View from the Top: University Administrators' Perceptions of Crisis Preparedness and Response

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Degree

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of Dr. Heather Monique Whaley. This journey was built on the foundation of your unwavering belief in me. This work is as much yours as it is mine, and I dedicate it to the memory of your wisdom, your words, and your limitless love and care. May this dissertation and my career in higher education honor your incredible legacy and serve as a testament to the profound and enduring impact you had on my life and the lives of so many others.

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, universities have faced significant changes in the types of crises they encounter, requiring a shift in how these crises are addressed. As the nature of these challenges evolves, universities must adapt their responses accordingly. Research focusing on the crisis management strategies of university administrators contributes significantly to the field of higher education literature. Instead of analyzing crises solely from an organizational standpoint, this approach prioritizes the perspectives of those directly involved in decision-making. However, despite the frequency of crises in educational environments, there has been limited research on how universities define, prepare for, and respond to these crises.

Crises, by their nature, have the potential to severely disrupt an institution, making it essential to understand how university administrators perceive and address these events. The main objective of this qualitative study was to explore institutional crises in higher education, focusing on how university administrators define, prepare for, and respond to them. The study gathered data through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using Mitroff and Pearson's six-phase paradigm of crisis management (1993).

The analysis revealed several key findings, notably the importance of agency among university administrators in making decisions and the role of collaboration within the campus community to ensure safety and well-being. These findings were organized into four key themes, supported by the conceptual framework. Administrators

emphasized the necessity of comprehensive emergency management plans (CEMP), including table exercises and after-action reviews, to prepare for future crises effectively.

Based on these findings, the researcher utilized Mitroff and Pearson's 6-phase Crisis Management Model (1993) to develop the HOPE Model for Institutional Crisis Management. This new model takes into account the human factors involved in a crisis and its impact on the university. It provides valuable, value-driven guidance for administrators to align their crisis preparedness and response strategies with the institution's mission and values, ensuring a more holistic approach to crisis management.

Keywords: Crisis Management, Crisis Response, Emergency Management, Institutional Crisis, Student Safety, University Mission

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY 1

Statement of the Problem 2

Purpose of the Study 6

Research Questions 6

Significance of the Study 6

Definition of Terms 7

Delimitations 8

Organization of the Study 8

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW 10

Search Process for Literature Review 10

Defining Institutional Crisis in Higher Education 11

History of Crisis in Higher Education 14

Racial Tension at Missouri-Columbia 15

Violence at Virginia Tech 17

The COVID-19 Pandemic18

Institutional Crisis Preparation and Organizational Readiness 20

Institutional Crisis Response 22

Conceptual Framework 24

Conclusion 27

CHAPTER THREE METHODS 28

Research Design and Rationale 28

Epistemological Perspective- Constructivism....28
Qualitative Methodology....29
Sample....31
Participants....31
Site....32
Data Collection....34
Instrumentation....35
Data Analysis....36
Document Analysis....37
Interviews....38
Trustworthiness40
Validity....40
Methods of Verification....41
Transferability....41
Dependability....42
Confirmability....42
Positionality Statement....43
Conclusion....44
CHAPTER FOUR LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY....45
Research Participants....46
Description of Findings....46
Theme 1: Crisis Definition: An Exercise in Experience....49

Theme 2: Crisis Factors and Susceptibility 58
Theme 3: The Cycle of Crisis: Write, Train, Exercise 73
Theme 4: Process or Procedure: The Importance of Emergency Operation Structures 84
Document Analysis 102
Unexpected Findings 107
Conclusion 114
CHAPTER FIVE DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS 116
Discussion of the Findings 116
Research Question 1: How do university administrators define institutional crisis 117
Research Question 2: How do university administrators prepare for institutional crisis? 119
Research Question 3: How do university administrators respond to institutional crisis? 121
Discussion of Conceptual Framework 123
HOPE: A Model for Institutional Crisis Management 124
Summary of the Discussion 129
Limitations 129
Implications for Practice and Research 130
Recommendations for Practice and Research 132
Scholars 132

Practitioners....133
Future Research....134
Concluding Thoughts....136
REFERENCES....138
APPENDICES....147
APPENDIX A....147
APPENDIX B....148
APPENDIX C....149
APPENDIX D....153
APPENDIX E....157
APPENDIX F....159
VITA....163

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Participant Information..... 32

Table 2. Site Information..... 33

Table 3. Research Questions Related to Interview Questions..... 36

Table 4. Detailed Participant Case Information..... 46

Table 5. Study Themes and Descriptions 49

Table 6. CEMP Institutional Comparison.....103

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Evolution of Responses to Crisis..... 20

Figure 2. Mitroff and Pearson's Six-Phase Paradigm of Crisis..... 25

Figure 3. HOPE Model for Institutional Crisis Management..... 125

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Ouellette (2019) reported that the beginning of the 21st century was defined by crises, and institutions of higher education have not been immune. According to Barker and Yoder (2012), "74% of universities have experienced an event classified as a crisis" (p. 186). Yet, despite the prevalence of crises in educational settings, little attention has been given to addressing the unique characteristics of crises and crisis response in such settings. Crises, by their nature, have the potential to severely disrupt an institution. Institutions have had to handle increasing numbers of natural and human-made crises, including school shootings, violent racial protests, and the COVID-19 global pandemic. Institutions and their constituencies are shaped by events of magnitude, and moments for which they must prepare, talk about, honor, and remember so that they are not repeated (Eckert, 2010).

With the ever-changing landscape of higher education, the study of crisis suggests that often, a lack of university preparation and campus community buy-in impacts the intentional planning and preparation of university crisis response plans (Alvarez, 2017). The study of crisis management at institutions suggests that crisis intervention and transparent communication are crucial to off-setting student trauma following a crisis. Not all university members see the value in preparing these plans pre-crisis. Moreover, only those directly impacted, such as Student Affairs professionals and the university president, play a role in drafting these plans. One potential explanation for the limited involvement could be that protecting the student body is seen as the sole responsibility of the student affairs office and, ultimately, falls under the purview of the president. The evolution of crisis response highlights that these findings may be shifting as

greater focus is put on campus-wide engagement, preparation, and training of all faculty and staff in the event of a crisis (Slage et al., 2021). Additionally, this widening of responsibility may allow university administrations to see beyond the crisis planning phase and into the intervention phase. Additional time spent preparing for the intervention phase and the university resources it may require may lead to a wider sense of support for crisis response planning from the entire university community as they consider the impact the lack of preparation has on the university and its student body (Barker & Yoder, 2012). Research that provides a clearer understanding of university administrator's definition of crisis and understanding of crisis preparation may lend itself to reasoning for a broader sense of campus leading to a change in the makeup of crisis response management teams allowing constituencies, not initially included in crisis management planning, to have a voice in creating a well-thought- through and student centric plan.

Statement of the Problem

The last three decades have brought with it great change in the types of crises that universities and students have faced and addressed. There is a current shift in the types of crises experienced in higher education and so the way in which universities respond to these crises must also shift. Since the early 1990s, communication and crisis management plans have been crucial to university sustainment following a crisis, but it was not until 2001, following the 9/11 terrorist attack, that universities began to understand the importance of crisis preparation and education campus-wide prior to a potential crisis, including the use of external supports, communication systems and resources ensuring that training is provided to all faculty and staff that will encourage effective application of crisis response and student support, implementing

intervention and response plans that are unique to the needs of the student body of their specific university (Coombs, 2021, Flynn & Sharma, 2016; R Slage et al., 2021).

A study by Carello and Butler (2014) reported that by the time young adults reach college, 66% to 85% report lifetime traumatic event exposure and many reports multiple exposures with the peak age range being 16–20. The most common events reported include a life- threatening illness and the unexpected death of a loved one. In 2011-2020, the most cited student crises include the mental health crisis, social support needs, resource scarcity, the politicization of higher education and the COVID-19 pandemic (Burrell & Heiselt, 2012; Canto et al., 2017; Catullo et al., 2009; Colclasure et al., 2021; Flynn & Sharma, 2016; Giroux, 2019; R Slage et al., 202)

While most students arrive at college with a trauma exposure history, some also experience trauma while attending college, in varying forms. Universities greatly contribute to improving educational outcomes (retention, graduation rate) for traumatized students which requires buy-in from administrators, faculty, and professional staff in respect to how crisis is defined, prepared for, and responded to at the university level. (Eckert, 2010). Although there are limited studies supporting trauma's direct effects on academic performance, students with a childhood history of trauma, or who have experienced two or more kinds of abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), or who report PTSD at the start of their freshman year are more likely to drop out (Carello, 2014) and this negative adjustment can result in poor school performance and may be related to attrition. By providing support to students when they arrive on campus, in the face of their own trauma, university success rates may be higher. Further research may suggest

high-level general supports (student services, counseling, healthcare) needed in the face of an array of crises students may face while in college.

Crisis is context specific and, therefore crisis is perceptual (Coombs, 2021; Weick, 1988). The leadership and management of an organization may perceive a situation as a crisis depending on their personal definitions of the perceived threat or impact to the organization. If leaders and managers of an organization believe there is a crisis, then the consensus is that there is (Richardson, 1994). The heightened awareness of the university community in relation to their administration's definition of and preparation for crisis will encourage and promote a safer and more productive academic community (Beatson et. al, 2019). The nature of each crisis and the university campus where it occurs impacts the needed support.

Research has been conducted to improve university responses to the needs of students in crisis. Carden (2007) found that university campuses and administrations can only provide so much to its student body without the external supports and resources of the surrounding community and that when internal and external constituents are involved, it is possible that great leaps can be made in caring for and encouraging students using combined resources and a shared vision. A university's response to crisis and external supports provided are but one important piece of better understanding crisis and the university. Nonetheless, the gap in university specific literature and resources provided is far too wide. To fully understand the impact a crisis can have on an institution, it is important to evaluate the crisis management process from beginning to end, including defining crisis, identifying crisis key indicators, containing effect, if possible, and then mitigating impact and ensuring proper response (Mitroff, 2005). This study aims to evaluate

the crisis management process since most previous research has addressed only a part (student response) and not the whole.

By lifting the voice of university administrators, a more wholistic understanding of crisis response can be evaluated by exploring the administrator's definition of crisis as we as their experience in preparing for and responding to crisis. Now is the time for higher education researchers to examine university crisis response plans and student intervention measures that impact student needs pre- and post-crises to inform institutional practice and pedagogy in an effort to improve students lived experiences on a university campus. Broadening the literature utilizing the voice of the administrator will help create a more complete understanding of crisis definitions, preparation, and response.

Research that focuses on institutional crisis in higher education through an evaluation of the crisis response process utilizing university administrators' definitions, preparation, and intention to respond will add to the literature by answering the call of Eckert (2010), Carello and Butler (2014) and others by seeking greater knowledge of universities preparation for and response to crisis and its relationship to the student experience. This research works to give voice to university administrators, to the barriers and difficult decisions they face and the needs they have that limit their effectiveness when leading university and campus community through crises. Institutions have a high-priority goal of ensuring student safety at all times, which requires extraordinary security measures as well as comprehensive emergency, risk, and crisis communication strategies (Barker & Yoder, 2012). A better understanding of institutional crisis management, specifically through the lens of the administrator, is crucial to the future success of

an institution. With ever-evolving student concerns and needs, university administrators must pay greater attention to crisis response.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine institutional crisis in higher education to understand how university administrators define, prepare, and intend to respond to crisis utilizing a crisis management plan in the face of the everchanging higher education landscape.

Research Questions

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. How do university administrators define institutional crisis?
2. How do university administrators prepare for institutional crisis?
3. How do university administrators respond to institutional crisis?

Significance of the Study

Research that focuses on understanding the management of institutional crisis from the viewpoint of the university administrators strengthens the corpus of higher education literature because rather than studying crisis from an organizational perspective, the administrator's voice is brought to the forefront. In doing this, a more complete understanding of the administrator's decision-making processes is examined as well as the consequences of decisions made at upper administrative levels. This study also has the potential to inform higher education decision-making by investigating, through information provided by university administrators, what data are necessary to understand and make better, more-informed decisions around crisis management and response. Additionally, this study adds to the literature of both Mitroff and Pearson's six-phase paradigm of crisis management and the broader field of higher education, specifically that

of student services. Mitroff and Pearson's six-phase paradigm of crisis management is based in the field of organizational leadership and business management (Mitroff, 2005) and by associating the framework to crisis in higher education, the application of the framework is strengthened through highlighting its applicability across fields. By bringing a first-person perspective, through the voice of the university administrator, and a holistic approach, utilizing Mitroff and Pearson's six-phase paradigm of crisis management (1993), this study is significant in better understanding crisis management. Literature in the field of higher education, and specifically in the area of student services, is strengthened as this study establishes, through provided literature, the necessity of campus community services and supports to meet student needs in times of crisis.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, a glossary of terms is provided in this section.

- **Crisis**: An event, series of events, or situation that present reputational risk to the institution and requires immediate institutional attention.
- **University Administrator**: An individual that is currently serving as the executive administrator at a university. This word will be used synonymously with chancellor or president.
- **Research I Public Institution**: An institution that awards at least 20 research/scholarship doctoral degrees during the update year and has at least $5 million in total research expenditures (as reported through the National Science Foundation (NSF) Higher Education Research & Development Survey (HERD)) (Carnegie Classifications, 2024).

- **Crisis Management Plan**: A plan that is written by university leadership in an effort to mitigate student trauma and move the university forward in the face of the crisis. This word will be used synonymously with crisis response plan.
- **University Leadership**: An individual that is currently serving on the university administrators cabinet or leadership team. This word will be used synonymously with vice president or vice chancellor.
- **Professional Development**: Specialized training or advanced professional learning intended to improve professional knowledge, competence, skill, and effectiveness (Great Schools, 2014).
- **Faculty**: A full-time instructor that is in the classroom or exposed to students in the university classroom environment. This will be used synonymously with educator or staff.

Delimitations

This study is delimited to research I public institutions in the Southeast; therefore, findings from this study should not be generalized to institutions of varying sizes and resource level. This study is delimited to qualitative data through interviews and, as a result, only a limited number of lived experiences of university administrators are considered and thus not a generalized administrative experience can be accounted for.

Organization of the Study

Subsequent to this introductory chapter, my study is organized into four additional chapters. In Chapter 2, a review of literature concentrates upon a critical review of literature and research foundational to this study and will cover the history of crisis and how it is defined by

modern society. In addition, a review of existing literature will be presented that outlines the history of crises in higher education and the evolution of university preparedness and response. In Chapter 3, an explanation of the methodologies of qualitative analysis and the data collection and data analyses processes are presented. Within Chapter 4, findings are shared and discussed. Finally, in Chapter 5, an analysis to identify themes is presented to summarize findings, illuminate conclusions, and generate recommendations. I close by offering reflections on this research process.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

To better understand how crisis permeates the landscape of higher education, this chapter provides a critical review of literature and research foundational to this study and will cover the history of crisis and how it is defined by modern society. In addition, a review of existing literature will be presented that outlines the history of crises in higher education and the evolution of university preparedness and response.

Before proceeding into the actual literature review itself, I will revisit the purpose for this study and briefly discuss how this will influence the review. The purpose of this qualitative methods study is to add to an already existent body of research on crisis response and preparedness in higher education and its impact on universities through understanding how university administrators define, prepare for, and respond to institutional crisis.

The purpose of this study is integral to the selection and organization of the studies that follow. In this chapter, I review the literature seeking to create a foundation of information for this study. I begin with a description of the search process for the literature review. I, then, discuss the literature foundation to the: history of crisis in higher education, institutional crisis operational definition, institutional crisis preparation and organizational readiness and institutional crisis response. I then conclude the chapter with an introduction of the theoretical frame. This chapter begins with an overview of the search process.

Search Process for Literature Review

This review of literature began with two purposeful searches for empirical studies and articles involving first, crisis and higher education and then, the history of crisis in higher

education and particularly, crisis leadership. The first step of each search entailed examination of electronic databases and search engines (i.e., ERIC via EBSCO and Academic Search Complete) using keywords. The first search included key words crisis *definition, crisis response, crisis communication and post-secondary.* The second search included key terms *response, intervention, and peer reviewed.* These search efforts resulted in an array of research on the evolution of university crisis, which forms the basis of this review. In completing this review, 56 studies, articles and book chapters were studied in response to both the search of the history of crisis in higher education and the secondary search specific to trauma-informed practices.

