Using Social Media to Connect with University Constituents During a Campus Crisis

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Abstract

College or university crisis situations can come at any moment. Sometimes, such as with a weather related emergency, there is time to plan and take precautions. Other situations, such as campus shootings, can come without warning. With over 4,400 colleges and universities in the U.S. serving 20 million students, emergency situations are inevitable. North Carolina colleges and universities have managed many emergency situations in recent years. Various communications media, including email, web updates, and social media played a significant role in the provision ofofficial communicationsto constituents. This study examines the actual and potential use of social media and other communications methods among North Carolina's institutions of higher education during emergency situations. The study examines how communications professionals at 16 public and 35 private institutions use and perceive various communication methods, including social media, during crisis situations. Study findings are highly relevant to public and private sector administrators. This study is also significant because it enhances an understanding of the use of social media among colleges and universities during crisis situations.

Keywords: crisis communications, emergency communications, crisis management, social media, higher education, university administration, public administration

1.0 Introduction

An emergency, crisis, or controversy on the college or university campus can come at any moment. Sometimes, such as in the case of a weather related emergency, there is time warn constituents and take protective measures.

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Other situations, such as the April 16, 2007, shooting rampage at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), come without warning (Hauser &O'Conner, 2007). A crisis situation can seemingly come from nowhere and cause major disruption to normal campus life and routines. As noted by Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, "In a classic study, Hermann (1963) identified three characteristics separating crises from other unpleasant occurrences: 1. Surprise, 2. Threat [and] 3. Short response time. A troubling event cannot reach the level of crisis without coming as a surprise, posing a serious level of threat, and forcing a short response time" (Ulmer, Sellnow, &Seeger, 2011, p. 5).

With over 4,400 public and private colleges and universities in the United States serving more than 19.7 million students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), emergency and crisis situations are inevitable, be they natural disasters, unforeseen accidents, or criminal actions. The April 2007 shooting rampage at Virginia Tech demonstrated the need for rapid security response and communications procedures to quickly and regularly inform students, faculty, staff, community leaders, and parents. Sadly, Virginia Tech experienced a second major crisis situation on December 8, 2011, when "A Virginia Tech police officer was shot to death and a second person found dead on campus was believed to have killed [the officer] (Blackstock, 2011). Many other colleges and universities across the nation have also experienced such tragedies.

North Carolina institutions of higher education have also been faced with numerous high-profile emergency and crisis situations in recent years.

Since November 2011, at least seven universities and community colleges in North Carolina alone have been locked down or have issued a campus alert because of a reported gunman on campus. On November 9, 2011, North Carolina's Campbell University issued a campus-wide lockdown after a student escaped deputies during an arrest for stolen weapons and barricaded himself in a room at his on-campus residence. One week after Campbell's incident, East Carolina University in North Carolina went on lockdown after more than one person reported seeing a man carrying an assault rifle on a main thoroughfare near the campus.

That "rifle" turned out to be an umbrella, but the three hours between the first report and the lifting of the lockdown proved to be a challenge to ECU's communications team (Liggett, 2012, p. 27).

Various media forms, including email, web updates, press releases, and social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, played a significant role in each of the North Carolina campus scenarios. These tools were utilized to provide situation updates and official university communications to students, faculty, staff, parents, law enforcement, media, and other constituents. Social media was extensively utilized in some situations. According to a 2011 University of Massachusetts Dartmouth study, "Social media tools are now used in some form by 100% of all four-year universities in the United States as a way to reach students" (Liggett,pp. 26-27). However, it was unknown if North Carolina colleges and universities were broadly prepared to utilize social media as part of their crisis communications plan or if communications professionals at these institutions believed social media to be aneffective crisis communications tool.

2.0 Brief History of University Crisis Management

Natural disasters and crises have been a part of human history since the dawn of time. In centuries gone by, individuals and communities would lead the response to crisis situations. However, "with the emergence of the modern welfare state and the 20th century trends of globalization, urbanization, large-scale migrations of human population and climate changes, the nature of crises facing nations has increased both in magnitude and complexity…increasing population densities and urbanization have resulted in greater impact on human lives and property" (Government of India, 2006, p. 4). Colleges, universities, and schools in the United States have certainly faced their share of crises situations since earliest colonial era settlers. Fires devastated many schools when buildings were primarily constructed of wood and water distribution systems were limited. In these instances, school administrators, students, and the local community shared in the management of the crises. With no electronic communications, word of mouth and printed accounts had to suffice as crisis communications. The advent of the radio, television, email, and other wireless communications in the 20th century entirely changed the nature of communications during institutional crisis situations.

