communicate corrective action the institution will take to prevent a similar crisis, and thank internal and external stakeholders for their assistance and support after a crisis occurs (Kuypers, 2007; Lawson, 2007; Parrot, 2012). In this study, HEI presidents leading in all 12 cases followed these recommendations by either expressing care and concern for victims or describing steps the institution would take to prevent a similar crisis from reoccurring, or both. In each of the four crisis types
explored, a majority, but not all, of the HEI presidents thanked or praised stakeholders. Only one president, Dr. Steger, who led his institution through the Virginia Tech shootings, frequently acknowledged his campus community’s need for healing. Half of the cases explored included HEI president discourse with elements of community building: Tulane University/Hurricane Katrina, University of Iowa flood, Virginia Tech shootings, Texas A&M bonfire collapse, OSU plane crash, and Ithaca College student protests. Cases in which there was a change in president leadership in the year following the crisis, which included Penn State/Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse, FAMU Marching 100 band hazing death, and University of Missouri student protests, did not include discourse that aligned with literature’s recommendations to include elements of community-building. It is unclear if a lack of reference to family and community led to the changes in leadership for these three crises, but the relationship is worth noting.

Discussion

As mentioned in Chapters I and II, during crisis and its aftermath, communities expect leaders to provide direction, information, comfort, strength, confidence, swift and appropriate action, and to be a spokesperson (Bion & Hart, 2003; Foote, 1996; Hincker, 2014). Leaders who do not exhibit these qualities can be perceived as weak or ineffective (Hincker, 2014). In three of the 12 crises studied, presidents either resigned or were asked to step down at the beginning or sometime during the year following the crisis: President Spanier from Penn State University was asked to resign just as the scandal became public due to perceived knowledge of the sexual abuse crisis, President Ammons from Florida A&M University was asked to resign because of perceived inactions to eliminate hazing, and President Wolfe from the University of Missouri, resigned in an
attempt to end the protests. In each of these cases, perceptions were that the presidents knew there were problems but failed to act, which contradicts expectations community members have of their leaders after a crisis. Perceptions were that President Spanier did not stop Jerry Sandusky from sexually abusing young boys, President Ammons did not end hazing, and President Wolfe did not change the culture of insensitivity toward minority students on his campus. It is unclear if the perceptions of the presidents’ inabilitys to lead through these crises directly impacted their resignations, but the connection is worth noting.

In addition to exhibiting qualities strength, comfort, confidence, and action after a crisis, leaders are expected to incorporate language to provide direction, calm fears, and show sympathy toward victims and their families (Klann, 2003). Penn State University President Spanier resigned the day the sexual abuse crisis broke, so I was unable to analyze his discourse. As presented in Chapter IV, President Ammons promised to end hazing but did not incorporate a concrete plan for how he would, which may have shown a lack of direction. He showed sympathy to the victim in his spoken discourse, but did not appear to have a memorial service, nor did he incorporate discourse directed specifically to calming fears community members may have had about their safety or the safety of loved ones on campus. President Wolfe resigned just a few weeks into the crisis, but in those few weeks he said there was not a racism problem at the university but then reversed his opinion, did not talk to students during the homecoming parade when they attempted to engage him, did not meet with students about their demands, which led to student hunger strikes. I did not find language in President Wolfe’s discourse dedicated to providing direction or calming fears. As in the previous paragraph, it is
important to point out these relationships, but it is unclear if the presidents’ discourse content, or lack thereof, caused perceptions of weak leadership and eventual resignations.

An organization’s culture is revealed and communicated through its symbols (Bolman & Deal, 2013). One of the responsibilities of an HEI president is to serve a symbolic function for the institution after a crisis by being physically present (Klann, 2003). When authorities in Iowa warned the university of a possible flood, President Mason went to the riverbank and helped place sandbags (Mason, 2014). President Cowen stayed behind to help after he evacuated Tulane University (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007b). Presidents Bowen and Halligan went to the sites of the bonfire collapse and plane crash, respectively, when their institutions were impacted by crisis (Paterson et al., 2007). President Sheeran moved into a room in Boland Hall after it was restored from the fire to live in the same residence hall as students (Brown et al., 2007). In these environmental and accidental crisis cases, each of the presidents were physically present to help and support and serve in their symbolic roles, and each successfully led their institutions through crisis. In contrast, President Wolfe was perceived as inaccessible and unwilling to talk with students about their concerns (Pearson, 2015). He was not physically present to serve as a symbol of the institution during the crisis. Student demands for President Wolfe’s resignation strengthened, until he stepped down. There is more to successfully managing a crisis than being visible, but there is evidence that presidents who immersed themselves in the campus community and fulfilled their symbolic responsibilities after the crisis were more successful than those who did not.