In the initial search, retrieved articles and studies were restricted to studies that (a) had an identified crisis, (b) provided a notable research question and purpose statement relevant to the stated research questions, and (c) provided recommendations for administrator preparedness, responsiveness, and implications for practice in post-secondary education. From this criterion, 8 additional studies were deleted due to their focus on secondary education (n= 6), publication in an international journal (n=1) and published before 1990 (n=1) leaving 48 studies to be included in the initial literature review. Much of the research on the evolution of crisis in higher education has been empirical, primarily qualitative case studies. The secondary search revealed 34 peer-reviewed articles and journals related to the history of crisis in higher education with 17 of them focusing on post-secondary education, included in this review.

Defining Institutional Crisis in Higher Education

Crises, by their nature, can threaten the very fabric of an institution. While moments of disruption pose significant challenges for leaders, they also create opportunities for leadership to emerge (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996), foster reflection (Barge, 2004; Barge &

Fairhurst, 2008), and drive organizational change and improvement. Navigating the complexities of crisis preparation, management, and communication provides a critical framework for analyzing effective responses and preparedness strategies. To better understand the nature of crisis in higher education- a context in which myriad conflicts across diverse stakeholders are common, and where their occurrence often challenges core institutional values- this study seeks to add to an already existent body of research on crisis response and preparedness in higher education as well as the impact on universities through understanding how university administrators define, prepare for, and respond to institutional crisis.

With ever-evolving student concerns, university administrators must pay greater attention to crisis response. Universities greatly contribute to improving educational outcomes (retention, graduation rate, job placement) for traumatized students which requires buy-in from administrators, faculty, and professional staff (Eckert, 2010). As such, a fundamental step in this dissertation process has been a scholarly examination of this research.

Boote and Beile (2005) stated that "a substantive, thorough, sophisticated literature review is a precondition for doing substantive, thorough, sophisticated research" (p. 3). This literature review is an integral part of the research process and helps refine the purpose and focus of the study. The literature will guide understanding of "what has been done before, the strengths and weaknesses of existing studies, and what they might mean" (p. 3). The review roots the dissertation firmly within a historical context and establishes its relevance and significance to present research.

Crises are unpredictable phenomena, yet not unexpected (Coombs, 2015). The origin of the word "crisis" offers valuable insight into human perceptions of the concept. Rooted in Greek,

the term originally referred to a “turning point,” much like its medical usage in Latin to denote the critical juncture of an illness. This early meaning carried a positive connotation, highlighting pivotal moments in sickness, tragedy, or peril that could lead to transformation (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015). These turning points, shaped by human choice and decision, had the potential to redefine the future of an individual or organization (Shrivastava, 1993).

By the 18th century, “crisis” evolved to describe a difficult situation or dilemma, reflecting a shift toward a more negative interpretation. This duality—the fear and danger of crisis alongside its potential as a turning point—captures the inherent tension within the concept (Gigliotti & Fortunato, 2017). It is this balance of risk and opportunity that underpins crisis management, where the objective is to mitigate harm while maximizing potential for growth and improvement.

Drawing from scholarly literature on the topic, this study defines a crisis as an event, series of events, or situation that poses a reputational risk to the institution and demands immediate attention. Crises are distinct from routine problems, inconveniences, or incidents. However, as explored throughout this study, the identification of events as "crises," the monitoring of situations that might escalate into a crisis, and the preparation of leaders to navigate the inherent uncertainty and mission-related impact of crises in higher education remains unclear and potentially problematic. The occurrence of crises in higher education, along with the subjective nature of the term, offers an opportunity to explore a more expansive perspective on how administrators respond.

Moreover, crises can divert attention from the core educational mission of colleges and universities, demanding considerable time and energy from institutional leaders. As Rollo and

Zdziarski (2007) observed, "The impact of crises on the facilities and the institutions' ability to accomplish their educational mission must be addressed, but it is the human side of the equation that begs our attention as educators committed to serving our communities" (p. 3). These complex and far-reaching consequences make it especially challenging for leaders to effectively define, prepare for, and respond to crises.

History of Crisis in Higher Education

The last three decades have brought with it great change in the types of crises that universities and their students have faced and addressed. Ouellette (2019) found that the start of the 21st century likely will be defined by crises, and institutions of higher education are not immune. Institutions have had to handle increasing numbers of natural and human-made crises including school shootings, violent racial protests, and the COVID-19 global pandemic. Not only do most students arrive at college with a trauma exposure history, but some also experience trauma while attending college, in varying forms. A study by Carello and Butler (2014) reported that by the time youth reach college, 66% to 85% report lifetime traumatic event exposure and many report multiple exposures with the peak age range of exposures being 16–20. The most common events reported include a life- threatening illness and the unexpected death of a loved one. In 2011-2020, the most cited student crises include the mental health crisis, social support needs, the politicization of higher education and the COVID-19 pandemic (Canto et al., 2017; Giroux, 2019; Catullo et al., 2009; Colclasure et al., 2021; Burrell & Heiselt, 2012; Flynn & Sharma, 2016; Slage et al., 2021).

To best understand the types of crises that universities may experience, a broad history of crisis is provided with emphasis being given to three particular crises examples and literature.

Racial Tension at Missouri-Columbia

A significant crisis plaguing higher education in 1990-2000 was racial tension (Kezar & Fries-Britt, 2020). Kezar and Fries-Britt (2020) indicate that it is inevitable that most campuses across the country are likely to (or already have) experienced a racial crisis. Given many campuses' historical context of racism and inadequate work to address it, the Administration for Social Justice and Equity shared that the clock is ticking and time is not on the side of leadership teams who are unprepared; thus, research should examine leadership capacity to navigate a racial crisis (Kezar & Fries-Britt, 2020). Campus communities are impacted by racial tension in the local and regional community as well as on a national platform. After a racial crisis, campuses need to focus on healing the student body through conversation (Broadhurst, 2019). For example, in the fall of 2015, students were disappointed when university leadership at Missouri- Columbia University's (MU) failed to respond to a series of racist incidents on campus, including the verbal assault of the MU student government president and the Legion of Black Collegians by a drunken White student who used racial slurs. These events served to heighten student concern as just two short hours from MU's campus, the killing of an unarmed Black teenager, Michael Brown, had just taken place earlier in the year. As acts of hate continued to occur on campus, concerned students organized a public demonstration to demand that the university president address their concerns (Kezar & Fries-Britt, 2020). When their concerns were not addressed, the MU football team announced they were on strike, boycotting all games and practices, demanding that the system president resign. He resigned two days later (Kezar & Fries-Britt, 2020).

In Broadhurst's (2019) research on student activism in times of crisis, he recognizes that students are formal leaders on campus, working as agents of social change and that because they are on campus for a finite time, they often seek quicker change that allows them to reap more immediate benefits. By becoming involved formally in campus governance structures, students have the potential of not only strengthening their dedication to social justice and leadership skills but also inspiring other students to follow in their steps, calling for change and accountability on college campuses in recognition of their own needs related to crisis and trauma.

In the case of a racial crisis, a study conducted by the Pullias Center for Higher Education in Southern California (Kezar & Fries-Britts, 2017) outlines five key areas that build the capacity of a campus to respond to racial crises: (1) strategic planning with regards to institutional mission, and guiding values, (2) leadership expertise from external supports and resources, (3) building trust and respect across stakeholder groups (internal and external), (4) institutional investment in continual learning for faculty, staff, and students; and, (5) evaluation and assessment practices. In building campus capacity in these 5 areas, response to a crisis can be better managed and trauma can be effectively mitigated for students.

Kezar and Fries-Britt (2017) recognized the need for active listening as a way of capacity and community building on college campuses as an effort to better understand the needs of students. The authors defined active listening as a structured form of listening and responding that focuses the attention on the speaker and improves mutual understanding without debate or judgment. Active listening is a powerful method of responding to stressful and traumatic situations and events, allowing the speaker to share problems and struggles, engage with difficult feelings, gain perspective on the experiences, take ownership of the situation, re-build

relationships, find their own solutions, and build self-esteem and resilience. Using active listening through community building, strategic partnerships, and campus-wide involvement (focus groups, active listening sessions) university response and mitigation of trauma can have great influence on the student body (Kezar and Fries-Britt, 2017).

Violence at Virginia Tech

An early Monday morning in April, as students were walking to their 9:00 a.m. class, the first shots rang out across the Virginia Tech Campus. A few hours later, a final account reported that 32 people were killed with an additional 17 wounded by two-automatic pistols (Barker & Yoder, 2012). Since 1990, 7 mass shootings on college campuses have taken the lives of 70 college students, faculty, and staff members (Siebert et al., 2018). Campus mass killings cannot be predicted and often are carried out by rage-filled students and adults. American educators, including professors, administrators, and counselors, are forced to prepare for and deal with assault situations (Fein et al., 2008). Fein et al (2008) describes university mass shootings as an "organizational crisis" that is, "specific, but unexpected, and a nonroutine event or series of events…. Mass shootings create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten high priority goals which can cause high stress for the campus at large" (p.7). Acts of gun violence on college campuses became the front-page story following the shooting at Virginia Tech and conversations around university crisis response were on the forefront of every administration's agenda. Institutions have a high-priority goal of ensuring student safety at all times, which requires extraordinary security measures as well as comprehensive emergency, risk, and crisis communication strategies (Barker & Yoder, 2012).

Virginia Tech had, what they believed to be, a comprehensive crisis communication plan in place the day of the mass shooting with mass communication platforms set-up for quick access. Later reported, the first email following the shootings did not go out until 37 minutes after the shooting had taken place, placing more potential students in harm's way (Fein et al., 2008). Because the university was closed immediately after the shootings at the midterm point in the quarter, courses were finished in creative ways. Some professors opted to use only written correspondence to finish the requirements, while others held meetings or tutoring off campus. In all, faculty members put forth great effort to allow the students to continue their studies in nontraditional ways to finish their coursework and to provide space for students to struggle with the emotional aftermath of senselessly violent events. Research suggests that early communication and prolonged faculty support were crucial to student trauma support (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Eckert, 2010; Siebert et al., 2018; Scott et al. 1992).

The COVID-19 Pandemic

Education should be a place where students realize themselves primarily as critically engaged and informed citizens, contributing not simply to their own self-interest but to the well-being of society through dialogue and open communication (Giroux, 2019). The wellbeing of society, and of college campuses, was again threatened in 2020 with the COVID-19 Pandemic. Colclasure et al. (2021) citied that this event (COVID-19 pandemic) clarified the need to meet the basic physical and emotional needs of individuals as a prerequisite for learning stating that the health and safety of everyone in higher education should remain a top priority in any circumstance. In light of both a political crisis and the crisis of a global pandemic, higher

education needed to reassert its mission as a public good to reclaim its egalitarian and democratic impulses (p. 19). During an abrupt shift to a virtual environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there should be ready access to support for instructors and students in work–life balance, mental health, and self-care. Inequalities in access to education became more prevalent due to COVID-19 (Colclasure, 2021).

Another study from Slage et al., (2021) reported during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of reclaiming the mission of higher education in the face of crisis with changes needed in academic policies being put into place to protect and support the university campus during the pandemic. This plan was made up of communications and supports that included (1) daily digests in the form of emails to the university community, (2) an online form to submit requests to the university CARE team to help with student needs and concerns and (3) return to campus digital guides for both students and faculty/staff. Crises have occurred and will continue to occur on college campuses; thus, communicating both an acknowledgment of how a crisis affects stakeholders and an authentic expression of concern is necessary to student support (Slage et al., 2021). When informational uncertainty must be managed, there is a need for agility and shared decision- making when communicating, and the inclusion of processes for creating appropriate infrastructures for providing resources and information to ensure all students are being supported and potential trauma is mitigated. As a result, higher-education communicators have had to navigate a difficult campus landscape, where spoken or printed missteps may threaten lives and the health of institutions. When trauma cannot be mitigated, it is pertinent that universities provide interventions and support to alleviate impact and ensure student success.

Over the past three decades, there have been significant crises that have changed the course of higher education and impacted university students across the country. Research has been conducted to improve university responses to the needs of students in crisis but still the gap in literature and in the resources provided is far too wide. The evolution of crisis response is highlighted in **Figure 1** showcasing the varying responses and their frequency of use. Research on crisis response in higher education is ever evolving as the crisis's students face is changing with the needs and makeup of the student body.

Institutional Crisis Preparation and Organizational Readiness

With an understanding of the history of crisis response in higher education, what does it mean to "do more" as an institution and work toward meaningful change in the universities' ability to be ready in the face of a crisis? On one level, institutions clearly must provide certain resources (policies, programs, and procedures); however, this is not enough. Much of the literature on crisis management and prevention centers on the public relations dimension—how

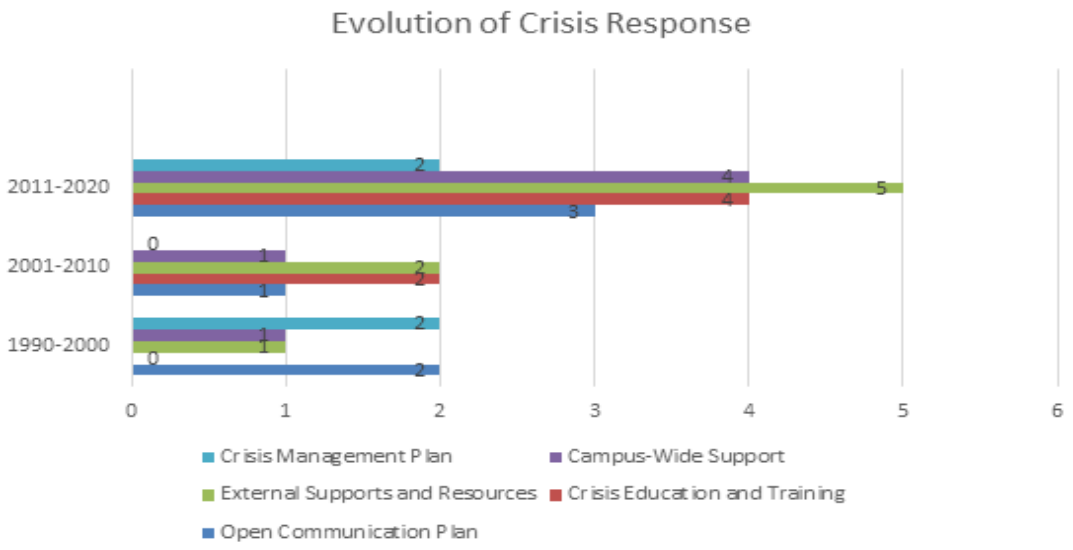


Figure 1
Evolution of Responses to Crisis

to safeguard the institution's reputation, maintain a positive image with various stakeholders, and use communication to influence public perception. However, achieving lasting systems-level culture change involves a thorough, honest reflection on the university's core values and principles. It also requires an examination of how these values are reflected across the institution's structure, policies, procedures, and climate, all of which demand strong, proactive leadership. Clarifying current principles and values must include an acknowledgment of the institution's history, such as the ways that different events, policies, procedures, and cultures or subcultures that may have contributed to the crisis at hand (Harris & Jones, 2020; Moylan et al., 2021). As institutions reflect on their values and principles, they must also acknowledge historical misalignments to drive meaningful change. University leadership must commit to this change for it to happen. At some institutions, leaders are already willing to engage in this work, while at others, they may be open to learning from the campus community about the urgency of the issue. Students, faculty, and staff offer valuable insights and experiences that can help encourage action. Additionally, some leaders may be motivated by the risks of failing to address and prepare for crises, as seen in recent cases where university administrations were removed for their inadequate or harmful responses.