The first recorded mass school shooting in the United States occurred on "July 26, 1764 [when] a teacher and 10 students were shot dead by four Lenape American Indians in Greencastle, Penn." (Lorenzi, 2012). However, shootings on college and university campuses were rare events until August 1, 1966 when "Charles

Whitman points a rifle from the observation deck of the University of Texas at Austin's Tower and begins shooting in a homicidal rampage that goes on for 96 minutes" (National Public Radio, 2007). Between 1991 and 2007, there were seven major shooting incidents on college and university campuses nationwide. Local law enforcement and institution officials typically managed the post-event communications in each of these incidents. The pattern of crisis management and communications was fairly consistent: the event occurred, law enforcement gained control of the situation, and post-event reports were provided to the media.

The broader campus community typically learned about the event when everyone else did—after it was over. However, on "April 16, 2007 a gunman kill[ed] more than 30 people in a dorm and a classroom at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va." (National Public Radio). Frustrated by the lack of information and real-time situation details, students at Virginia Tech took to a relatively new social media site called Facebook to piece together information and a list of victims. "The [Virginia Tech] survivors, lacking any official word from the university other than the total death toll, were still in the dark. So they turned to the best information source they had: the Internet – notably, the social web site Facebook. By the time the university released the [victims'] names one day later, it was old news to the online community" (Winerman, 2009, p. 376). Online social media, namely Facebook, just three years old in 2007, completely changed the nature of crisis communications for literally every organization in the developed world within a single day. Facebook posts from individuals at the scene of the Virginia Tech shootings, combined with additional details from friends and family, painted an accurate picture of the incident and victims long before campus officials and law enforcement were ready to release their statements.

Between November 2011 and April 2012, "at least seven universities and community colleges in North Carolina alone have been locked down or have issued a campus alert because of a reported gunman on campus." In each instance, social media, email, text messaging, and university web site updates kept students, faculty, and other constituents updated.

"On November 9, 2011, North Carolina's Campbell University issued a campus-wide lockdown after a student escaped deputies during an arrest for stolen weapons and barricaded himself in a room at his on-campus residence."

Within minutes of the attempted arrest, "campus authorities…sent an emergency notification via text message asking students and staff to remain indoors. The university's communications team then went into action, updating the main web site and fielding several phone calls" (Liggett, p. 27). Neither social media or updating the university web site were specifically mentioned in Campbell's emergency procedures handbook in 2011, but as the situation unfolded, the communications team quickly decided to use Facebook and the main university web site to maintain a stream of accurate and timely updates. "The first Facebook post was a copy of the emergency notice that went out to students and staff via text message, but almost immediately, the staff had to rely on the site to dispel rumors and correct faulty information posted by students and other nonofficial sources" (Liggett, pp. 27-28).

3.0 Statement of the Problem

University crisis and emergency situations are challenging on a number of levels. Depending on the nature of each situation, law enforcement or other emergency personnel may be involved, campus facilities may need to be evacuated or locked down, or other measures taken to protect and inform members of the campus community. Some situations can be anticipated and planned for. However, other situations come quickly and without warning. The April 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech started shortly after 7:00 a.m. No one expected this tragic event at that time of day, but once it occurred, the campus community and outsiders expected security and communications officials to quickly and accurately control and report about the situation.

Developing and maintaining a crisis communications plan is imperative because an emergency situation or crisis can come at any time or place. The consequences of poor communications planning can cause dissatisfaction among students and other constituents, damage the university's reputation, and potentially place individuals in unsafe situations. When an emergency or crisis situations occurs, an initial institutional response must come quickly and continue with ongoing updates until the situation is resolved. The institution must have a plan and be prepared to actively lead and engage in situation communications.

Students and others will inevitably begin to tell their version of the story through social media. "By sharing images, texting, and tweeting [details of emergency situations], the public is already becoming part of a large response network, rather than remaining mere bystanders or casualties" (Merchant, Elmer, &Lurie, 2011, p. 290). However, there seems to be inconsistencies as to how colleges and universities plan to communicate updates and details during campus emergency and crisis situations.

Many, perhaps even most all, colleges and universities are prepared to utilize various communication channels in the event of campus emergency or crisis situations, including but not limited to channels such as telephone and text message alert/notification systems, campus email, microblogging sites such as Twitter, official institution blogs, social media sites such as Facebook, university web site (traditional and/or mobile), video web sites such as YouTube, as well as traditional media sites such as newspapers, radio, and television.