If crisis communication is not proactive, the media can fill in gaps with negative assumptions (White, 2009). Presidents leading their institution through an intentional
crisis all communicated quickly after their crises went public, perhaps to stay ahead of media criticism. For example, two days after the news broke of the Penn State sexual abuse scandal, newly-appointed President Erickson sent a video message to the campus community addressing the crisis (Erickson, 2011a). A day after Robert Champion died, FAMU President Ammons held a press conference to answer questions and express concern (Florida A&M University Family Mourns, 2011). President Steger held a press conference the day of the Virginia Tech shootings to provide information (Steger, 2007b). In all three of the student protest crises, presidents communicated publicly the day the media started covering the stories on their campuses. It is possible all six presidents were attempting to communicate proactively in an attempt to control the narrative and prevent media speculation.

Of all four crisis types, HEI presidents leading through environmental crises had the most consistent discourse with one another and the most alignment with SCCT recommendations. It is possible that, of all crisis types considered in this study, environmental crises may be the most straightforward regarding responsibility and required recovery. Perhaps all three HEI presidents believed their institution was not to blame for causing the environmental crisis and believed their campus communities felt the same way. It is possible each president could have been blamed afterwards for lack of organization or mismanaged recovery, but the crisis event itself was more than likely caused by nature, not due to anything the campus community did or did not do. Therefore, it is possible that, in addition to the three environmental cases included in this study, most HEI presidents would naturally communicate about an environmental crisis as if the institution were a victim. Further, each of the three environmental crisis cases
resulted in physical destruction on the impacted campuses and required rebuilding, and all three presidents incorporated optimism and reassurance in their discourse that the institution would recover but would need financial assistance. This may tell us that HEI presidents who lead their institutions through an environmental crisis feel they need to reassure current and future students that the institution will continue to thrive but will need help in order to do so. Because the institution was not to blame for causing the crisis, it is possible campus community members, alumni, and friends of the institution found it easy to rally behind the institution’s recovery efforts.

For the other three crisis types, intentional, accidental, and student protest, it may not have been as obvious or intuitive to know who was to blame for the cause, which may explain why communication by the HEI president was not always consistent, and did not always align with SCCT recommendations. It is also possible that once news of the crisis spread, HEI presidents reacted to perceptions of others regarding blame and therefore changed their discourse to better align with what the public’s reactions were.

It would benefit HEI presidents and their stakeholders to respond to crisis in a consistent way. Presidents who change their message during crisis recovery may risk confusing their audience and causing constituents to question their leadership. Even though a president may first communicate about a crisis as if the institution were a victim of it, then change their discourse content to acknowledge that the institution may be at fault, a president who changes the content of their discourse as a result of public or media reaction may be perceived as weak or irresolute. Many HEI presidents have a crisis communication team or a public relations staff; these team members too should either communicate, or support the president to communicate, consistently about the crisis.
I do not believe the size or type of the crisis should impact discourse content, with the exception of warning the campus community or giving instructions to keep individuals safe. Some crises happen so quickly it is not possible to warn campus community members. Other crises, such as accidental, do not put the rest of the campus community in danger, so it may not be appropriate for the president to provide instructing information. A smaller crisis, even one without loss of life such as a financial crisis, may not require instructing information, but it still requires careful, consistent discourse, as would a much larger crisis with many casualties and receiving media attention.

Regardless of the level of press coverage, the campus community will hear the president’s message, which should not change just because a news station camera might be present. Some crises threaten the safety of people on or around campus. In these cases, HEI presidents should communicate quickly and clearly to provide instructions to community members on how to stay safe, then after the immediate threat is over, presidents should ensure campus community members are safe and provide instructions on when or how to return to campus. In all crisis cases, presidents should describe lessons learned and corrective action taken to ensure a similar crisis will not happen again, express care and concern for the safety of community members’ healing process, and rebuild trust by managing the institution’s reputation carefully, consistently, and authentically.