Leadership can be taught to some extent (Giber et al., 2000; Parks, 2005; Van Velsor et al., 2010), with leadership development processes and structures being both systematic and multidisciplinary (Connaughton, Lawrence, & Ruben, 2003). Efforts to enhance leadership capacity in higher education continue through programs like those offered by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Southeastern Conference University's (SECU) Academic Initiatives, as well as numerous in-house training efforts across institutions. Despite the growing

number of leadership development initiatives, scholarly literature on the topic remains limited. Recent research, however, has begun to more deeply explore academic leadership development (Bolman & Gallos, 2011; Buller, 2012, 2013; Gmelch & Buller, 2015; Ruben et al., 2017).

Institutional Crisis Response

Barker and Yoder (2012) reported that, "74% of universities have experienced an event classified as a crisis" (p. 186). Institutions and their constituencies are shaped by events of this magnitude, and these moments must be prepared for, talked about, honored, and remembered so that they are not repeated and so that students are provided the opportunity to explore their lived experiences (Eckert, 2010). Institutional crisis response is crucial to the future success of an institution.

As shown in the literature, from the early 1990s, communication and crisis management plans were crucial to university sustainability following a crisis but it was not until 2001 that universities began to understand the importance of crisis preparation and education campus-wide, including the use of external supports and resources. By capitalizing on community supports and resources, universities can share information through various channels quickly and utilize experts in mental health and other pertinent fields (clergy, counselors, clinicians) to provide intentional care and resources to more students following a crisis. Flynn and Sharma (2016) share that immediate response and intervention, communication, ongoing needs assessment are needed outcomes of crisis management. As students return to campus after a large-scale traumatic event, having a clinician present during the first class meeting can provide valuable support. Social media, widely used across college campuses, offers immediate access to information for the entire community. In the wake of tragedy, it can be an effective tool for

notifying students about changes to meetings or classes and sharing resources for support. Social media also enables students to connect and offer each other vital support during difficult times. Additionally, it provides a platform for the university to share accurate information, addressing myths and rumors promptly.

The study of crisis management at institutions suggests that crisis intervention and transparent communication are crucial to off-setting student trauma following a crisis. Often, not all university members see the value in preparing these plans pre-crisis and only those directly impacted such as Student Affairs professionals and the president play a role in drafting these plans. One potential explanation for this could be that protecting the student body is seen as the sole responsibility of the student affairs office and ultimately falls under the purview of the president. Although, students spend most of their time with and are more likely to have deeper relationships with faculty members, it is often not seen as the responsibility of faculty members to care for students, only to educate them (Flynn and Sharma (2016); Slage et al., 2021). The evolution of crisis response highlights that these findings may be shifting as greater focus is put on campus-wide engagement, preparation and training of all faculty and staff in the event of a crisis. Crises take many forms and on an ecological level a knowledge of key components associated with on-campus crises, i.e., the unique stressors that entering students may face, as well as the prevalence of crisis among college students, may provide universities with a useful foundation upon which intervention strategies can be designed (Flynn & Sharma, 2016; Slage et al., 2021). Catullo et al. (2009) speak to this impact on college campuses, highlighting political and social issues sharing:

> Universities are called to balance the goal of providing an open campus with a learning environment where everyone is welcomed and encouraged to value free speech and an exchange of ideas; one that encourages individuals outside of the institution to gather for the purpose of education and exchange. (p. 317)

Important to glean from this literature review is the understanding that there is a current shift in the types of crises experienced in higher education which requires administrators to also shift the way in which they prepare for and respond to crises.

Conceptual Framework

This study is framed in the work of Mitroff and Pearson's six-phase crisis management model (1993). Mitroff was one of the first researchers to recognize that, due to resource limits, preparing for every conceivable crisis is impossible. He noted that crises tend to fall into certain categories, which Mitroff called clusters, such as external actions (i.e., mass shootings, racially and politically charged activity), and threats (i.e., natural, and man-made). Crisis management is a strategy developed by an organization's leadership to effectively reduce risks arising from both internal and external crises (Simola, 2005). Mitroff and Pearson's crisis management model outlines a six-phase framework commonly used to prepare organizations for crises (Simola, 2005) (**see Figure 2**). The first phase, Signal Detection, refers to the "pre-crisis" stage, where the organization monitors and responds to early warning signs of a potential crisis (Mitroff et al., 1987). The second phase, Preparation, involves identifying potential risks and developing a plan of action in case of an emergency (Mitroff, 2005; Pearson & Mitroff, 2019). The third phase, Containment, focuses on minimizing the impact of the crisis. The fourth phase, Recovery, addresses the implementation of programs aimed at restoring normalcy within the organization

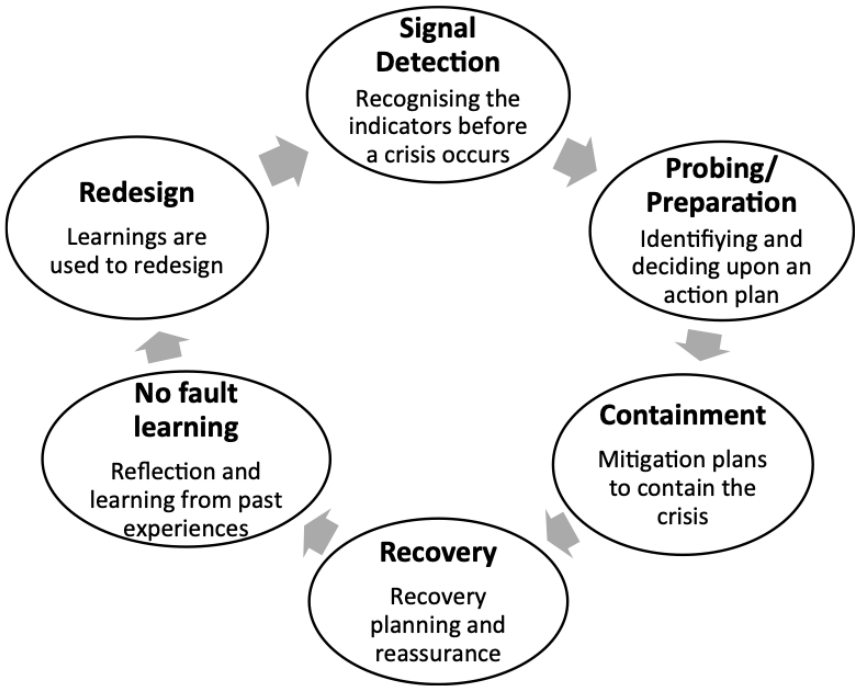


Figure 2
Mitroff and Pearson's Six-Phase Paradigm of Crisis Management (Reprinted with permission from author (Appendix A)

(Mitroff, 2005). The fifth phase, No-Fault Learning, involves reflecting on the crisis to assess the damage and evaluate the organization's vulnerabilities and strengths (Mitroff, 2005). Finally, the sixth phase, Redesign, uses the insights gained to improve the organization's crisis management approach for better future performance (Mitroff, 2005). The six-phase paradigm of crisis management highlights the time phases or stages through which nearly all crises pass- from early warning signals to prevention, through damage containment and recovery, to organizational learning.

A university is vulnerable to limitless types of crises and university administrators can provide crisis examples that fall into each of Mitroff's crisis clusters (Mitroff et al., 1987). Since the number of potential crises are endless, no university, even with the largest budgets or seamless crisis management plans, can plan for all possible contingencies. Universities which prepare effectively for crises make a deliberate point to constantly probe and scrutinize their operations and management structures for potential errors or problems before they are too big to correct, as indicated in the signal detection, probing and preparation and containment phases of the six-phase model. They establish clear and open information channels and recognize the contributions of messengers of bad news while also preparing both short- and long-term recovery plans, allowing for adequate reflection and critical examination of the lessons learned from experiencing a crisis, as indicated by the recovery, no fault learning and recovery phases of the model (Mitroff & Pearson, 1993).

I applied Mitroff and Pearson's model as the conceptual framework for this study in an effort to present a more comprehensive interpretation and reflection of university administrators' perception of crisis preparedness and response. Utilizing the six phases of the model, I aimed to

acknowledge university administrators understanding of crisis related to definition, preparation and response and highlight areas in which a lack of understanding could be supported through the framework.

Conclusion

The review of the literature began with a discussion of the definition of crisis, followed by the history of crisis in higher education and institutional preparedness and responsiveness. The literature provides evidence that there has been significant growth in the literature around what can be defined as a crisis and the ways in which university leaders are preparing for such events. Yet, despite the prevalence of crises in educational settings, little attention has been given to address the unique characteristics of crises and crisis response in such settings. Chapter 3 will introduce the methods used in this research.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The purpose of this study is to examine institutional crisis in higher education to understand how university administrators define, prepare, and intend to respond to crisis utilizing a crisis management plan in the face of the everchanging higher education landscape. Therefore, three research questions will guide this study:

- RQ1: How do university administrators define institutional crisis?
- RQ2: How do university administrators prepare for institutional crisis?
- RQ3: How do university administrators intend to respond to institutional crisis?

This chapter outlines the research design, reviews data collection and analysis methods, provides the validity and reliability of the study and provides how I situate myself within the research through a positionality statement.

Research Design and Rationale

Epistemological Perspective- Constructivism

One's belief about the "nature of knowledge" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 8) defines the epistemological approach to research. A paradigm is a perspective that molds an individual's worldview, and the way knowledge is created within that perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). My belief that an individual's experiences, reflections, and perceptions are shaped by their personal, social, and cumulative perspectives has led me to approach my research through a constructionist epistemological paradigm. Acknowledging that varying social realities can influence the constructs of study participants, I have embraced a constructivist approach to participant interviews and data collection (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I

recognize my influence in the reflections and observations of my study participants, and further acknowledge that my personal perspectives will impact my interpretation of participant reflections (Saldaña, 2021; Seidman, 2019).

I approach this work from a constructivist perspective, meaning that I recognize that a single universal truth does not exist, and that reality is co-constructed by various individuals, groups, and systems, ultimately shaping the personal experiences of individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kincheloe et al., 2018). Researchers assert that one who embraces a constructivist paradigm recognizes that "there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). These tenets of the constructionist perspective accurately represent my research lens. Approaching my research with this perspective centers the lived experiences of university administrators and I acknowledge that as an investigator posing questions to guide recollections of university administrators lived experiences of crisis, I am a participant in the construction of participant memories, reflections, and assessments as it is related to their definitions of crisis and experience in crisis preparation and response (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Qualitative Methodology

Recognizing that the foundation of my study requires investigation into the lived experiences of university administrators and an exploration of the construction and interpretation of those experiences and how it impacts their university's crisis preparation and response plans, I have chosen to conduct a basic qualitative study for my research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Worthington, 2013). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe qualitative research approaches as "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they

attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). While the purpose of quantitative research is to find an absolute truth through statistical analysis, the beauty of qualitative research is that the researcher is able to engage in analysis and interpretation of the complexities of dialogue and words, images, text, and documents, enabling researchers to explore and describe the meaning-making that people engage in through their own experience (White & Cooper, 2022).

To further inform my decision to utilize a qualitative design for this study, Crotty (1998), as cited in Creswell & Creswell (2018), identifies three basic assumptions of constructivism: (1) humans construct meaning as they engage with the world they are interpreting, (2) humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspectives, and (3) the basic generation of meaning is always social. To meet these basic assumptions, the process of data collection will be largely inductive, completed utilizing open-ended questions so that participants can share their views while engaging with the researcher in the context of their own university setting and personal experience. Meaning will be generated from the data collected and interpreted according to themes found throughout the research.

Because this study aims to understand the lived experiences of university administrators and the universities they serve, as well as explore their personal definitions of crisis and how it informs university preparedness and response, a qualitative study is most appropriate. Specifically, a basic qualitative research design places participants (university executive administrator) and the university's that they lead at the center of the research process, recognizing that their lived experiences and university crisis plans hold profound insights to understanding crisis planning, preparation and response (White & Cooper, 2022).

Sample

Participants

This study used purposeful sampling to obtain interview participants. My goal for this study was to interview five to eight university administrators. I continued to interview until saturation was reached as to limit repetition of findings and ensure an extensive, rich analysis of participant responses (Guetterman, 2015). Data saturation, according to Charmaz (2006), can be described as the period "when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of core theoretical categories" (p. 113). The process of purposeful sampling is necessary for this qualitative research. As Maxwell (2013) stated:

> In this strategy, particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and can't be gotten as well from other choices... Selecting those times, settings, and individuals that can provide you with the information that you need to answer your research question is the most important consideration in qualitative selection decisions. (p. 98)

Utilizing this sampling method, I recruited participants who met the following descriptors: 1) University Administrator; 2) located at a Research-1 Institution; 3) geographically located in the Southeastern United States. These criteria are important for this study's sample because the study focuses on the examination of institutional crisis in higher education to understand how university administrators define, prepare, and intend to respond to crisis utilizing a crisis management plan. Participants for this study were limited to university administrators who lead Carnegie Classification "R1" Research Universities specifically in the Southeastern part of the United States. The nonprofit American Association of Geographers (n.d.) defines the

Southeastern United States as including Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia and so this study has been delimited to these eleven states. According to Carnegie Commission data, fewer than three percent of all U.S. educational institutions are included in this classification (R-1), and the Southeastern Conference (SEC) is one of only four NCAA conferences with all its fourteen members in the top category including the flagship public institution of ten states, three additional public land-grant institutions and one private research university (Southeastern Conference, n.d.).

Eight individuals participated in this study, all of whom participated in one-on-one interviews. An email explaining the study and inviting participation was sent to university administrators, who fit the purposeful sampling descriptors, copied to their respective administrative assistants. The initial recruitment communication can be found in Appendix B. Upon contact with the participant, a copy of the International Review Board (IRB) consent form (Appendix C) was shared, and a request was made for a signature and a return digitally or via postal mail prior to their participation in the study.

See **Table 1** for the participants' demographic and pertinent employment information.

Site

In qualitative research, it is important to consider potential contextual influences on the study as situation can impact participant perspectives and must be accounted for (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Seidman, 2019). For this research study, each participant serves as an individual participant, while the location or site of the case(s) is the respective institutions. This is important because the location of the institution- the context- influences each participant's perspective. At

Table 1
Participant Information

Title	Name (pseudonym)	University (pseudonym)	Gender	Current Position
Case 1	Elizabeth	1	F	Senior Advisor to the University President
Case 2	John	2	M	Assistant Vice President for Emergency Management
Case 3	Phyllis	3	F	Vice President for Student Enrollment and Engagement Services
Case 4	Bertie	4	F	Assistant Vice President for Operations and Safety; Director of Emergency Management
Case 5	Maddox	5	M	Director of Emergency Management
Case 6	Kay	6	F	Associate Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students
Case 7	Kathleen	7	F	Director of Emergency Management
Case 8	Warren	8	M	Executive Director for the Office of Emergency Preparedness

an ecological level, crises take many forms and depending on the location and context within which the crisis takes place, unique stressors and responses might be necessary that might not be necessary in another location or context at a different university (Flynn & Sharma, 2016; Slage et al., 2021). The site(s) for this study included public and/or private, four-year institutions of higher education in the Southeast at which the participants are employed.

Below is **Table 2** representing the site information for each participant.

Data Collection

"Qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data" (Dezin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 10). To answer my research questions, I will seek to make meaning out of university administrator's experience and establish important themes as it is related to crisis planning, preparedness and response (Worthington, 2013). I conducted individual interviews utilizing a predetermined semi-structured interview protocol with individual university

Table 2
Site Information

University Name	Total Enrollment Size	Geographic Region (Rural, Urban, Suburban, Coastal)	Type (Public or Private)
University 1	28, 594	Urban	Public
University 2	30, 598	Urban-Suburban	Public
University 3	22,541	Suburban-Coastal	Public
University 4	55,000	Suburban	Public
University 5	44,597	Urban-Suburban	Public
University 6	49,591	Urban-Coastal	Public
University 7	23,406	Suburban	Public
University 8	37,606	Suburban	Public

administrators at Carnegie Classified Research-I institutions in the Southeastern part of the United States to gather information utilizing focused NVivo coding and code mapping. I first conducted a document review utilizing themes developed via a priori coding, found in the literature regarding pertinent information included in strong crisis response plans to confirm what participants shared in their interviews.