Recent studies indicate that approximately 90% of individuals between the ages of 18-24 utilize social media and 100% of college students in this age group access the Internet (Smith, Rainie, &Zickuhr, 2011). Available literature also indicates nearly 100% of colleges and universities utilized Facebook and other social media tools during the 2011-2012 academic year for various communication purposes (Barnes &Lescault, 2011), yet just 59% of respondents to Syme's 2011 university social media survey indicated that social media is part of their institution's crisis communications plan (Syme, 2012). Jackson's 2011 study notes that while university communications professionals believe "various types of social media should be included in the [university] crisis communications plan" (Jackson, p. 22), they also believe "social media [is not] effective and therefore do not use [or limit use of] social media to communicate with students during a crisis" (Jackson, p. 105). It is counterintuitive that social media, which is the most utilized communications method among 18-24 year olds, is so widely used by colleges and universities for general institution communications and updates, but seemingly marginalized as a crisis communications tool. Will this practice also be found among communications professional at North Carolina public and private, nonprofit baccalaureate colleges and universities? And, will any findings be the basis of recommendations that benefits colleges and universities outside of North Carolina?

3.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the potential and actual use of social media among North Carolina's institutions of higher education during emergency campus situations. The study also assessed differences in the perceptions and actual use of communications media and tools, with an emphasis on social media, among North Carolina's public and private colleges and universities. Study findings serve as the basis for a social media crisis communications model and best practice recommendations.

Sixteen different communication channels were evaluated in the survey, including an evaluation of actual and planned use of 16 communication channels in the event of a campus crisis, as well as perceptions of effectiveness of these channels. The channels include: Alert/Notification System (telephone based), Alert/Notification System (text message based), Email, Microblogging Sites (i.e., Twitter), Newspapers (campus), Newspapers (local), Official Institution Blogs, Radio (campus), Radio (local), Social Media Sites (i.e., Facebook), Television (campus), Television (local), University Dark Site, University Web Site, University Web Site (configured for mobile), and YouTube or Other Video Sites.

Survey questions utilized a Likert scale with a response of "1" being Never Use or Not Effective at All and "5" being Frequently Use or Extremely Effective. The following measures were applied to the Likert scale: responses of 1.00-1.50 represent Never Use or Not Effective at All; responses of 1.51-2.50 represent Seldom Use or Seldom Effective; responses of 2.51-3.50 represent Occasionally Use or Occasionally Effective; responses of 3.51-4.50 represent Often Use or Often Effective; and responses of 4.51-5.00 represent Frequently Use or Frequently Effective. Respondents were also permitted to provide and rate "Other" communication channels that might be used during campus crisis situations. No additional channels were suggested by survey participants.

3.2 Study Population

The population for this study included chief communications officers at each of North Carolina's 51 public and private, nonprofit baccalaureate colleges and universities. This includes 16 public and 35 private sector institutions.

Community colleges, two-year junior colleges, and private, for-profit institutions of higher education were not included. A list of institutions included in the survey is in Appendix A. Chief communications officers from 20 of 51 in the survey population completed the survey for a participation rate of 39.2%. This included 8 public sector colleges and universities (50% participation) and 12 private sector colleges and universities (34.3% participation).

4.0 Findings

The following observations provide insight regarding the use of differentcommunication channels and the role of social media during campus crisis situations. Foremost, chief communications officers at North Carolinacolleges and universities report they primarily utilize communication channels that allow for nearly instant communication with constituents during crisis situations. University Web Site, Social Media Sites, Alert/Notification System (text message based), and Alert/Notification System (telephone based) fall into the "Often Use" category. Microblogging Sites, Newspapers (local), University Web Site (configured for mobile), Radio (local), Television (local), University Dark Site, Radio (campus), and Newspapers (campus) fall into the "Occasionally Use" category. Official Institution Blogs, YouTube or Other Video Sites, and Television (campus) fall into the "Seldom Use" category. In the aggregate, no channels were rated as "Frequently Use" or "Never Use." Social Media Sites rated as an "Often Use" channel among the group while Microblogging Sites rated as "Occasionally Use."

Chief communications officers report they perceive communication channels that allow for almost instantaneous communication with institution constituents during a crisis situation to be the most effective. Alert/Notification System (text message based) was perceived as a "Frequently Use" channel. The only channel to be rated this high in the aggregate. University Web Site, Email, Social Media Sites, Alert/Notification System (telephone based), Microblogging Sites, and University Web Site (configured for mobile) fall into the "Often Use" category. University Dark Site, Radio (campus), Television (local), Radio (local), Newspapers (local), YouTube or Other Video Sites, Television (campus), and Official Institution Blogs fall into the "Occasionally Use" category. Newspapers (campus) fell into the "Seldom Use" category. In the aggregate, only one channel, Alert/Notification System (text message based), was rated as "Frequently Use." No channels were rated as "Never Use."