Before conducting this study I thought about which elements may or may not be present in the data. I wondered if the presidents would directly mention the crisis throughout the year and if so, if they would mention the crisis on the one-year anniversary, hold a commemoration ceremony, or construct a memorial. I supposed
presidents leading after environmental crises would often mention it afterwards, perhaps in order to remind stakeholders of the need to contribute money or other support for the institution’s recovery efforts. I also considered presidents leading after intentional crises and wondered if they would avoid mentioning the crisis because they did not want to remind their campus communities of the tragedy. As presented in Chapter IV, I found evidence that presidents leading after environmental crises mentioned the tragedy throughout the year, often by telling stories and using victimage strategies, especially during planned speeches such as commencement, which aligned with my expectations. While the presidents of the Penn State/Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse and FAMU Marching 100 hazing death crises avoided mentioning them, I was surprised to learn how often the president of the Virginia Tech shootings mentioned the tragedy to various stakeholder groups. Throughout the study I learned President Steger communicated about the crisis as if Virginia Tech had been a victim, while Presidents Erickson, Ammons, and Robinson did not. Thus, it appears as though perceptions of victimage may have given the presidents confidence to remind audiences of the tragedies that impacted their institutions.

Crises that resulted in student deaths included the CSUN earthquake, Virginia Tech shootings, FAMU Marching 100 hazing, Texas A&M bonfire collapse, Seton Hall residence hall fire, and Oklahoma State University plane crash. All of the presidents leading after these crises referenced memorials or memorial services for victims except for the FAMU Marching 100 hazing death. It is possible Presidents Ammons and Robinson created a memorial for Robert Champion, but the data did not reveal discourse content that mentioned it. If FAMU did not create a memorial for Mr. Champion, it may
have been because the university was perceived to have been at fault, and a memorial
would have been a physical, lasting reminder of the scandal and the negative culture that
led to it.

**Implications**

Current and future HEI presidents and those who train them may benefit from
understanding how this research may be used to support HEI presidents who lead their
institutions through a crisis. First, framing devices can be used in post-crisis discourse to
help a president provide a framework or lens through which the audience can view the
crisis, the leader, the institution, or the campus community. For example, presidents may
consider using feeling statements to express their emotions about the tragedy, which may
have an added benefit of helping them appear approachable and authentic. If a
president’s decisions or actions are criticized or questioned, the president can use
argument to defend their decisions in a reasoned and logical manner, which may help
them appear confident and in charge. For environmental crisis cases, presidents used
metaphors to describe the strength, determination, and resilience of victims, while
presidents leading after intentional crises used metaphors to acknowledge emotional
distress and shock experienced by the campus community. In both crisis types, story was
used months after each crisis to remind audience members of the tragedies but
congratulate their campus communities, and perhaps themselves, for the progress they
have made in the healing and recovery process. Feeling statements were used after
accidental crises to describe grief and pain the president was experiencing, possibly to
establish trust and relate to campus community members. Finally, presidents leading
their institutions through student protest crises appeared to use argument to justify decisions they made with which students disagreed.

Conversely, presidents may want to avoid using particular framing devices, for example, analogy, which points out similarities between an institution’s crisis and other events. Only one president incorporated analogy into his discourse, Dr. Rochon, president of Ithaca College, after the student protests. As part of healing, crisis victims, their families and campus community members may need to process their feelings by acknowledging the true impact the crisis had on them, and if a leader compares the crisis to something else, it may create the perception the president thinks the event was ordinary or already experienced elsewhere. Similarly, HEI presidents may want to avoid using positive or negative spin in their post crisis discourse as it may make a leader appear insincere. Presidents managing the Penn State/Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse crisis and the University of Missouri student protests used spin in their discourse. It is unclear if this particular framing device had a negative impact on the public’s perception of the crisis recoveries, but it is worth noting that both of these campus communities struggled with reputation management afterward (Bohanon, 2018; Cooper, 2012).

Second, SCCT can be applied as leaders are thinking about and planning how to communicate to both internal and external audiences about the crisis. Presidents should initially incorporate instructing information and adjusting information into their discourse, then, reputation management strategies should be included according to the type of crisis experienced. If a crisis does not appear under any of the crisis types, then crisis leaders should choose a crisis response strategy thoughtfully and include consistent reputation management strategies. Presidents should not mix or combine reputation
management strategies, because communicating about a crisis as if it is more than one type confuses the audience.