Instrumentation

Documents

In this study, I examined university crisis response plans and corresponding documentation prepared by and for university leadership, faculty, staff, and students in the case of a crisis that impacts the university community. All crisis response plans were retrieved in either printed or electronic form and were shared by the corresponding study participant. Yin (2003) asserted that, "documentary information is likely to be relevant to every case study topic" (p. 85). He noted that the relative strengths of documentation include their stability, exactness, breadth, and lack of interference with that which is under observation. The analysis of these crisis response plans allowed for a better understanding of the university's goals and planned outcomes when responding to crisis as well as led to a more holistic understanding of the supports that are in place to be enacted when a crisis occurs. All documents were examined for evidence relating to the research questions, including potential response outcomes and university values, along with the relationships and systems that are necessary to the implementation and success of crisis response.

Interview

All participants took part in an approximately 90 minute-semi structured interview. Each interview utilized an interview protocol (Appendix D) composed of open-ended questions (Seidman, 2019). A semi-structured interview protocol was chosen in an effort to allow for the interview questions to give way to deeper discussions into various related topics (Adams, 2015). Due to the nature of the topic of crisis response and each administrator's lived experience, open ended questions allowed each participant to share stories of their experience that provided great insight and allowed for rich description. Each participant was asked to respond to the same set of questions, but the exact order and wording of the questions were asked in response to the participants' thought processes. During the interview, emphasis was put on meaning and meaning context as interviewing is both temporal and transitory in nature being that it is built out of human experience (Williams, 2007). All interviews were conducted with the written consent of the participants. Participants were assured, verbally and in writing, that their responses were confidential. Interviews were recorded and transcribed via Zoom, while also recording, as a back-up, utilizing the "Voice Record" app on my iPhone to ensure that the transcription was verbatim for analysis. Zoom auto-transcription was saved to a OneDrive cloud-based storage drive. **Table 3** provides my analysis of interview questions in relation to research questions.

Data Analysis

Flick (2014) describes the process of data analysis as "a simultaneous process that requires the classification and interpretation of material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions of meaning-making" (p. 195). Data gathered from interviews and documents were analyzed and manually coded as they were collected. In this study, data were analyzed in

Table 3
Research Questions Related to Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Question
1. How do university administrators define institutional crisis?	Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6
2. How do university administrators prepare for institutional crisis?	Q7, Q8
3. How do university administrators respond to institutional crisis?	Q9, Q10, Q11

two phases. I first analyzed the crisis response documents using a priori coding and then analyzed the interviews using descriptive- focused coding (In Vivo coding) which refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record, the terms used by [participants] themselves" (Strauss, 1987, p. 33). In Vivo coding is the method often used when the study prioritizes and honors the participants voice (Saldana, 2021). Data gathered from the In Vivo coding were then utilized to create a code map. Data analysis in qualitative research is aimed at revealing experiences and meanings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Similar data are collected in both phases of data collection and then concepts and themes are interpreted in a way that the reader can understand that captures the participants lived experiences, with a focus on their histories and current experience with crisis response (Van Manen, 1990).

Document Analysis

Fischer (2006) defines document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, both printed and electronic material. A document analysis was conducted, prior to individual interviews, utilizing themes provided through a priori coding. A priori coding, or deductive coding, allows for the creation of codes using a provisional "start list"- prior to the research being conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Crisis response plans shared by each study

participant were analyzed with the themes found through the a priori coding which were provided in the data collection phase. Prior to each interview, I reviewed the crisis response documents shared by each administrator and used the information to inform probe questions that were asked during the interview. Data from the qualitative document analysis were used to triangulate findings from other data sources and validate the information shared during the semi-structured interviews.

Interviews

Qualitative coding is a systematic, subjective, and transparent process of reducing data to meaningful and credible concepts which adequately represent the data and address the research problem, purpose, or questions (Saldana, 2021). Following the completion of each interview, utilizing the Zoom transcription provided, I set aside time to read each transcript to ensure accuracy and to proofread for any grammatical errors that may have been recorded. I then changed each transcript into a Microsoft Word (.doc) file and sent it to each participant to ensure accuracy through member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For the purpose of this study, descriptive-focused coding was used to describe the behaviors and experiences of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My approach to coding and data analysis is informed by the model derived from Anfara et al. (2002) who believed that simultaneous data collection and analysis allows for generating categories and building theories by continuously comparing within and between identified categories shown in the data. This *constant comparative analysis method* builds towards research questions and allows for three distinct levels of analysis which I utilized in this study.

Level 1 Initial Codes: Descriptive-focused coding is based on frequency of words in the interview transcript and utilizes In Vivo coding, using the actual words of the participants, to uncover thematic findings in the data. The researcher must attune themselves to words and phrases that called for bolding, underlining, highlighting and vocal emphasis if spoken aloud, creates a list of impactful, action-oriented verbs, clever and ironic phrases and phrases that were repeated often across all interviews (Saldana, 2021). I used In Vivo coding to find these common words, phrases and nouns that were mentioned and then determined thematic codes that would be utilized in the finding of my study.

Level 2 Pattern Variables: From the initial coding and organization, like phrases and words were coupled together. This analytical approach, as Saldana (2021) states, "allows the researcher to offer greater reflection through second cycle coding and condenses the number of NVivo codes and provides a reanalysis of initial work" (p. 142).

Level 3 Theme Identification: Theme creation unites the identified concepts emphasizing overarching ideas and concepts that were repeated in each of the participant interviews. Appendix E shows the evolution of form in the analysis relating to the research questions in a code map. Appendix F shows the code table utilized in this study.

Because the first research question addresses university administrator's definition of institutional crisis, interview data were analyzed for participant definitions and themes for the types of events they considered a crisis. Additionally, documents were reviewed to determine crises that universities have specific written plans for to triangulate findings from the data shared around definitions and examples shared. Because the second research question examines university administrator's perceptions of preparation, the data from the interviews were analyzed

for insights into the university structures, communication plans, resources, and training that are provided to the university community in preparation for a crisis. Because the third research question addresses the university administrator's intention to respond to crisis, the interview data were analyzed for cited crisis examples which provided insight to the response of each institution. Where possible, document data were used to triangulate findings from the interview data.

Trustworthiness

While qualitative research findings may not be replicable nor generalizable due to small sample size and the inherent bias that can come from interpretation of data, trustworthiness must be established through validity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, several steps were taken to certify and protect the data collected. As with any qualitative research study, I will approach the data with caution as it is self-reported data. To mitigate the potential for misconstrued data, I will verify information shared about crisis preparation and response using the provided crisis response plan for each case to see if the response that was described in the interview, follows the response plan provided. Qualitative data can lead to bias which will be discussed in the positionality statement below.

Validity

Validity is a strength of qualitative research and is based upon the determination of whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher and study participant (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this study, I will establish validity utilizing member checks and triangulation. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define *member checks* as taking "your preliminary

analysis back to…the participants and [asking] whether your interpretation rings true" (p. 246). I will give all participants a copy of their transcripts and the codes and themes I produce after data analysis to ensure they feel ownership of the information they shared being told through my study.

A second method of validity used in this study is triangulation. Triangulation requires varying data sources used to examine evidence that will build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, an analysis of crisis response planning documents and an understanding of information shared on the participant's university websites ensures that information shared in the interviews are accurate and verifiable.

Methods of Verification

Transferability

Due to the small sample size, the findings of this study may not be generalizable to all people who may share some or all identities and lived experiences of participants. Additionally, due to the primary geographical bounds set by the study, the findings are limited to those participants within their current settings. However, utilizing rich descriptions provided through the interview findings will allow for applicability in other contexts. Researchers (Denzin, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln; 2017) describe the process of providing thick description as an avenue for ensuring that findings have applicability in other contexts: "A thick description … does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another." (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). To ensure that rich descriptions were provided and understood during the interview, although recorded through Zoom and not held in-person on the participants respective

campus, the interview protocol utilized open-ended questions that allowed for the thought process of the participant to guide the conversation allowing for the participant to share as desired. I also offered time at the beginning of each interview to build rapport with each participant learning more about their work, their university mission and priorities and their personal reasoning for doing the work that they do. Chapters 4 and 5 of my dissertation will provide rich, detailed descriptions of administrators' lived experiences of crisis and their understanding of crisis response, allowing readers of this study to determine the transferability of this study.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1986) define dependability as data being consistent with data collection. To ensure consistency in the data collection and analysis process an audit trail will be utilized. A The implementation of audit trail allows qualitative researchers to provide detailed descriptions of data collection, category derivation, and decisions behind inquiry/further exploration (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I will create a folder in a cloud-based drive that includes all interview transcriptions, In Vivo files with coding, as well as a detailed journal with descriptions of dates, tasks completed, next steps, and links to related documents.

Confirmability

Confirmability speaks to "the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). It is important to take steps to ensure study findings are reflective of the study participants and not the thoughts and biases of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). I will take two beneficial steps to establish confidence in the confirmability of my qualitative findings. First, I will practice reflexivity,

acknowledging personal perspectives and opinions resulting from my participation in the study (Palaganas et al., 2017). Second, I will utilize both the triangulation of data utilizing documented crisis response plans and university website and I will create a detailed audit trail to demonstrate thorough and accurate documentation of study findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Positionality Statement

As a white cisgender, middle-class female doctoral student, and former secondary educator in the southeastern region of America, I recognized that I do bring my own bias and perspective to this study. My perceptions of university crisis have been shaped by my professional and personal experience. Professionally, since 2018, I have served and continue to serve as a university staff member in the field of Student Affairs. After completing my Master's in Higher Education Administration Degree, I have served in numerous administrative positions on various college campuses, both public and private, including roles as a student ambassador advisor, first-year experience instructor, orientation advisor, academic officer, and special projects coordinator for executive level administration. Each of my professional roles and experiences have impacted my perceptions of the importance of crisis preparation and response and its impact on college and university students.

On a more personal level, my past experience as an educator in the public school system, teaching at an urban, racially, and economically diverse high school could potentially influence my understanding of crisis preparedness and response. During my first year as a classroom teacher, our school experienced an act of gun violence that required a quick and confident crisis response for which I was not prepared. This personal experience has impacted my opinions of the importance of crisis planning and strong, knowledgeable leadership in the face of a crisis.

Due to these previous experiences, I bring specific biases to this study. Although I will make every effort to ensure objectivity, I recognize that my beliefs and experiences may have shaped my understanding and analysis of collected data. However, I counteracted my bias by recording and reporting factual findings of participant's responses throughout each part of the research while analyzing the data and writing the findings.

Conclusion

"Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (Dezin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 10). A sound methodological plan will facilitate accurate data collection and analysis as I seek to address my established research questions. A thorough, detailed investigative methodology will enable me to create a strong and comprehensive study that accurately depicts participant perspectives throughout the research process. Following this chapter, the study findings are presented in Chapter IV and a summary of findings and recommendations for further study are presented in Chapter V.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to examine institutional crisis in higher education to understand how university administrators define, prepare, and respond to crisis utilizing a crisis management plan in the face of the everchanging higher education landscape. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do university administrators define institutional crisis?
2. How do university administrators prepare for institutional crisis?
3. How do university administrators respond to institutional crisis?

The study used a basic qualitative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to understand the experiences of university administrators and the universities they serve, as well as explored their personal definitions of crisis and how it informs university preparedness and response.

Purposeful criterion sampling was used to select participants for the study. I conducted individual interviews that lasted between 35 and 90 minutes utilizing a predetermined semi-structured interview protocol with individual university administrators to gather information. I then conducted a document review utilizing themes developed via a priori coding, found in the literature regarding pertinent information included in strong crisis response plans to confirm what participants shared in their interviews. After data collection, the data were analyzed using descriptive-focused coding, and four major themes emerged from the participants' experiences including additional unexpected findings, each of which are discussed in depth in this chapter.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations were identified during this study. First, it focused exclusively on large Research-1 institutions in the Southeastern United States. The qualitative research design required a small sample size to capture rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences. Additionally, only university administrators who volunteered were included. Participants were uniquely selected by their university president or chancellor, who identified someone on their leadership team as the primary individual responsible for or actively involved in campus crisis response. In one case, a university president expressed willingness to participate but recommended the content expert on their team as a more valuable contributor to the study.

Research Participants

Eight university administrators shared their thoughts, feelings and perceptions about their experiences of crisis on their respective university campuses. As evidenced in the scholarly research, leadership can be taught (Van Velson et al, 2010) but the experience and specific lens that each of the research participants brought to the study must be acknowledged prior to sharing the description of findings to recognize the uniqueness and varied expertise of each research participant. **Table 4** provides demographic information about the administrators who participated in this study. Participants were selected by their respective university president or chancellor; therefore, objectivity and honesty were assumed. All participants were provided with a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Description of Findings

Four major themes emerged from the data, each with subthemes. Each of the themes includes a title, as well as a quoted phrase directly from the participant's "own language that

Table 4

Detailed Participant (Case) Information

Name (pseudonym)	University (pseudonym)	Current Position	Tenure: years spent in higher ed	Degree(s)	Professional Experience
Elizabeth	1	Senior Advisor to the University President	22	B.S. in Journalism; M.S. Public Administration; Certificate in Crisis Communication	News Media, TV, Governor's Press Secretary, Communications Consulting
John	2	Assistant Vice President for Emergency Management	16	B.S. in Biology and Chemistry; M.S. in Civil and Environmental Engineering	State Government Engineer for Hazardous Materials; State Government Emergency Response Team
Phyllis	3	Vice President for Student Enrollment and Engagement Services	28	B.S. in Accounting; M.Ed. in Higher Education Administration and College Student Personnel; Ed.D. in Adult and Higher Education	Tax Accountant; Student Affairs Professional; Student Enrollment Engagement Services
Bertie	4	Assistant Vice President for Operations and Safety; Director of Emergency Management	13	B.S. in Social Work; M.S in Mental Health Counseling	Social Work; County Government Emergency Management Coordinator; City Government Director of Emergency Management

Table 4 (continued).

Maddox	5	Director of Emergency Management	6	B.S. in Public Administration; Certificate in Emergency Management and Hazard Mitigation	Military Veteran specializing in Communications; County Government Water and Sewer Communications
Kay	6	Associate Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students	13	B.S. in Speech Communications and Psychology; M.Ed. in Higher Education Administration; PhD in Curriculum and Instruction	Student Affairs Professional
Kathleen	7	Director of Emergency Management	6	B.S. in Crisis, Emergency and Disaster Management, M.S. in Business Administration	Air Force Veteran specializing in Disaster Preparedness; Civilian Emergency Management Craftsman for Naval Weapons Station; Installation Emergency Manager for Joint Naval Station and Air Force Base
Warren	8	Executive Director for the Office of Emergency Preparedness	2	B.A. in Journalism, M.S. in Public Safety Administration	University Police Force- Major, Deputy Chief of Operations

succinctly capture(s) and summarize(s) the major idea" (Saldana, 2021, p. 260). **Table 5** summarizes each of these themes. Following is an in-depth discussion of each theme, supported by participants' quotes gathered from the audio-recorded interviews and supported by the conceptual framework used in this study. This study is framed in the work of Mitroff and Pearson's six-phase crisis management model (1993) which highlights the time phases or stages through which nearly all crises pass- from early warning signals to prevention, through damage containment and recovery, to organizational learning. Crisis management is a framework put into place by an organization's leadership to effectively mitigate risks incurred from internal and external crisis (Simola, 2005). Throughout the findings, administrators shared their lived experiences working to mitigate risks from crises that occur on their university campuses. I applied Mitroff and Pearson's model as the conceptual framework for this study in an effort to present a more comprehensive interpretation and reflection of university administrators' perception of crisis preparedness and response. To ensure clarity of the text, filler words such as "um", "like", or the excessive use of "as you know" have been removed.