In terms of perceived effectiveness as crisis communication channels, Social Media Sites and Microblogging Sites both rated as "Often Use" among the group.

Some differences exist in the actual and planned use of various communication channels among North Carolina colleges and universities based on institution's total enrollment. Data analysis revealed that institutions with enrollment of less than 1,000 (M = 2.75, SD = 2.06) rated microblogging as an "Occasionally Use" crisis communications channel, and institutions with enrollment of 1,000-4,999 (M = 2.20, SD = 1.30) rated microblogging as "Seldom Use." Institutions with enrollment of 5,000-9,999 (M = 4.11, SD = 1.36) and institutions with enrollment of 15,000 or more (M = 4.00, SD = 0.00) each rated microblogging as an "Often Use" channel during crisis situations. Thus, larger institutions are much more likely to utilize Twitter and similar microblogging sites as crisis communications channels. Social media was rated as an "Often Use" channel for all respondents. Thus, regardless of the institution's total enrollment, social media appears to be adopted in a reasonably consistent manner as an important crisis communications tool among all participating institutions.

No differences exist in the actual and planned use of various communication channels among North Carolina colleges and universities based on the communications staff size at each institution. Regardless of each institution's communications staff size, social media appears to be adopted in a reasonably consistent manner as an important crisis communications tool among all participating institutions.

Despite the prevalence of different social media and microblogging channels, a small number of channels dominate among North Carolinacolleges and universities. Nine social media options were included in the survey, but three channels were overwhelmingly selected by virtually all participants: Facebook (100% adoption among colleges and universities represented in the survey), Twitter (95% adoption), and YouTube (95% adoption). Two channels, Flickr and LinkedIn, are utilized by about half of survey participants. All other options, including iTunes, Pinterest, Foursquare, and Tumblr, are utilized by 25% or less of participants. Clearly, in early 2013, three social media channels are highly prevalent among North Carolina's colleges and universities: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Most North Carolina colleges and universities have adopted social media management and crisis communications policies. All 20 survey participants stated that their institution has a documented crisis communications plan. However, some of the institutions do not include social media as an official crisis communications channel within their crisis communications plan. Despite 100% adoption of institutional crisis communications plans among survey participants, just 80% (16 of 20) specifically reference social media in their institution's crisis communications plan. Among the eight public colleges and universities represented, all eight (100%) note that social media is part of their crisis communications plan. Among the private universities represented, eight of 12 (66.66%) note that social media is part of their crisis communications plan. Additionally, of eight participating North Carolina public colleges and universities, five (62.5%) of the institutions have a formal social media management and use policy. Of 12 participating private colleges and universities, nine (75.0%) of the institutions have a formal social media management and use policy. In the aggregate, 14 of 20 (70%) institutions have a formal social media management and use policy.

Not all available communication channels are actually used or perceived to be equally effective during crisis situations. While variance certainly exists based on data stratification, and there are some slight differences between actual use among the public and private institutions, the following generally represents how the communication channels are used and perceived:

- Frequently Used channels: Alert/Notification System (text message based), Alert/Notification System (telephone based) Email, Social Media Sites, University Web Site
- Often Used channels: Microblogging Sites
- Occasionally Used channels: Newspapers (campus), Newspapers (local), Radio (campus), Radio (local), Television (local), University Dark Site, University Web Site (configured for mobile)
- Seldom Used channels: Official Institution Blogs, Television (campus), YouTube or Other Video Sites
- Never Used channels: no channels were consistently rated as "Never Use"

5.0 Planning Theory Application

Managing university crisis situations requires forethought and preparation in advance of potential crisis or emergency situations, documented procedures and clear lines of responsibility during such situations, and comprehensive post-event assessment and evaluation to determine what went well and where improvements might be necessary. Planning is an oft-discussed topic in public and private sector organizations. Van Wart and Dicke (2008) provide a framework for planning that is practical and relevant to crisis communications planning and management: "There are many types of planning, but our interest here is work process planning, also known as operations planning. It is the division and coordination of work; that is, how the work will be divided by processes and individuals, and how this division of labor will be combined consistently, efficiently, and effectively" (Van Wart &Dicke,p. 271). Contemporary university crisis situations must be coordinated in such as a way that various institutional departments, and individuals therein, know and understand their roles and responsibilities when an emergency or crisis occurs.