Finally, HEI presidents who lead their institution through a crisis should also consider using their post-crisis communication to build community and praise stakeholders and first responders. The presidents included in this study appeared to accomplish this differently based on the crisis type. For example, presidents leading their institution through an environmental crisis used optimism and positivity in their discourse. They often spoke of the crisis and the need for money to rebuild and come back better than ever. Presidents communicating after preventable crises did not frequently mention the event itself, but instead they often spoke of the corrective action taken or planned to avoid a similar crisis. Presidents leading their institutions through accidental crises in which student deaths occurred communicated the need to grieve and heal as a community. They also held memorial services after the crisis event and on the one-year anniversary, and they created physical memorials on campus.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Scholars who wish to add to this research may consider replicating this study but with different cases under the environmental, intentional, accidental, and student protest crisis types. Adding to the number of cases studied will strengthen findings and provide a stronger foundation for this type of research in higher education settings. Researchers could also consider replicating this study, but use different crisis types that impact higher education institutions, such as financial, enrollment, political, or more contemporary crises such as inviting controversial speakers to campus or student groups who make demands of administration. Another replication of this study could include looking at
different variables such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, or number of years at the institution to determine if they have any effect on the presidents’ discourse content.

An extension of this study may also include an exploration of the HEI presidents’ goals with their post-crisis discourse. For example, were the presidents aware of framing devices and SCCT recommendations, and if so, did they use them intentionally, and in what ways were they attempting to use them? Were the presidents purposely attempting to create connections with their audience through discourse, and if so, how? What were the goals the presidents were attempting to achieve in their spoken discourse, and in their written discourse, and were there differences between the two types of discourse?

Another opportunity to further this research is to explore the campus community members’ perceptions of the presidents’ discourse. Did stakeholders’ perceptions of the crisis, or who was responsible for it, change as a result of the president’s post-crisis discourse? In what ways did the president’s discourse align, or misalign, with stakeholders’ expectations? What were campus community members’ reactions after the president spoke or communicated with the public?

An additional extension of this research could include an exploration of the crisis management training each president received and in what ways training, or lack thereof, could have impacted the presidents’ discourse or the public’s perception of it. Some HEI presidents have a public relations staff, while others do not, so further research could include an investigation of how presidents felt supported by public relations staff after the crisis.

This research focused on HEI presidents’ written and spoken discourse. This study could be extended by considering HEI president leadership styles after an on-
campus crisis. In what ways might a president’s leadership change after a crisis? In what ways does the crisis type influence the president’s leadership style after crisis? What are the presidents’ perceptions of their leadership after crisis? What are stakeholders’ perceptions of president leadership after crisis?

Conclusion

As stated in Chapter I, one of the purposes of this study was to add to the existing knowledge about post-crisis communication and apply SCCT to HEI president discourse. This research showed different ways in which HEI presidents can incorporate framing devices, SCCT strategies, and additional themes into post-crisis discourse, and to what extent presidents use the suggestions from crisis communication theory. Young (2013) found university presidents use framing devices in major, planned speeches, and as a result of this research, we now know that presidents use the same devices to frame their discourse after an on-campus crisis.

Another purpose of this study was to help break the cycle of presidents being unsure of how to communicate after crisis leading to a communication void and ineffective campus recovery, which results in other presidents lacking confidence and knowledge of how to communicate after crisis. Presidents who read this research will have examples of framing devices and themes other presidents have incorporated, and learn how to apply SCCT to different crisis types, which will provide presidents with information and self-assurance.

While campus communities can and should prepare for crisis, HEIs will never be able to eliminate them. It is unclear if the number or type of crises impacting HEIs will change in the future, but it is important to think about and plan for the possibility.
Perhaps climate change may increase the number of natural disasters in our world, thus affecting more campuses. As the number of students struggling with mental health issues increases, it is possible campuses may experience more suicides or threats of physical harm. Access to guns and changes in policies allowing students to carry firearms on campus may result in more shootings. When children of the current anti-vaccination movement go to college and live in residence halls, there may be an increase in contagious and serious diseases, possibly even reaching pandemic level. Even though campuses are safer than ever today, and campus leadership teams continue to plan for and practice crisis management, it is impossible to predict what the future holds for HEIs and crisis.

Because of access to the internet, social media, and 24-hour news, word of a crisis reaches a broader audience and much quicker than in the past. It is possible to watch a crisis unfold on an HEI campus from across the country, or even around the world, and see firsthand its leaders begin to manage and communicate about it. HEI president discourse content may help an institution and its community recover from crisis, but if used incorrectly, it may confuse key stakeholders or hinder the institution’s reputation and recovery. In a perfect world, no president would ever have to manage a crisis on campus, but the reality is that crises will continue to impact higher education institutions. It is critical for presidents to not only think about and plan for crisis, but to reflect on how they would act and communicate if they are faced with crisis.
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