Theme 1: Crisis Definition: An Exercise in Experience

Crises are unpredictable phenomena, yet not unexpected and the definition of "crisis" can be determined by human attitudes towards the concept of crisis (Coombs, 2015). The presence of crisis in higher education, coupled with the subjectivity of the term itself, provides an opportunity to consider a broader view of administrator response. Similar to Mitroff's (1993) viewpoint, which highlights the impossibility of preparing for every potential crisis, the interviews with participants in this study revealed that no single definition of crisis could encompass all the types of crises that universities might face. The subthemes indicated that

Table 5
Study Themes and Descriptions

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Theme 1: Crisis Definition: An Exercise in Experience	"It Depends": A Continuum of Crisis	Administrators shared varying definitions and descriptions of the types of crises they handle in a university setting.
	"I Know it When I See it": The Importance of Administrator Experience	Administrators' varied experiences influenced how crises were handled and the pressure under which they responded.
Theme 2: Crisis Factors and Susceptibility	"If Everything is a Priority, Nothing is a Priority": What Matters in the Moment	Administrators highlighted key indicators of a crisis and stressed the importance of identifying priorities for preparation and execution in any crisis.
	"Control the Message before it Controls You": Communication is Key	Administrators emphasized the importance of intentional communication during a crisis, ensuring one unified voice.
	"A City within a City": University as a Microcosm of the World	Administrators described how university crises are similar to those in a city, highlighting the unique factors involved.
Theme 3: The Cycle of Crisis: Write, Train, Exercise	"It's Everyone's Responsibility": Implications for Training and Leadership	Ongoing training and leadership development are crucial for crisis response on a university campus.
	"Break the Plan": Prepare in Order to Manage	Administrators discussed the importance of table exercises and after-action plans to prepare for future crises.
Theme 4: Process or Procedure: The Importance of Emergency Operation Structures	"A Seat at the Table": Reporting Structures	Administrators highlighted the importance of having a voice among executive leadership in crisis response decision-making.
	"Leaning Forward": Appreciation for Administrative Support	Buy-in from executive-level leaders is necessary for preparation and forward-thinking in crisis management.

participants believed that how you define crisis is subjective and depends on the campus context, resources available, and experience of the university administrator.

"It Depends": Continuum of Crisis

Participants shared their own definitions of crisis as it relates to the university setting and although all recounted varying definitions and descriptions of the types of crises that they handle, a common language was used and each expressed interest in providing a more definitive definition. With each definition, participants provided reasons citing information around their specific campus and its needs for context. Kay believed that each administrator comes to the conversation around crisis with a different lens, informed by their own personal history and career. Bertie described this sentiment as she stated:

> There is no clear consensus on what a crisis means. What may be a crisis to you is an incident to me. I think a lot of it depends upon the scope and the size and what resources and what experience the institution may have. It all comes to scale.

Kathleen stated a similar sentiment: "Wherever you are, crisis means something very different. Everything is very scalable, and what feels like a crisis to one organization certainly may not to another, due to experience or the depth of their organization and their capacities." All the participants expressed similar feelings. Words such as "degrees," "continuum,", "scalable", "creeping," "levels," and "subjective" were used to describe the varying definitions and descriptions of crisis. Phyllis described how this continuum of crisis impacted her daily work and must be accounted for when talking about a crisis definition:

> To me, there's a continuum of crisis. And not to minimize, but I think about how we have students in crisis each and every day. They've lost a parent, a grandparent. And again, not

> to minimize, but I might say that's more of a micro or a short-term crisis. And then I think about student deaths as moving along that continuum and what we must deal with there or student death that may be death by suicide and it's in the halls and the impact there. And then of course, I think about more the kind of higher level that might activate more of a university response, like a campus shooting or a major disaster.

In the same vein, John explained:

> I think there are degrees of crisis. We talk a lot about, or I talk a lot about, how I position things as there are hard days and then there are crises. And as a first responder, we have a whole lot of hard days. And that's one level of crisis management. I think the real challenges are when you have a bad day. And in my career, I've probably only had a handful of bad days. And when you're having a bad day, that's when you're truly experiencing a crisis. You're usually in a situation that may be unprecedented, somewhere you may not have found yourself before.

While many participants articulated why there was no one definition of crisis, with Maddox stating that, "what some may define as a crisis, our office would consider a hazard or concern", few participants came to a personal definition that they articulated. Kathleen stated that, "At an institution of higher education, a crisis is something that has a significant disruption to our normal operations and needs some sort of attention to resolve the situation, to take care of people and to continue our mission." With a continued focus on university mission, John shared that "A crisis is when there's significant interruption of your core mission and significant disruptions of a significant core of your operations." Elizabeth described a crisis as "a point in time in which a matter or an issue needs immediate attention that requires you to go outside of the normal

bureaucratic ways of addressing it. It can be good, or it can be negative requiring an expedited decision-making process." Warren agreed and offered a similar sentiment to Elizabeth stating that, "Anything that stresses the institution's ability to provide its essential services would be considered a crisis, when the scope of it gets broader than either the institution has enough resources to adequately deal with it or we have to start to pull in abnormal external resources." Bertie simply described a crisis as "a hazard that comes to scale".

To further understand the continuum of crisis that each participant spoke of, each provided examples of the types of crises that they had experienced on their campus, further emphasizing the varying nature of crisis dependent upon the campus and its context. All participants identified inclement weather (e.g., hurricanes, snowstorms, tornadoes) as a potential crisis, while many also pointed out other, unique crisis situations specific to the universities they served. These examples fit into two categories outlined by Mitroff (1993) in the conceptual framework guiding the study. Mitroff noted that crises typically fall into clusters, such as external actions (e.g., mass shootings, racially and politically charged incidents) and threats (e.g., natural and man-made disasters).

Threats reported by the participants included a wide variety of threats to the institution. Kathleen stated: "We have an animal care facility, and those animals need to be taken care of 24/7 and there are strict protocols that go with that. We also have chemicals, biological and radiological materials, on our campus and so we use a lot of hazmat protocols that people do not understand. This can pose a serious threat and can compound in a crisis."

Other examples included loss of infrastructure and its impact on university operations. Bertie stated:

> We had a roadway that was known as belonging to *Institution 4* but it really didn't. It was connecting our university across the street where there is student housing, but it was owned by the government. They were positioning, putting it into place and it collapsed, killing two students and injuring construction workers.

Bertie also mentioned the fire hazard in residence halls, particularly for students who cook with oil, "Students will walk away, get distracted, it catches fire and the first thing they do is throw water on it, which is the worst thing you can do. If you have a fire on the third floor in one room, the fire department comes in and put the fire out and now the water is trickling all the way down into the walls of other floors causing even more damage than the fire."

The second category identified by Mitroff as external actions were also identified as examples by the participants. Warren disclosed that his university had experienced an on-campus murder in recent years that made national headlines due, not to the nature of the incident, but the nature of the person with news media associating it with potential illegal activity. Phyllis and John both recounted an act of mass violence that took place on campuses they have served with Phyllis reflecting on her experience at a previous campus she served at and the level of crisis that ensued following an act of mass violence:

> The largest crisis of my career was an active shooter when I was at a northern university, early in my administrative career. I was an assistant vice president at the time. We have an alum of our campus, come back, enter a classroom and kill a number of our students and then proceed to take his own life.

Other common examples of external actions included medical emergencies that resulted in student deaths, reports of and searches for missing students, protests and mass violence taking

place on university campuses. Participants highlighted personal examples from their careers. Kay reported that, “With over 50,000 students on our campus, with huge age ranges, people are often surprised by how many student deaths we have in a year. Most of these, nobody hears about as they are due to medical issues, etc. but then there are ones that do get greater attention.”

All participants noted varying ways in which crisis can be defined through specific university context, scale and degree of impact citing examples of both external actions and threats on a continuum of crisis, degrees varying by type of crisis and resources available, all impacting the university and its core mission.

“I know it when I see it”: The Importance of Administrator Experience

University emergency management is often not a career about which individuals dream . Maddox stated that he, “found emergency management kind of by accident.” Warren agreed, stating that after spending approximately 20 years with the university police department, he transitioned to emergency management. Unlike Maddox and Warren, Bertie, a 20-year emergency management veteran, was in emergency management before it was recognized nationally as emergency management. Starting her career in social work, she segued into training and education coordination for government crisis response efforts. Although unique in their backgrounds and experiences that brought them to university crisis response work, all participants identified common descriptions about their leadership styles and the importance of their previous experience when it came to responding to crises in their current roles. Bertie spoke of a humanistic approach to crisis, noting that emotional intelligence was the key to all other traits.

> Emotional intelligence is key. You have to be able to really take in the information, be deliberate about asking questions and getting the type of information that you need. The challenge with crisis is you don't always have all the information you need in the moment. Emotional intelligence allows for diligence and inquiry, and then decision making and delegation which requires you to really lean into the staff and communicate.

Kathleen stated that:

> My leadership style is collaborative. Emergency managers, at heart, are master collaborators. We are coordinating things. We are not personally putting out fires or diffusing bombs or removing a threat from a place. We are coordinating individuals who have those specialties and are making sure that they are organized, trained and equipped to do what they need to do, and that we are providing them with the support that they need.

Elizabeth stated that in addition to collaboration, problem solving was the main trait she felt was necessary.

> I am a problem solver. That's basically what I feel like my job overall is when you have my background, which has been very universal across the university. It is helpful to be able to solve problems. If I don't know what to do, I generally know what direction to go in to be able to get people where they need to go and help solve problems. At this level, every day, there is a problem. Even the best problems need solutions.

Kay and Phyllis emphasized the importance of being approachable, revealing that this trait helped them become stronger advocates for their students and campus. They approached their work with a mindset focused on understanding and addressing the needs of their

community. Both noted how they have leaned on their leadership teams to collaboratively develop strategic and innovative ideas while maintaining a clear view of the broader goals. Phyllis, in particular, highlighted her reliance on instinct and a strong sense of humanity in her decision-making.

> I would say in every major crisis that I have been involved with; there's a lot of times where I didn't know what to do but I just followed my instincts and just thought, how do I treat people at a very basic human level? What is it that they could use or need right now? How do I show up? And that really sometimes is my guiding tenet. No two crises are going to be the same. I've found that crisis management often depends less on position and more on experience, competence, and skillset. It's about having the right demeanor and abilities rather than just holding a specific role.

During the interviews, the participants' diverse experiences in crisis management influenced both how they responded to crises and the level of pressure they faced while responding. Elizabeth described it as a creeping crisis and something that she felt in her gut.

> For me, an issue presents itself, and if someone like me is doing his/her job, we will see that if we don't pay attention to this right now, it could turn into a full-fledged crisis. Many times, it can start as something small and then grow into something large. That's what I call a creeping crisis. Much of it is based on experience and gut. Sometimes things are moving so fast there isn't really time to contain the situation, but if I can recognize and catch it early enough- I will and that's all based on instinct.

John and Phyllis also reported their reliance on instinct and trusting themselves enough to call the shots, with John comparing crisis response to art, noting that "you know it when you see it,"

a sentiment that spoke to the inherent importance of experience when serving as a university's emergency management and crisis response administrator.

Theme 2: Crisis Factors and Susceptibility

"If everything is a priority, nothing is a priority": What Matters in the Moment

There are many factors to be considered when evaluating if something is a crisis and the findings below are illustrative of the first two steps in Mitroff and Pearson's six-phase crisis management model highlighting signal and probing and preparation. Signal detection refers to the 'pre-crisis' phase of crisis management and involves monitoring and responding to the early signs of a possible crisis (Mitroff et al., 1987) while the probing and preparation stage involves searching for risk factors of a crisis and deciding on an action plan should an emergency arise (Mitroff, 2005; Pearson & Mitroff, 2019). Each participant discussed factors that influenced how they determined what qualifies as a crisis. They explained that deciding whether a specific event is a crisis can be challenging, as it involves considering factors such as the timing of the event, required resources, potential budget concerns, the duration of its impact on the campus community, and the human element involved.

Bertie reported that, "Crises don't come between nine and five, Monday through Friday. They come on holiday weekends, they come after 11pm. They come in inopportune times." Kathleen agreed, pointing out that a crisis has a start and an end, but that end may be hours or days away, or it may be weeks or months away depending on the impact. Impact was a word often used by participants to describe crisis factors; the impact it can have on individuals, the campus, the community and the standard operations of the campus. John highlighted this point

by sharing an example of mass violence that occurred on his campus and the lasting impact it had on a generation.

> I think the most pointed example of impact on a campus is that of our mass violence experience, our students were able to come back to campus, and we did have graduation. Classes did start again that next fall, but the impact of that incident has lasted almost a generation. There are still pieces of that that permeate the fabric of who we are and what we do. It took a long time to work through. Most of the students who are here now weren't born when it occurred, but there's still pockets of PTSD among faculty and staff that were here. And I think maybe that's an important piece of crisis, too. An incident is intense, but short in duration. I think a crisis can be intense but the curve as you come back to normal is much longer.

Common across all participant responses to crisis response priorities was the value put on life safety first, followed by protection of infrastructure. Maddox stated, "It's typically life safety that comes first and then comes protection of property. And then we can get to some of those, I don't want to say less priority, but those things that take a fall in the ranking of priority after life safety and property protection." Bertie explained that:

> There will be chaos, there will be damage, there will be inconvenience, there will be displacement. But the number one priority is life safety. Obviously, our students, faculty and staff are the priority. Infrastructure is the next kind of priority, but it all comes down to life safety.

John agreed and offered that:

> If you look at our continuing operation plan for the university, it talks about life safety as being first and how quickly you can restore that. Second is when you can get operations back in place and infrastructure secured. Third is when you can begin teaching again. Fourth is research and then fifth is our external missions.

Beyond life safety and infrastructure concerns, participants believed that there are human factors that must be considered when identifying priorities in a crisis. There is financial investment that must be made and the impact that it has on resource allocation as well as the relationship to the community that must be considered.

Elizabeth spoke to the financial capital required for a crisis and how it must be a priority, "When you hit a crisis, sometimes you must adjust your finances. We had to go outside the normal budget process to get more funds to be able to do what we needed to do." Bertie also spoke to this, stating that, "It's very difficult to take sums of money and put it to a potential 'what if' situation that may or may not even occur. Resources are tight at every level, and so nobody wants to spend money, then the scenario happens and you're spending gobs of money to recover from it." Aside from financial capital, there is social capital with the surrounding community that must be a forethought when considering a crisis and how to prepare for and address it.

Through the interviews, clearly, community support and resources were essential to priority setting in a crisis. Many participants spoke of the importance of first, where the university is situated and secondly, how the university operates within the greater community. John stated that crisis can be dependent on geography. Kathleen elaborated:

Depending on where you are located, your potential for certain types of crises is higher noting that if you are on the coast, you may experience a hurricane and will have a specific plan whereas if you are in the Midwest, you may be more prepared for a tornado. Aside from weather, Phyllis recounted her experience living in areas with higher crime rates due to being situated in a city or an urban area.

> I live in an urban area and our university is situated in an urban area and sadly, there's shootings every day outside of our campus. We don't often hear about them, but we are always aware of them and the risk they can pose to our campus.

Six of the eight participants commented on the importance of community in the midst of crisis and the importance of protecting the entire community. John spoke generally stating that: "To get through any type of crisis, you really need to do it with your community" while Bertie emphasized the importance of external community connection, stating that: "We are part of a community. If our surrounding county is impacted, we are impacted." Elizabeth spoke more specifically: "There is great importance in town gown relationships and strong relationships with local agencies." Maddox agreed with Elizabeth noting that while it can be challenging at times, there are businesses in and around campus and it is important that everyone should be working together to protect the community.

With strong partnerships and relationships with local and state agencies and the local business community, the impact of a crisis can be mitigated. A good relationship with these agencies can mean the difference between an incident and a crisis. Warren stated:

> We are never afraid to have our community partners to our campus whenever we need to in a crisis. We have had county police, fire and rescue departments here. We have had the

> Department of Health here. We've had the National Weather Service come in. As much as we want to be self-sufficient, and as much as we want to be controlling the incident, we sometimes aren't, and we may not be the lead agency. But even if we are, we're going to depend upon our outside partners for certain things.

Maddox spoke to the importance of strong outside partnerships noting that with severe weather being frequent in their state, having the ability to have pre-event contractual agreements already negotiated and in place makes quickly responding to a crisis easier.

> All I have to do is pick up the phone, make one call and contractors can get on site and begin supporting our campus- it is a critical thing.

Five of the eight participants discussed the burden of managing numerous critical responsibilities and priorities in crisis management and response, as well as the personal impact it can have. Kay emphasized that understanding priorities is crucial to preventing every issue from becoming a crisis. By doing so, it becomes easier to manage a team and ensure success for the campus community in any situation.