Kaufman and Jacobs describe the familiar SWOT strategic planning tool where an organization "assesses its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats as a basis for devising action strategies to achieve goals and objectives in certain key issue areas" (Kaufman &Jacobs, 1987, p. 24). The SWOT analysis model fits well with the concept of communications preparation and planning in the event of a university emergency or crisis situation. Communications preparation in the pre-crisis phase is critical to rationale, quick decision making in the event of a crisis. Universities can assess the SWOT options—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—in the pre-crisis phase to determine if they are prepared for a crisis situation, how the institution will respond, how the campus will be secured, and how constituents will be informed. Basic steps in strategic planning process might include: "1. Scan the environment [i.e., the university campus and departments]; 2. Select key issues [i.e., types of emergencies and crises]; 3. Set mission statements or broad goals [in the event of emergencies and crises]; 4. Undertake external and internal analyses [to assess how prepared the institution is to manage and communicate in the event of emergencies and crises]; 5. Develop goals, objectives, and strategies with respect to [potential emergency and crisis] issue[s]; 6. Develop an implementation plan to carry out strategic actions [in the event of emergencies and crises]; and 7.

Monitor, update, and scan [i.e., regularly review strategic plans and preparations]" (Kaufman &Jacobs, p. 24).

6.0 Conclusions

Based on the findings listed above, the following conclusions can be drawn from this study. Foremost, communications professionals at North Carolina colleges and universities are aware of the need for crisis communications planning. One hundred percent of survey participants (n = 20) state their institution has a documented crisis communications plan. While this sample of 20 cannot guarantee a specific level of crisis communications planning among all 51 North Carolina public and private institutions of higher education (or colleges and universities nationwide), it appears that communications professionals at North Carolina colleges and universities are highly aware of the critical need to have a crisis communications plan in place. The lessons learned from the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings and similar crisis situations at other institutions in recent years have resonated deeply with college and university administrators and communications officers. The need to be prepared for crisis situations—security and communications—is well understood.

There is a need for and focus on communications speed. There was universal agreement among chief communications officers that communication channels actually being used and perceived as most effective during crisis situations are those that quickly connect with institution constituents. Alert/Notification System (telephone based), Alert/Notification System (text message based), Email, Social Media Sites, University Web Site, and, in some categories, Microblogging Sites each were continually rated as "Frequently Use" or "Often Use" channels in actual use. Other than one or two occasional outliers, these six channels, which included social media and microblogging, were unquestionably the preferred crisis communication channels in every instance.

Actual use and perceived effectiveness of key crisis communication channels can be different. Table 1 compares the median score for each communication channel, actual and planned use versus perceptions of effectiveness.

The following channels had a stronger perception of effectiveness score than actual use score (n = 12): Social Media Sites, Alert/Notification System (text message based), Alert/Notification System (telephone based), Microblogging Sites, University Web Site (configured for mobile), Radio (local), Television (local), University Dark Site, Radio (campus), Official Institution Blogs, Television (campus), YouTube or Other Video Sites. The following channels had a stronger actual use score than perception of effectiveness score (n = 4): University Web Site, Email, Newspapers (local), Newspapers (campus). This tells us that most all of the channels have some levels of intrinsic value to communications officers. It also validates that most of the top rated crisis communications rated even more strongly for perceived effectiveness than actual use. Thus, these channels are perceived to be highly effective even if they are not maximally utilized. Social media and microblogging are included in this category.

Table 1: Actual and Planned Use of Communications Channels versus Perceptions of Effectiveness of Communications Channels among North Carolina Public and Private, College and University Communications Professionals

Characteristic	M (Actual Use) (n = 20)	M (Perceived Effectiveness) (n = 20)	Difference (M (Actual Use)- M (Perceived Effectiveness))
University Web Site	4.45	4.37	0.08
Email	4.40	4.26	0.14
Social Media Sites (i.e., Facebook)	4.11	4.26	-0.15
Alert/Notification System (text message based)	4.05	4.63	-0.58
Alert/Notification System (telephone based)	3.95	4.21	-0.26
Microblogging Sites (i.e., Twitter)	3.30	4.00	-0.70
Newspapers (local)	3.15	2.72	0.43
University Web Site (configured mobile)	3.05	3.65	-0.60
Radio (local)	2.84	3.00	-0.16
Television (local)	2.80	3.05	-0.25
University Dark Site	2.56	3.32	-0.76
Newspapers (campus)	2.55	2.26	0.29
Radio (campus)	2.55	3.11	-0.56
Official Institution Blogs	2.37	2.61	-0.24
Television (campus)	2.05	2.67	-0.62
YouTube or Other Video Sites	2.05	2.68	-0.63

Social media use among North Carolina colleges and universities is consumer driven. Communication through social media and microblogging channels are a staple among North Carolina colleges and universities. Each institution has at least one or more official social media channels. eBizMBA Inc. lists the following social media channels as the ten most heavily utilized by consumers as of February 2013: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, MySpace, Google Plus+, DeviantArt, LiveJournal, Tagged, and Orkut (eBizMBA Inc., 2013). As of January 2013, North Carolina colleges and universities have almost universal adoption of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, while about 50% utilize LinkedIn and Flickr. Following these top channels, use of other social media channels drops off significantly. Despite the wide array of consumer social media channels, North Carolina colleges and universities are primarily investing their time and resources to communicate with social media through the most popular consumer channels.

Crisis communications planning may be incomplete among some North Carolina colleges and universities. Despite that 100% of the colleges and university use social media and have crisis communications plans, just 80% (16 of 20) of the institutions specifically reference social media in their institution's crisis communications plan. It appears that some North Carolina colleges and universities, particularly among the private institutions, may not have crisis communications plans that are definitive in how various channels should be managed in the event of a crisis or emergency situation.

Institution demographics do not have a significant impact on the application and use of crisis communication channels. Public and private colleges and universities generally utilize crisis communication channels at similar rates regardless of student population, the percentage of students who live on campus, communications staff size, and the annual amount budgeted for social media channel development and management. One could logically assume that social media and crisis communications channel management is easier with a larger staff and budget, and may well be, but the data indicates that all North Carolina colleges and universities are nonetheless utilizing these channels and most all of the institutions have a plan to utilize social media in the event of a crisis situation.

Chief communications officers have a sense of legal responsibility, and perhaps sensitivity to potential liability, associated with communications during crisis situations.

As noted, 100% of North Carolina public and private colleges and universities have a documented crisis communications plan. This indicates significant awareness among the institutions about legal responsibilities to issue official institution communications and messages in the event of a crisis or emergency situation. While there appears to be a willingness among these colleges and universities to utilize channels that not only appeal to the communications preferences of constituents but also meet possible legal obligations to communicate news and information quickly and efficiently.

Social media and microblogging are important crisis communication channels to communications professionals at North Carolina public and private colleges and universities. Writing in 2011, Jackson stated: "Colleges do not view social media as being effective and therefore do not use social media to communicate with students during a crisis. University relations professionals did not perceive social media such as Facebook and Twitter as being effective for communicating with students during a crisis" (Jackson, p. 91). The results of the current study, conducted in December 2012-January 2013 reveal very different results than what Jackson realized. Social media was rated in the top three or four most utilized channels for crisis communications among both North Carolina public and private colleges and universities. Perceived effectiveness of social media scored equally well. Microblogging consistently scored as the number six most utilized channel for crisis communications among both North Carolina public and private colleges and universities. Perceived effectiveness of microblogging scored at the same level. Thus, it is clear that communications officers place high value to social media and microblogging as crisis communication channels.

8.0 Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations for practice are drawn from this study and presented as practical measures for colleges and university communications professionals:

Continually prepare for crisis situations. Preparing for crisis situations is a never-ending process. Many, perhaps most, crisis situations come without warning. Some incidents, such as a weather emergency, can be anticipated.

Other situations, such as a building fire or a gunman on campus, can be planned for, but the actual timing will always be a mystery. Thus, it is imperative for institutions to continually plan and prepare for the possibility of a crisis situation. As an example, on an annual basis, relevant crisis management personnel (including representatives from campus safety, office of student life, and office of university communications) at many colleges and universities meet to review the institution's crisis management and communications plan to ensure it is still relevant, take known possible threats to the institution into consideration, and updatethe plan accordingly.

Integrate all relevant university communication channels into the institution's crisis communications plan. Documentation of official university crisis and emergency situation processes and procedures is key to developing, maintaining, continually improving, and, when necessary, implementing a campus crisis plan. Crisis communications must be part of the overall crisis management plan, and integrating top channels such as Alert/Notification System (telephone based), Alert/Notification System (text message based), Email, Social Media Sites, University Web Site, andMicroblogging Sites must be well documented.

Practice and drill. There are some practical steps involved in preparing for potential crisis situations. Foremost, communications officers can practice and drill. "Drills enable communicators to test three essential parts of any response: policies, plans and people." Policies and planned procedures must be tested. Additionally, staff must demonstrate they can manage a crisis communication scenario and "respond on behalf of the organization with social media" (Baron &Philbin, 2009, p. 12). When the crisis comes, responsible communications personnel must be able to react and manage the situation.

Prepare pre-crisismessages in advance. Communications templates can be useful guidelines in the event of an emergency or crisis situation. Staff at Campbell University developed a series of initial response messages in the event of the following campus crises: "Accidental Death/Severe Injury; Bomb Threat; Active Shooter - Immediate Threat; Homicide - No Immediate Threat; [Campus] Lockdown; Gas Leak/downed electrical line/fire/hazardous materials incident/structural failure; Health Alert; Tornado Warning; Winter Weather Advisory" (Davis &Hottel, 2012, p. 5).