> You are either able to do crisis and you're okay with it or you need not to be. Self-awareness is key. So much about how crisis is managed is how people see the person managing it. And so, for my staff, they can't see me freaking out, running around with my head cut off because that then creates their response. And so, I think that one of the things that are important for leaders in crisis is understanding that everybody's going to take their reactions from you. You have to put some of your own emotions out of the way. You must deal with the issue at hand, and you need your staff and students to see that you are authentic and real, but not really. As a leader, you're put in this double-edged

> sword situation of trying to reassure everybody while being truthful and authentic. I have worked under people who everything was a crisis, and the world was always ending and that has impacted how I lead because when everybody's always on a heightened awareness and it causes a lot of burn out.

Warren and Kathleen agreed, each stating specifically that when "everything is a priority, nothing is a priority." Setting priorities, especially during a crisis, carries significant responsibility and administrators carry a great burden in determining these priorities to ensure the health and safety of their campus and community.

"Control the Message before it Controls You": Communication is Key

When informational uncertainty must be managed there is a need for agility and shared decision-making when communicating (Slage et al., 2021). Bertie highlighted this and pointed out the number one tenet of crisis management is focused on communication:

> The number one tenet of crisis management is you need to control the message before the message controls you, which does not mean to say that you are not honest and you don't give information, but if you're not providing information to the public, to your constituents, to the media, to students, faculty and staff, they will find it elsewhere. And there are people that will fall out from under rocks to provide opinions on issues that they have not a lot of reason to be speaking about.

All eight participants emphasized the importance of communication in every crisis, highlighting the significant role that communication played in responding intentionally and with one voice. Each shared about their strategic communications teams and how they worked in tandem across

the university and with external partners to ensure they were in lock step and able to keep everyone informed. Maddox stated:

> Our team is constantly working, They have a good relationship with the local media. They have good relationships with other entities, with other universities and really work to control the message.

Kathleen emphasized Maddox's point reflecting on the importance of the relationship that the marketing and communications team has with the local news outlets:

> It all comes back to relationships. We work very hard to be as transparent as possible and very open and honest about the situations we are in, what we're doing about it and where we are going next. If the media gets a story, they very quickly call our guys and say, "Hey, this is what I heard." Our team will get the right people involved to handle the interview, statement, whatever is the appropriate thing at the time, and then we will move on. Oftentimes, this prevents things from becoming crises because of our transparency and our relationship with the media.

Kay believed that communication can sometimes be the most difficult part of managing a crisis:

> We are no longer communicating with just our students and campus community. We communicate with everyone. So often there are people who need to read the communication and approve it before it goes out. Edits are made and by the time it is approved, the crisis has changed, and the cycle begins again. What we can't say impacts what we do say and getting that approved can sometimes take an extended period of time that we don't always have.

Several participants also mentioned that questions surrounding communications and press conferences, which can prolong the response time, were a common concern. Maddox shared that there is continuous critique and conversation that is taking place prior to a press conference. Kay provided some of the questions she and her team ask before approaching a communication or press conference:

We always ask, "Who should speak?" Should it be the president? Human Resources? Someone from Marketing and Communications? Obviously, the president cannot comment on everything, as that will become the expectation. And depending on who sends out the communication, there is a perceived level of importance to the university.

When asked about the importance of communication during a crisis Elizabeth stated that, "It's normally more the people disasters that cause the real issue with the media." Kathleen also discussed how many crises they face stem from poor decisions made by individuals, such as a university president misappropriating funds, which often attract significant media attention. She emphasized that by acknowledging the mistake, taking responsibility, and avoiding concealment, the university is more likely to be seen as a friend of the media rather than an adversary. Elizabeth stated that:

> There are some basic rules that you must follow when communicating about a crisis with the media. You must acknowledge that something is happening, and you must be on site. It is very important to have the news conference right away, so people know the university is managing it. Have a top university official there to speak to what is happening, even if you don't have answers yet. It all goes to those tenets of good communication: Be timely, be transparent, have the right people in front of the camera

and follow the law because there are personnel rules (FERPA. HIPPA) that must be followed.

Maddox and Warren also discussed key communication principles, both stressing the importance of the university's marketing and communication team determining who should speak to the media and where the press conference should be held. They emphasized that the location must be secure and not interfere with the ongoing crisis. Both noted that their university's marketing and communication team effectively coordinated with the media, directing them to specific areas at designated times to ensure they received the necessary information without being in restricted areas.

These rules of communication extend beyond the university and each participant shared that the relationship their university has with the media is predicated on everyone doing their job. Kathleen noted:

> Everybody has a job at the end of the day. So, if we (the university) help them (the media) do their job, which is to inform the public, which is incredibly important, they will often very quickly be willing to help us get the word out about things that we need shared. Relationships are two ways.

Each participant emphasized that people are often only reading the headline, getting a perception of what is happening and then creating their own narrative. Phyllis explained that “if you don’t communicate people will make it up, making it even more difficult to manage the crisis in the first place”. Kay gave an example:

> I think about things like a hazing incident or a student death. We may not be able to say what has happened because of FERPA or HIPPA and so then people make up those facts

> and then we spend time having to respond to the crisis that ensues from the facts that are created about the original crisis.

But why is there so much media attention on universities? Phyllis believed that because the college experience is part of the fabric of an American society, everybody relates to it. And so, it's an easy target for media. Also, the amount of attention changes dependent on the location and perceived status of the university. Kay agreed and offered that "anything that takes place near a college campus, when it's in the headlines, it's going to be near university 6. Well, it had nothing to do with university 6, but suddenly now it's in people's mind. "Oh, well, that happened at University 6."

John perfectly summed up the importance of communication during a crisis response stating that, "If you (the university) don't tell your story correctly, it doesn't matter how good of a job you did containing the crisis, the media will tell it for you. Pay attention."

"A City within a City": University as a Microcosm of the World

It can often feel as though the eyes of the world are on the university, even when no crisis is unfolding. Participants in this study highlighted the unique factors involved in assessing a crisis on a campus, often drawing parallels to a city. All eight participants agreed that the university truly is "a city within a city." Elizabeth pointed out that the university faces all the challenges of a city:

> Universities, I feel like they are cities within cities, whether you are a rural university or you're in the middle of a city. We are a community within a community, and we have all the problems that any town has, only ours are condensed. A lot of what happens is exacerbated. I think that is what makes a difference, too. If something were to happen in

> a city (e.g. a robbery, burglary), everyone quickly moves on but on a campus? Oh my god. It automatically means that the campus isn't safe when in reality it was 6 miles away from the campus.

Kay agreed and offered that there is a higher expectation for the level of care and safety that universities provide:

> When people talk about how many student deaths we have on our campus, I tell them that they should go to the obituary section of the city or town they live in and see how many they have for reference. It's more than we have all year, even though we have more people on or affiliated with our campus than what lives in their town. It's just that because we, at the university, are so compact that it's more newsworthy. And so, there's a heightened interest in us and there's higher expectations. And so, when I do a presentation for family members about safety, I talk about how you don't necessarily expect the police in your city to always keep your student safe, but you do at the university. And although we have some controls, not much of what they (the police) do is all that different from a regular city. These things are happening everywhere. There are just more eyes on it here.

Before taking his position at the university, Warren had worked as a police officer for the local government. He was shocked by how much attention every incident on campus received. He recalled an instance when someone had a heart attack and passed away, only to have the media arrive demanding details and an interview. At first, he didn't understand why, but soon realized, "Everything here matters; everything gets a lot of attention, even though it wouldn't get this much in the city."

For Bertie, it was simply the size of the university that led her to compare it to a city, stating that "In our state, there are 67 counties and Institution 4's population is greater than 29 of them. We are a mid-size city and so we function as such." John agreed with Bertie, "We are the elephant in the closet. We're the biggest thing here. We've got the most resources, the most assets."

Like a city, there is great diversity on a university campus and study participants commented on this being another unique factor that comes into play when evaluating crisis calling the university a "microcosm of the society at large". Bertie stated that "the university is actually a slice of everything that is happening in the community and society today." Elizabeth stated that because of the diverse needs of the campus community, many individuals are impacted by decisions that are made, sometimes without understanding the full impact that is made until it has occurred:

> We have so many audiences and they're so diverse and attention must be paid to all of them. Your internal audiences are always most important, your students, faculty and staff. But any university has so many tentacles. You've got your state government, your governor, general assembly, state legislature, etc. And then you have your alumni, donors, the city you're in, your neighborhoods, research partners, etc. It is just crazy who all can be impacted and depending on the crisis, what attention needs to be paid to what audience.

Other unique factors considered when determining a campus crisis went beyond size and geography. Participants highlighted various internal and external factors that make universities more vulnerable to crises. When asked to elaborate on these factors, they specifically mentioned

the student population, noting that many are young, vulnerable, and away from home for the first time. They also discussed the external pressure families place on universities to protect their children.

Bertie stated:

> We are dealing with a lot of young people. One, they're trying to find themselves, and it's a pretty vulnerable time for a lot of them. And for some, it's their first time away from home in a new city.

Kay agreed and offered that:

> We have a large contingent of 18- to 25-year-olds on a college campus who are living together with a lot of temptation and not all of their critical thinking skills, and so our ratio, statistically speaking, is that we have more crises.

Although college students are technically adults, Elizabeth pointed out, "We say they are adults, but there is still a sense of *in loco parentis*, when students go to university, but parents expect them to be safe, well cared for, and to receive the education they are paying for." Maddox explained:

> The expectation is that the care and services we provide to students are more extensive. On campus, especially in student housing, we are still actively guiding students—telling them what to do and when to do it.

Bertie agreed and stated that:

> As a parent sending a child to college, even an 18-year-old, they still see them as their 'baby.' They expect the institution to bear a greater responsibility for their well-being than they would if their child were entering the workforce.

These external pressures extend beyond increased attention to safety and security due to the student population and included other factors such as societal trends and political pressures. Interestingly, Warren stated that:

> I think there is more attention being given to weather in society right now. If you think about it, we have movies like Twister coming out, and then all of a sudden people are going to pay more attention to the weather thing and that is just how it goes.

Similar to the attention given to societal trends, participants mentioned that their universities are also closely monitoring political trends and pressures, as these can lead to crises. Politicians, particularly those with ties to public flagship institutions, often show great interest in what is happening on university campuses. Warren explained that this is due to the close relationships between university leaders and those in power at both the university and government levels.

Bertie noted that:

> We are governed by the state, so whoever happens to be in power at the time determines the direction that you go in. And it may not be a direction that you necessarily would take or believe in, but that's the way you must do it. So, you have got to figure out how you can still do your job effectively with the parameters that are put in place.

Kay added:

> The political pressures are different now. How we respond to certain things is much different today than it would have been 10 or 12 years ago because of the priorities of legislation, because of the pressures on colleges and university presidents. Our president serves at the privilege of the governor and so all of that is going to impact how they

> manage crises and what their responses are. I would even say that something can quickly become a crisis when somebody has gotten a legislator involved. People love to copy the governor on emails and issues if they feel they've been treated wrongly.

John provided an example of how political pressure creates crises and makes university operations more challenging. He explained that decisions made in the state capital, such as those by politicians or state agencies, can have a significant impact on the university, often without their awareness. One example he gave was a state-managed shelter plan during a community-wide crisis. In such situations, states look to universities for shelter space when a major incident occurs. John explained:

> This decision is made outside the university, outside of higher education, yet it has a direct impact on us. There is no extra capacity for that type of support during a crisis. When a crisis happens, our students are still on campus—we don't just send everyone home. We already operate at 105% capacity. We don't have the space in residence halls to safely house that many additional people, nor do we have the capacity in our dining halls to feed an extra 3,000 or 4,000 people three times a day. We're simply not built for that. This is an example of the external pressures that can complicate university operations.

Universities face a unique set of challenges when it comes to crisis management, often drawing comparisons to cities in terms of size, complexity, and the diverse needs of their populations. The "city within a city" analogy captures the essence of university life, where the problems faced can be just as varied and intense as those in a larger urban environment. The heightened attention and expectations placed on universities, both internally from students and

families and externally from political, societal, and media pressures, further complicated the participants ability to manage crises effectively. Universities must navigate these pressures while maintaining a balance between the safety and well-being of students and their broader role in the community and society.

Theme 3: The Cycle of Crisis: Write, Train, Exercise

As participants shared their personal insights on university crisis preparation, they highlighted the cyclical nature of crises and their far-reaching impact on planning, response, and the broader university community. The findings below align with the third and fourth stages of Mitroff and Pearson's Six-Phase Paradigm of Crisis Management. According to Mitroff (2005), "The third stage of the model (containment) focuses on limiting the damage of a crisis, while the fourth (recovery) addresses recovery programs that are implemented to resume normalcy within an organization." As Mitroff (2005) states, since the number of potential crises is endless, no university, even with the largest budgets or seamless crisis management plans, can plan for all possible contingencies but the cycle of crisis and the preparation and training that administrators do play a part in a university being prepared as evidenced by the information provided below. These stages are reflected in the cyclical patterns identified in the findings. Kathleen stated that every crisis has a massive impact on people but there is always a start and an end and even when it may be difficult to see, you know that the cycle will eventually start over. Bertie agreed sharing that the cycle provides a continuous path forward regardless of the crisis:

> You have to look at the cycle of emergency management: the preparation, the response, the mitigation and then the recovery. Every single one of us would be more than happy to

> prepare, get ready, go through all the motions, do all the work that the cycle requires and then wait and monitor and then breathe a sigh of relief afterwards.

John also spoke to the importance of the cycle of crisis noting that you cannot overstate the importance of the cycle:

> You must plan, train, exercise, write the lessons learned, correct the lessons learned and start back over. The entire preparedness cycle is so important.

Each participant stated that planning is crucial to the cycle. Maddox described it as a "constant cycle" of preparedness and planning. The findings provided below highlight the importance of the cycle and specifically the training and preparation that goes into preparing to manage a crisis when it occurs.

"It's Everyone's Responsibility": Implications for Training and Leadership Development

Participants provided information about the training and leadership development related to crisis response on their campuses. It was clear that each believed ongoing training and leadership development for university members were key to effective crisis response. Kathleen, when asked what role she believed training and leadership development played in preparation for crisis, stating that:

> I think that crisis leadership training and succession planning are critically important. If we want our people to take care of the organization, we have to take care of our people first. They don't care about what you know until they know you care. When we are talking about crisis training and leadership in particular, we can't just throw the training around like a buzz word. We must prepare our teams to do the necessary work and provide them with the resources to do what we are asking of them.

It was clear from each participant that it is the individuals that are working at the university on the frontline that make crisis response possible. Bertie stated that, “It’s great to have an emergency operations center (EOC) but it’s only as good as the people that fill it.” With different levels of training required for university community members based on their roles, along with general training provided to everyone, John believed that individual preparedness is crucial to the overall health of the campus. If someone doesn’t know how to respond in a crisis, it could lead to another crisis. John stated:

> We spend a lot of time and a lot of effort on individual preparedness. We have an app that we use that talks about being “Institution 2 ready” that helps us to communicate with all campus members and reminds them of their personal responsibility in preparing for a crisis.

Beyond individual preparedness, participants highlighted the general training in which they require faculty and staff to participate , with some of them being state mandated training. Phyllis stated that:

> We have a state mandated requirement for active shooter training. We also have a driver required training, so again, a continuum of things. There are required training pieces that are either state mandated or required by the institution that all employees must participate in.

Kay and Elizabeth agreed sharing additional examples of mandated or required training that university faculty and staff must complete each year. Kay stated:

> We have mental health training that's required in the state for all new employees. Title IX of course, is required. So those are the mandated ones and then we scale all other training courses based on the "type" of employee that they are.

Elizabeth offered that:

> We have training on everything from our Code of Conduct to Title IX and mental health and wellbeing services that are required. We don't necessarily call it crisis training but rather frontline training as that is what we consider it for many of our employees. This is a mandated central training for mass shooting and then we scale all other crisis training.

John and Maddox also spoke about general training, sharing examples of faculty training and student information sessions that are provided to emphasize the importance of safety and security on the camps.