In the event of any of these scenarios, the Campbell communications team is prepared to launch an initial message for students, faculty and staff, community, media, and other interested individuals through the university web site, Facebook page, Twitter feed, text alert to cell phones, email to the university community, and telephone hotline. Depending on the severity of the situation where the main university web site could be overloaded and crash (as did the Virginia Tech web site in April 2007), Campbell is also prepared to take down the main university web site and replace it with a "lite" university dark site.

Prepare post-crisismessages in advance. Numerous researchers and practitioners have written about the structure of crisis communications plans. There are three distinct communication phases involved with all crisis situations: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. "The pre-crisis stage encompasses all aspects of crisis preparation. The crisis stage includes the actions taken to cope with the trigger event—the time when the crisis is being actively dealt with. The post-crisis stage reflects the period after the crisis is considered to be over or resolved" (Coombs, 2007, p. 17). Once the crisis is over, the university communications office must continue to provide post-event updates about the nature of crisis, pertinent details that occurred during the crisis that may require additional explanation, plans to manage crisis aftermath, and potential recommendations to manage or prevent future crises. A message indicating that a crisis is over is imperative. Such messaging can be prepared in advance, perhaps during the time a crisis unfolds, to quickly inform constituents when the crisis is officially over and any subsequent steps or action items.

Monitor student use of social media and other technology. There are two reasons colleges and universities need to monitor social media use among college age students. First, to understand which channels are being utilized by their constituents (i.e., college bound high school students, college students, and alumni). As previously noted, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are, by far, the most utilized social media and microblogging channels among North Carolina colleges and universities. These channels are, as of January 2013, the most utilized tools by university constituents. However, the nature of social media is dynamic and fast changing. Other channels are gaining in popularity and use. Thus, there is a need to understand the popularity and use of various social media channels. Second, there is a potential need to monitor social media for potential threats.

In July 2012, a "Kent State University student accused of posting a message on Twitter saying he would be 'shooting up' the northeastern Ohio campus was instructed to stay away from the school and its president." The student was ultimately arrested and charged with "inducing panic, a felony, and aggravated menacing" (Rodriquez, 2012). In this instance, "University officials say an employee [of Kent State University] was monitoring social media mentions of the school in northeast Ohio when the tweet was discovered" (Seewer, 2012). It is unknown if the student would have actually followed through on his threats. However, such menacing language could not be dismissed. Monitoring of social media channels by university staff played a huge role in disarming a potentially dangerous situation.

Monitor legal matters related to university communications, generally, and crisis situations, specifically. There are few comprehensive social media laws in the United States and most social media related policy relates to user privacy. On September 27, 2012, California became "the first state in the country to enact comprehensive social media privacy legislation." The California legislation is intended "to protect the social media privacy of post-secondary students" and "privacy rights of employees which may also protect California employers from frivolous social media related lawsuits" (Shear, 2012). Maryland, Delaware, and Illinois have similar legislation in place intended to protect the privacy rights of students and employees who use password protected social media. More states are likely to adopt similar legislation. There are two primary legal issues associated with college and university social media use and crisis communications: privacy and liability from action and inaction. "Privacy is an individual's right to determine what information they would like others to know about themselves; which people are permitted to know that information; and the ability to determine when those people can access that information" (Sicker et al., 2010, p. 3).

However, liability from action and inaction is far more likely to challenge a university in the aftermath of an institution crisis scenario. No specific social media liability legislative policy or regulations exists in the United States. "Existing, traditional laws will apply to [social media liability in] a Web 2.0 context, however it remains to be seen how they will be interpreted" (Sicker et al., p. 6). The concept of liability from action and inaction is straightforward. Liability from action is associated with "dissemination of inaccurate or misleading information are of primary concern as the authority would be incorporating information from non-authority (public) sources."

Conversely, in liability from inaction situations, "authorities may be liable if they have a statutory duty to warn but fail to do so or fail to adequately warn, for example, due to improper use of the technology" (Shear; Sickeret al., p. 7). Planning, preparation, transparency, and honesty are mentioned over and over as the best way to protect the institution from social media liability. All relevant indicators demonstrate "that organizations that prepare for PR crises in advance actually experience fewer issues and recover more quickly" (Beyond PR 2012).

Anticipate risk and work as a team. Colleges and universities must have a campus-wide integrated approach and awareness of potential crisis and emergency situations. Campus safety, office of student life, office of communications, and other departments have a role when addressing, managing, and communicating details about crisis and emergency situations. Department leadership and staff from different areas of the institution must work together to assess and assign responsibilities and processes for each segment associated with crisis situations: pre-crisis and monitoring, when a crisis occurs, and post-crisis communications and adjustments to internal management processes.

9.0 Summary

This study finds its origins in a crisis situation that occurred at Campbell University on November 9, 2011. "Campbell issued a campus-wide lockdown after a student escaped deputies during an arrest for stolen weapons and barricaded himself in a room at his on-campus residence." Within minutes of the attempted arrest, "campus authorities…sent an emergency notification via text message asking students and staff to remain indoors. The university's communications team then went into action, updating the main web site and fielding several phone calls" (Liggett, p. 27). Neither social media use or university web management was specifically mentioned in Campbell's emergency procedures handbook in November 2011, but as the situation unfolded, the communications team quickly decided to use Facebook and the main university web site to maintain a stream of accurate and timely updates. "The first Facebook post was a copy of the emergency notice that went out to students and staff via text message, but almost immediately, the staff had to rely on the site to dispel rumors and correct faulty information posted by students and other nonofficial sources" (Liggett, pp. 27-28).

Communications professionals at North Carolina public and private colleges and universities note that they utilize or plan to utilize social media sites such as Facebook and microblogging sites such as Twitter "Frequently" or "Often" for communications during crisis situations. Survey participants also rated social media and microblogging high in their perceptions of the effectiveness of these channels for crisis communications. As noted in Table 1, social media and microblogging sites were rated among the top six crisis communications tools in terms of actual use and perceived effectiveness.

Beyond the broad use and endorsement of social media by communications officers at North Carolina colleges and universities, two other significant findings were realized in this study. Foremost, communications professionals at North Carolina colleges and universities are aware of their responsibility to communicate with all relevant constituents in the event of a campus crisis. They are prepared with crisis communications plans and channels to relay and receive relevant news, data, and situational updates. Second, speed and high connectivity rates are the motivations behind communication channels perceived to be the most effective. Results of this study continually pointed toward communication channels that are instantaneous and likely to reach a large number of "connected" users (i.e., email, university web site, social media and microblogging, telephone based alert systems, and text message based alert systems). As additional communication channels that can instantaneously reach a wide audience in a cost efficient manner are developed, colleges and universities will likely adopt these methods to communicate with constituents in crisis and emergency situations.

The April 2007 tragedy at Virginia Tech set off a firestorm of awareness among college and university communications professionals regarding their responsibility to quickly and honestly communicate with constituents during a campus crisis or emergency situation. In the seven years since the situation at Virginia Tech, additional crisis situations have occurred in North Carolina and other parts of the country. It appears that North Carolina college and university communications professionals have consistently made progress in their adoption of crisis communications procedures and channels that are most likely to reach constituents in the event of a crisis. It is encouraging to note that significant variance did not exist among survey participants, regardless of institution size or other demographics, regarding social media adoption and use during crisis situations.

Hopefully, continued use and preparation of these channels will help ensure the safety of North Carolina college and university constituents in the event of campus crises or emergencies.

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Appendix A

Survey Population

The chief communications officer at the following North Carolina colleges and universities were contacted to participate in this study.

Public Institutions (n = 16)

- o Appalachian State University
- o East Carolina University
- o Elizabeth City State University
- o Fayetteville State University
- o North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University
- o North Carolina Central University
- o North Carolina State University
- o University of North Carolina at Asheville
- o University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- o University of North Carolina at Charlotte
- o University of North Carolina at Greensboro
- o University of North Carolina at Pembroke
- o University of North Carolina at Wilmington
- o University of North Carolina School of the Arts
- o Western Carolina University
- o Winston-Salem State University

Private Institutions (n = 35)

- o Barton College
- o Belmont-Abbey College
- o Bennett College
- o Brevard College
- o Cabarrus College of Health Sciences
- o Campbell University
- o Catawba College
- o Chowan University
- o Davidson College
- o Duke University
- o Elon University
- o Gardner–Webb University
- o Greensboro College
- o Guilford College
- o High Point University
- o Johnson C. Smith University
- o Lees–McRae College
- o Lenoir–Rhyne University
- o Livingstone College
- o Mars Hill College
- o Meredith College
- o Methodist University
- o Montreat College
- o Mount Olive College
- o Pfeiffer University
- o Piedmont Baptist College
- o Queen's University
- o St. Andrews University
- o St. Augustine's College
- o Salem College
- o Shaw University
- o Wake Forest University
- o Warren Wilson College
- o William Peace University
- o Wingate University