John stated:

> We have a presentation called Safety, Security and Preparedness that we like to get in front of as many students as we can or at least in front of student leaders who can force multiple to the delivery. We provide this presentation to faculty and staff as well . Faculty training is a little different. We don't know exactly what each college or department does. We have a university-wide new faculty orientation, and we have been able to provide a presentation there but mostly, it comes down to what the Deans, Department Chairs and Office decide to make as part of the onboarding or training.

Unique to Warren, when discussing the scalability of training at University 8, was the emphasis on staff wellness and mental health both in preparation for a crisis and in the aftermath.

The university offers training specifically focused on helping staff care for themselves during and after a crisis. He recounted that:

> The mental health aspect of our employee training is important. We have an employee assistance program and specifically, when I was at the police department, we had our own separate employee assistance program that utilized people who specialize in training first responders. As a first responder you are going to deal with crises, and you have to keep yourself well. The program is free and really encouraged people to participate.

The inability to speak directly to what was being provided as training across the university and the varying types of training that was provided based on department came up again and again, as participants spoke to the scalability of the training that was required for key staff and university personnel and how it differed from department to department. Elizabeth stated:

> From an operational perspective, when I think about training staff and upscaling staff on what training they need, we often bring them into an environment where we have to figure out what type of training they need and so it varies.

Kay agreed sharing that how much of what training is done is part of a routine and structure, but that structure can sometimes be left up to the area in which you work. Kay stated:

> For instance, I have an onboarding list for all my staff, and they all must do certain training that's in their onboarding (Stop the Bleed, Student Death protocol, mental health CPS). Nobody else requires all of those but it suits the needs that our department has and what we may find ourselves dealing with either.

All participants mentioned that although not all training was required for everyone, there were always opportunities for staff to be well-informed and have access to the information they needed. Warren noted training modules and access to information on the university's website as a key location. Beyond the required and requested training, Maddox spoke to those that are identified as essential personnel and the training that is required for them:

> Any staff that is considered essential employees are required to do a specific training about what it means to be an essential employee and includes things such as: What are the different things that you could have to do, who you are responsible for, where do you find our plans, procedures, all of those things. And then the supervisors of essential employees also have to go through those trainings.

Bertie expanded on the required training for essential employees and members of the Emergency Operations Center, highlighting additional training that University 4 mandates:

> We require anybody who has a seat on the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to take two courses. Incident Command System (ICS) 100 and 700. This helps them to be familiar with the terminology and what we are doing.

Kay spoke about additional required training for those who serve with the emergency operation center reporting that everyone must go through Incident Command Systems training which, although not a course like at University 4, still outlined the hierarchies and roles that people may have in an emergency operation center that are different from their roles in their daily job.

Building a culture of preparedness was the goal of every participant in the study, who documented the specific ways they achieved this through the support of the university and their staff in the emergency management office. Each participant emphasized the importance of

training and explained that it wouldn't be possible without emergency management teams who dedicated each day to intentionally training everyone on campus.

These teams are tasked with, as Kathleen stated, "creating clear structures that allows for flexibility and ensuring that people are effectively trained and understand what is expected of them in a crisis." Kathleen's team structure allowed for a training coordinator that is tasked with building a culture of preparedness throughout the campus population by being visible and open to students, faculty and staff with the goal being that if even one more person knows how to take care of themselves and maybe help their friend or fellow student, the training has been successful. Bertie cited the 80/20 rule when describing the importance of the work her team does sharing that:

> Part of that preparation is we do a lot of training and exercising, and if you've done your preparation on the front end, when the incident occurs, if you've managed, you're able to manage 80% of it by having adequate preparations, adequate training of staff. And that is all so well and good to talk about, but the best laid plans still go wrong, and you don't know until you exercise them- that's when you realize where the gaps are. If you can manage that, and if you have a solid handle on that, that other 20% that comes in from the left side that you weren't expecting, you're free to manage that.

It is the preparation of the plan that allowed participants to manage the crisis when it occurred and as all participants shared, this is not possible without training and preparation.

"Break the Plan": Prepare in Order to Manage

Participants detailed the importance of comprehensive emergency management plans (CEMP) complete with table exercises and after-action plans as a way of preparing for future

crises. These plans and the table exercises and after-action plans that were shared by the participants reflect the fifth stage in the six-phase paradigm of crisis management. 'No fault learning' involves reflection on the crisis and evaluation of the damage as well as the organization's vulnerabilities and strengths (Mitroff, 2005). Not only is training necessary but the building, managing and practice of the plan must take place before the training to ensure success. Maddox stated:

> Yes, we work to develop plans, train staff on those plans if they have a role or responsibility in them, but most importantly, we work to exercise those plans through either tabletop or functional exercises. After that, we do what we call after action review, and everybody sits down and we look at what worked well, what didn't work well and then we formulate a corrective action plan to now go back and make those improvements in the plan so that we're in a better position next time. And then the cycle starts all over again but now we've got a new improved plan and now we want to test that and try to "break it" again.

John, a veteran in the field of emergency management stated that, "I can tell you the people that have experienced more crises are much better prepared than those who have not" and cited tabletop exercises as the ideal way to exercise teams and prepare for the stress of dealing with a crisis.

The use of table-top exercises and after-action plans were cited by study participants noting the value that is placed on these exercises and the impact they have on planning and preparation. The number of times that table-top exercises were done each year varied by university with some only participating once a year while others hosted several each semester for

varying groups of individuals. At Institution 1, Elizabeth oversaw table-top exercises several times a year. These exercises were carried out by the senior leadership team and include essential support staff as necessary. Elizabeth explained:

> It's not always a natural disaster or a mass shooting or something. We develop different scenarios like a missing student. I'm always trying to think of something that would involve the whole. We have different tabletop exercises and sort of the real live role-playing exercises that we do each year, which are extremely instructive and help point out gaps in perhaps our preparedness or subject matter experts that we might need to fill in. There are a lot of people on our incident coordination team, depending on the incident, we boil that down to the subject.

Phyllis stated that at her institution, at the beginning of each year, the emergency management team sits down with the senior leadership team made up of the president and cabinet and do a tabletop exercise. As they walk through the exercise, they refresh themselves on the CEMP and ask themselves if they all understand their roles and responsibilities in each scenario. She pointed out that this is normally a lengthy meeting, and the discussion can take a large part of the entire day, but the president sets aside the time to do it. They ask questions such as, “What do we have in place for this scenario? What do we need to have in place? What are we not thinking about?”

Katheleen shared similar questions that she and her team ask when planning for a crisis and completing tabletop exercises:

> When we come together, we ask, “Have we done what we can to mitigate the hazard? Because if we can prevent it... we absolutely want to do that. Preventing the problem in

> the first place is the best plan. If we can't prevent it, we want to mitigate the impact to the best of our ability so, what resources do we need that we haven't considered?"

Warren discussed tabletop exercises being completed with the senior leadership team but also including college deans and direct reports to the president, a larger group than that which is included at other study participants universities. The focus of this tabletop exercise was less about the crisis and more about the university response as the crisis is managed and the days following. Warren explained:

> It was more of an active shooter type tabletop. It wasn't necessarily what they would do in the moment of their being an active shooter. It was assuming the police are responding, they're dealing with it now. Now, here are all the things that come afterward that you as an administrator might need to worry about. The tabletop was more focused on their response to the incident that had already happened.

John, Kathleen and Kay each disclosed participating in tabletop exercises as part of the EOC but all expressed there was not a set schedule of when these exercises took place each year but were rather "as the need arises" and cited examples of severe weather, free speech and expression issues and political campaigns as situations in which tabletop exercises were utilized to remind their teams of protocol and procedures they were to follow. Of all 8 participants, Elizabeth was the only one to share that there are emergency drills that the entire campus participates in twice a year or once a semester, testing the text communications system, digital billboards and severe weather sirens, ensuring that all campus members are aware of what would take place and are prepared to act in the event of an actual crisis.

Unique to University 7, Kathleen provided information about the state-wide training that is provided for university administrators that oversee emergency preparedness on university campuses throughout the state. This continuity of planning ensured that all state universities had consistent plans, access to resources and support from the state and each campus. Kathleen stated:

> We have an Emergency Management Council that has representatives from across the entire enterprise, so about 75 different state and non-profit organizations represented will come together once a month to work on preparedness, protection, mitigation. The Emergency Management Council has representatives from all university sites across the state. We all come in, plan together and work hand in hand to make and test our plans.

Another widely cited method for managing and preparing for a crisis, mentioned by the study participants, was the use of After-Action Plans. Defined by Warren, an after-action plan or improvement plan is an opportunity for the emergency management team to bring in the different stakeholders that were involved in the crisis response, talk through their experiences and talk about ways to improve moving forward. With a better understanding of what went well, what could have gone better and ways to improve for the future, they were able to improve the process for the future if the university were to face a similar crisis. Kay highlighted "hot wash" exercises that the senior leadership team at University 6 participated in, which required them to review after-action plans of other university's emergencies sometimes even including a conversation with someone from that institution to provide insight to the decisions that they made.

Bertie captured the essence of "breaking the plan" emphasizing the key question: "What is it that we need to do to be more resilient the next time? Because there is going to be a next

time." All participants echoed this sentiment, drawing on their experience and expertise to highlight the critical importance of preparation in effective crisis management.

Theme 4: Process or Procedure: The Importance of Emergency Operation Structures

Universities employ various structures for setting up and managing emergency operations, with many universities designating an office to oversee emergency management efforts across the institution. Administrators described their campus crisis response structures, emphasizing the importance of having a voice within executive leadership and relying on established processes and procedures as the foundation for decision-making. Often reporting to the President and collaborating with university leadership to address student and campus needs, participants expressed that the structure of the emergency operations center significantly impacted the team's ability to fulfill their critical responsibilities.

The findings in this section align with the sixth stage of Mitroff and Pearson's Six-Phase Paradigm of Crisis Management. The redesign stage, organizations use insights gained from crises to enhance their crisis management performance (Mitroff, 2005). The participants' reflections underscored the ongoing evolution of crisis response, as they continue to lead, adapt, and transform their universities through improved and redesigned crisis management processes and functions.

"A Seat at the Table": Reporting Structures and Key Crisis Respondents

Study participants described the reporting structure for crisis response on their individual campuses, emphasizing the critical need for their voices to be represented within executive leadership. Each highlighted the importance of their expertise serving as a guiding metric for decision-making—not only during crises but throughout the entire cycle of planning,

preparation, and response. When asked to detail the structure of their emergency operations centers (EOCs), each participant shared insights into their distinct approaches.

Although varying in structure, each participant pointed to the tenets of Incident Command Systems (ICS) as guiding their work. John described ICS as a standardized system for the command, control, and coordination of emergency responses, designed to provide a common hierarchy that allows responders from multiple agencies to work effectively. However, he expressed frustration with the inconsistent success he has experienced in implementing ICS with executive leadership, primarily due to their lack of full buy-in. John stated:

> There's a lot of hierarchy still in higher education where they don't necessarily understand why they aren't the ones making the final decision when they rank higher positionally. Somebody at a lower rank may know how to manage a situation better and so, in the ICS, they are the decision maker.

Warren also spoke of the hierarchy of the ICS and how he believed that the pyramid or "top down" approach of ICS can lead to decentralization making it a bit harder to respond efficiently with all the proper information and communication channels.

Contrary to John and Warren, Elizabeth expressed appreciation for the consistency that the ICS provided especially when everything else during a crisis is so inconsistent:

> What I like about it is that it can be customized to any crisis. It can be customized to a reputational crisis. It can be customized to a law enforcement crisis. It can be customized to COVID, to a health crisis, et cetera. But with ICS, we keep the organization of it, similar to a hierarchy, so we're all aware of our place. We work within it, and it gives us some consistency.

The ICS system allowed for tiers of response explained by Kay in three groups:

> Executive Policy Group, Emergency Operation Center (EOC) and then the Emergency or Essential Support Function (ESF) Groups. The ICS structure supports the activation of specific ESFs (Emergency Support Functions) based on the needs of the situation. For example, only certain departments are activated depending on the crisis. There's a clear trigger point for activating the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), which serves as the command hub. The EOC may involve everyone or just a few key individuals, depending on the crisis. For instance, facilities might not be needed for one situation, while communications and social media teams—almost always involved—take the lead. The EOC acts as the central communication point, gathering information from the field and relaying it to ensure everyone has a full understanding of the situation. Meanwhile, the executive policy group, consisting of the president's cabinet, makes high-level decisions such as whether the president will hold a press conference, the university will close, or external agencies will be called in for support. This entire process is coordinated through the emergency management office, which is led by a vice president who also sits on the executive policy group, ensuring seamless communication and decision-making.

Four participants pointed out that those serving in the EOC needed to be able to have the authority to commit resources (people, time, finances) to the crisis at hand sharing that it is key to the work. Maddox stated that, "Oftentimes executive administrators want to send someone to the EOC that they "won't miss" in the office but that is exactly the opposite of what we need. I need someone who can make decisions on behalf of your offices." Having people around the

table that can make decisions was a shared theme among all participants. John agreed, citing his criteria for selecting those who serve on the EOC:

> I need the do'ers around the table. When our executive leadership is selecting people to serve, I ask them to consider two things: They need to be able to speak on behalf of the entire area that they are representing and make decisions, and they need to be able to commit resources on that area's behalf. If they can't do those two things, they're of no value to me.

Bertie stated that the EOC at University 4 is staffed with decision makers:

> We have our president, provost, chief financial officer, faculty senate president serving on the EOC as well as the Dean of the College of Medicine, our General Counsel, Police Chief and our Vice President for Strategic Communication and then each of them has sections that report to them. Those sections are command or central office, policy, command planning, finance and administration and operations and logistics. For example, for operations, our police chief sits as the section chief for operations. So not only is he responsible for his normal law enforcement duties, but he's responsible for everybody who's seated at that table, a table of people that he has chosen.

The number of individuals that serve on the EOC varied from university to university with some having large groups with subsequent groups that are activated based on need, while other study participants preferred smaller groups.

Elizabeth described the members of the EOC at University 1 as "anyone on the executive leadership team who might touch the crisis," often resulting in a large group of individuals. Elizabeth stated that the first priority was always to define the nature of the crisis. While any

member of the leadership team can convene the EOC, they must also address why it was called and identify any additional resources needed for the response. She shared that these meetings are assembled quickly and often lead to follow-up meetings as different teams take on specific aspects of managing the crisis. Two participants, Maddox and Kay, recounted in detail the importance of the emergency or essential support function's structure that they use when evaluating and addressing a crisis.Maddox explained:

> Our lead department, of course, for anything law enforcement is going to be our police department. University health services are going to be our lead for health emergencies on campus. Our facilities department is going to be the lead for anything structural. If there was anything from a sinkhole to a building collapse to a gas pipeline rupture, they would be the lead in those things. So, we work with departments to identify a primary, secondary and tertiary representative for collaborating with the emergency management and reporting to the emergency operations center. Once we have those people identified, those are the people we communicate with through the year and plan and train with through the year. And then when we activate the emergency operations center, they're the people that come and sit in the chair and represent those departments, those functions within the Emergency Operations Center.

Kay highlighted a similar structure at University 6, emphasizing the varying sections, or essential support functions (ESF), that are managed by individuals outside of the main EOC group:

> There are 15 essential support functions. And so, each of those have a lead and a backup lead who even though it may not be their daily job function, it's related to their job. For example, there's an ESF for communications that our marketing, communications and IT

> Team serve on. And then they have a section lead who is part of the main emergency operation center.

Not all participants agreed that a large group of people was always the most beneficial way to activate the EOC and half of study participants shared EOC structures that were smaller in nature, with the full EOC being activated only after a smaller group had evaluated the situation and the needs that arose from that meeting. With a small team in place, Phyllis reported that she could do the work that needed to be done without getting bogged down. John spoke to his demand for maintaining a small team so that it does not become unworkable. He stated:

> Our team is intentionally small, allowing us to remain agile and focused on our decision-making. It consists of senior leadership and me, ensuring that discussions are streamlined and effective. Previously, we had a larger Safety and Security Policy Committee, but over time, it grew too unwieldy. By the time COVID hit, it had become unmanageable—too many voices in the room made it difficult to move things forward. Now, we operate as a small, agile, and student-focused leadership team chaired by the president. Known as the Incident Leadership Team, it includes the president, provost, the executive vice president, the vice president of Human Resources, the police chief, and myself.

Like the Incident Leadership Team at University 2, Maddox described the Executive Policy Group as a small, intentionally tailored group of decision-makers that meet prior to activating the full EOC:

> The executive policy group is chaired and co-chaired by the Vice President and Senior Vice President of Finance and Administration. My boss, the associate Vice President of public safety reports to that person. We have a conversation about the significance of an

> event, whether it just occurred or has the potential of occurring, talk about the things we may need to do and discuss with others in terms of just briefing them or ready the university. And then we will decide if we want to call in the larger EOC to have that conversation and make them aware of things that need to be done. I try to keep the leadership out of tactics. Not always an easy thing to do because everybody likes to be problem solvers, but I'm trying to keep them thinking at a higher level. Someone from the Policy group will then brief the president and share the recommendations that we are making. For example, say it's a hurricane coming on, it's expected to be here on Friday. The recommendation may be we close campus on Wednesday to give everybody a full day to prepare their homes or get to a location that they're going to ride the storm out in and then brief them on some of the preparedness activities we would then be taking on campus.

Kathleen spoke about how she has utilized a small team of individuals prior to activating the entire EOC:

> I pull together a very small group of people on a conference call to wrap our minds around what the situation is, what are the impacts, and what are the needs. This always includes the marketing and communications team, and then the Assistant Vice President for Public Safety and Facilites. Once we understand a little bit more about what is happening, and it's a very short and informal phone call, we will make the decision about if we are going to activate the entire EOC. If the answer to that is yes, of course, we ask who needs to be in the room this time? And we can slice and dice that several different ways. And that’s what we call the full EOC, and that's when all of the colleges or maybe

just the affected college will come into play. As well as several university departments and organizations that make up the full Emergency Management Council.

Kathleen described the ability to "slice and dice" the EOC as a key feature, which Elizabeth also found crucial when responding to crises. Elizabeth explained that the EOC could be adjusted based on the type of crisis they were facing, noting, "It can be abbreviated, so it's just the subject matter experts you need there."

Warren stated that depending on the crisis, there is often a need to activate additional teams outside of the standard EOC:

> We have a large number of people that we would only activate depending upon who might be needed for that specific crisis. For example, we had some tropical storms that were coming through our area. And so, we only activated police facilities, transportation, and housing for our students. So that was really, those are the main, there might've been one or two others, but that didn't encompass everybody that's part of that team. So yes, it would depend upon the crisis as far as who might be activated in order to maintain workability.

Kathleen explained that, at University 7, a unique special interest group operates outside of the ICS structure to support specific functions within her responsibilities at the university. This group, called the Current Issues Committee, worked to forecast potential or growing issues that the university may need to address. Comprised of staff internal to the Division of Student Affairs as well as from other areas of campus the group meets weekly:

> What I'm trying to instill in folks is to forecast. So, what are we seeing happening, whether it's on a global level or a national level or even a state or local level, what do we

> see happening that could come and impact the institution? The election is a good example as we move into election season. Okay, the outcome could be that everybody's cool and shows up for class tomorrow and we're good, and the outcome could look different. And so, strategizing around those, having a group that's really focused on forecasting those things, which helps with building the instinct for, “Ooh, this one's going to go sideways, and we need to get ahead of that.” It is a tool that over time I've tried to build in, but I also think it helps hone some of that reflex within your staff.

EOC structures varied across institutions, but all study participants highlighted the relevance of the Incident Command System (ICS) principles to their crisis response frameworks, even though these principles were not always fully appreciated or understood. Warren noted that while processes were in place, it wasn’t always evident that they were consistently followed. Phyllis agreed, stating that although protocols and procedures were relied upon and there was generally a clear understanding of who takes the lead in specific crises, the nuances of the decision-making process often lacked clarity. John expressed frustration over the challenges of gaining buy-in but shared that:

> ICS is a tool; it's not a religion. Make it work for you. There is some continuity of operations and span of control, and some of those tenants in ICS are very important. But if my administration doesn't know or care to know the difference between a strike force and a single resource, I don't really care. It's not important, as long as they understand the principles. So, we try to manage the principles as opposed to having somebody understand all the nuances.

Each participant agreed that understanding ICS as a framework of principles and structure rather than a strict rulebook allowed for universities to task university administrators and employees with duties related to crisis response as needed ensuring that everyone who has a responsibility in planning, preparing and responding to crisis are prepared to do so.

Building on the nuances of crisis management structures, each participant detailed their experiences as crisis responders and their perspectives on where emergency management should reside within the university's organizational framework. While their responses varied—reflecting the diverse approaches to crisis response—they all emphasized the critical importance of ensuring that administrators responsible for crisis management had "a seat at the table," as Phyllis described it, at every level of decision-making. Each participant also stressed the need for administrators to have the autonomy to make decisions, often out of necessity, during a crisis.

When asked about the reporting structure of their emergency management offices within the university, each participant described their current reporting lines, highlighting both the challenges and benefits associated with their respective positions. These insights are detailed below.

Kathleen believed that depending on who you were to ask on the executive leadership team, you could receive a different answer as to who is the top of the reporting line when it comes to crisis response. She stated:

> I think asking me that question, you're going to get one answer while asking, for example, our associate vice president for campus communications, you're going to get a very different answer and I think that's because it depends on the situation. Our leadership does a great job of pushing decisions down to the lowest applicable level.

Maddox, Kay, and Elizabeth shared similar sentiments, emphasizing that leadership during a crisis largely depended on the specific situation. However, they expressed confidence that it would typically be either a member of the executive leadership team or someone from the emergency management office, including themselves, taking the lead.

Meanwhile, Phyllis and Warren were clear that ultimately the president is the final decision maker in all situations of crisis even if those decisions come through varying recommendations of trusted advisors and colleagues. Warren stated that:

> Ultimately the president of the institution is in charge, but I think from an operational standpoint, a lot of what is done is driven by the Chief of Staff who is tasked with setting the varying expectations for different ESF's. They almost always serve as the primary point of contact conduit to the president.

Phyllis explained that while the president at her current institution serves as the final decision-maker, this has varied across universities she has worked at and often depends on the leadership style of the president. Phyllis explained:

> I would say that due to the leadership style, the president, along with an Executive Vice President or Chief of Staff, would likely be the ones to convene and bring people together. At my previous institution, I was the key point person, especially as the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Campus Life, where many others tended to say, "not our problem." In my first institution, I would have said the same—probably myself. However, the General Counsel was always a reliable partner, along with communications and the Provost.

With varying levels of decision-making involved, the question of where the Emergency Management office should report within the organization's structure arose. Like the differences in who makes the final decision during a crisis, the responses from participants varied, however; one key takeaway emerged: regardless of the reporting line, the emergency management office must have autonomy and direct access to executive leadership—either by mandate or at request.

Bertie explained that for University 4, by state mandate, there is a requirement that each university have an identified emergency manager although not necessarily coming from a standalone Emergency Management office which she believed had its pitfalls.

> In some places, that's the police chief. Well, that chief was trained to do a very different job than an emergency manager, and in crisis, we all go back to what we know. And so, when something happens, he/she is wearing the law enforcement hat, not necessarily an emergency management hat which can lead to blind spots.

John reinforced Bertie's point, noting that higher education institutions could become very insular during a crisis. He stressed the importance of having someone solely focused on emergency management—someone who was fully prepared to handle external support without the added burden of managing internal affairs. He emphasized that emergency management should not just be a part of their responsibilities but their primary focus. Kay highlighted the value of a dedicated emergency management team, stating that:

> There are people whose full-time job is to monitor events like hurricanes or other crises, ensuring that the right protocols and platforms are in place and that we're practicing and preparing effectively. The challenge comes when universities lack this dedicated structure, and crisis management becomes just an added responsibility for someone on

> top of their regular duties which has happened several times in my career. As a result, it often doesn't receive the attention it deserves in strategic planning because it's not something people deal with every day.

As the administrators reflected on their careers, they recounted dealing with crises at institutions where emergency management was not yet professionalized. Each noted significant variation in the development of emergency management offices, with the newest office being established at one university as recently as three years ago, while another was created in 2001 in response to 9/11. Phyllis, who experienced an act of mass violence at a school that did not have an emergency management office, stated that:

> What I'm grateful for is how much things have evolved over the course of my career, especially when I think back to my response during the active shooter situation on our campus. At that time, we didn't have a formalized or professionalized emergency management system—something that I now see developing much more robustly on campuses today. I'm particularly noticing how emergency management has become more integrated into the rhythm of the academic year. The professionalization of this area, especially at larger institutions, is incredibly important. Dealing with situations that impact a campus the size of a small town has made me truly appreciate these advancements.

Bertie highlighted the advancements in emergency management within higher education, emphasizing the importance of having a standalone office with a degree of autonomy. She argued that without this autonomy, emergency management could be less effective and have a reduced impact on the university. While Bertie believed that emergency management should

function as an independent entity, its placement within universities was often inconsistent. In some institutions, it fell under facilities or environmental health and safety, while in rare cases, it reported directly to the president's office. In a few instances, it was placed under the police department or academic affairs. Bertie argued that this lack of consistency was a significant flaw.

> What I've found critical is the autonomy that comes with having emergency management as its own entity. When it falls under environmental health and safety, police, or facilities—each with their own specific mission—it loses the independence necessary to function effectively. Emergency management has its own distinct mission and needs to stand alone to maintain credibility, authority, and the ability to make decisions. Without this autonomy, you're often seen through the lens of the department you're under, which can undermine the role's effectiveness, and the authority needed to engage peers and make critical decisions.

As evidenced in the findings above, the effectiveness of a stand-alone Emergency Management office could be influenced by the administration, the decision-making structure, and the individuals making those decisions. Warren agreed that although the president and his cabinet often have conversations and make decisions outside of the EOC process that he is not privy to, they always reached out to his office for input on things that were well within emergency managements' wheelhouse further solidifying the importance of having an office specifically for emergency management.

"Leaning Forward": Appreciation for Administrative Support

For study participants, it was clear that buy-in from executive-level leadership played a crucial role in fostering widespread preparedness and forward-thinking approaches. Combined with the autonomy many administrators have in their roles; participants emphasized the importance of having executive leadership who supported and championed the work of the emergency management office. Participants noted that an engaged president and executive leadership team positively influenced university morale and preparedness efforts.

Three participants reported that having a president who was supportive and engaged while also being on a "need to know" basis was quite helpful to their work. Kathleen shared that the president at University 7 was not the type of leader that needed to be in every conversation, which she considered a blessing. Kathleen said:

> The president trusts that they have worked hard to put the right people in the right places with the right skills and so when they need to be included, they will be. Otherwise, they trust us to do our jobs and that is a confidence boost, too.

Elizabeth shared a similar sentiment, emphasizing the importance of having a president who trusts the team they've built. She, as someone who reports to that president, noted the importance of knowing when it is time to involve them in the conversation. She explained:

> For us, if any part of the EOC is activated, it's big enough that the president needs to know we have an issue and it's going on. Depending on what it is, the president will be updated. Depending on what the response is. Not everything needs the president's or the Board's approval. If it's to the point where the EOC team needs to get together the

president is always advised. It's risen to a level where there's something going on they should be aware of.

Bertie agreed that trust was important, noting that the president has a job to do that is well beyond those who are “boots on the ground” as it is their responsibility to deal with state and national politics and answer to the Governor or Board of Trustees. She noted that in her career there have been times when the president didn’t know the value of the emergency manager until they needed her so they could focus on other things:

> They're dealing with politics at levels in the stratosphere, and that's their job. But in order to do that effectively, they know better what they have underneath them, and they know better that the staff that they have, they can count on them if they even have them. I know during the pandemic, I think some of the university presidents were quite surprised that, oh, we have this emergency manager and she's great. Really, this is now when you've come to realize that this person's on your staff.

Other participants emphasized the importance of having a president who trusts them, noting that this trust is often built through experience working together and understanding which events, scenarios, and crises are most likely to impact or capture the president's attention. Phyllis observed that the longer you are in a place and know the people, the better equipped you are to make decisions. Kay stated that, through experience, she learned that what makes a difference is the president's background and how they arrived at their position—whether through Advancement and Fundraising, Academics, or Student Affairs—and how those experiences shape their perspective. Phyllis agreed speaking to a specific example at University 3:

> My president here at University 3 was my vice president during the campus shooting I dealt with earlier in my career. Because of that shared experience, he tends to get a little over-involved at times. While his involvement comes from a good place and his understanding of the situation, there are moments when I feel like saying, "We've got this." However, our history and the trust we built during that process have allowed him to step back more in certain situations and trust my leadership. That said, there are still moments when I think, "Whoa, the president's office is very involved here." But then I remind myself that his lived experiences shape how he approaches these situations. Because of his past experiences, I've had more focused conversations about emergency management with the senior leadership team here than at my previous two institutions. And even though I've only been here a year, it's clear that his firsthand experience informs how he leads in these situations.

With an understanding of how a university president is going to lead through crisis, participants shared how they were better able to meet the needs of the president so that they can then inform and engage internal and external stakeholders such as the Board of Trustees and the state for information or support. Elizabeth explained that:

> If anything is going to go public, the board is always notified anyway. Even if we're preparing for a natural disaster, they're going to want to know what's going on. We may not be able to give them, depending on legal reasons, details but we can provide them with very high-level information, just enough so they're not blindsided by hearing it in the media. This is all for management, just to keep them informed. Then depending on what needs to happen, there are times that the president, and not only the president, but

> the board may also need not only to be informed, but to give the "go ahead". There are some things that we would not move forward unless the president was okay in moving forward with it and so this allows the president to communicate with them free of the logistics of the situation.

John believed that when free of the logistics of the impending situation, the president is better able be an information gatherer and sharer, planning high-level next steps that move the university forward.

> We're going to sit there and have the executive leadership leaning forward. I don't want the president managing tactics. I want them to lean forward. I want them to think about what the message is going to be. I want them to communicate with the board of trustees or visitors in our state. I want them to connect with the legislatures, whether they're federal or state. How are we connecting with those that may have been impacted? What does the university do beyond today? I want them thinking big picture.

From all participants perspective, it was clear that when the president and executive leadership of the university appreciate emergency management teams and can trust their work, they were able to lean forward and move the university forward in the face of adversity, empowering students and colleagues to be engaged in the work of emergency management. Kathleen speaks to this phenomenon and its impact on the university community:

> We've really started to create ripple effects throughout the nation as these folks go out into the world where they can now take care of their families and their neighborhood so really, we are empowering them. So if I am coming from an area where either someone else has always taken care of things for me, so maybe I'm not quite as confident or that I

> have to struggle to get by because I am working to put myself through college and I am doing all of these things, and we (emergency management) come alongside them and help show them, "This is how you can get through any emergency by yourself." Now they are going to stand a little taller. They're going to walk with a little bit more confidence where if they can handle an emergency, they can handle these other things that are coming up in their lives.

Each study participant emphasized that empowering individuals is a key aspect of their role, not just as emergency managers on a national scale but also within the unique context of higher education. Each aimed to contribute to the learning experience both inside and outside the classroom, encouraging everyone to take proactive steps, leaning forward, for the benefit of the university community and beyond.

Document Analysis

A document analysis was conducted, prior to individual interviews, utilizing themes provided through a priori coding. To ensure that no pertinent aspects of a university crisis emergency plan were overlooked, I read each plan and coded pertinent aspects. The literature is clear on two principles of comprehensive emergency management plan (CEMP) which were the themes used to analysis the documents. There must be a clarification of university mission and vision outlined in the CEMP (Harris & Jones, 2020; Moylan et al., 2021) and institutions clearly must provide certain resources such as policies, programs, and procedures (Slage et al., 2021).

A clear understanding of a university's mission and vision, as outlined in its Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP), required an honest and thorough examination of the institution's core values and principles. This understanding must extend to

how these values are reflected in the university's structure, policies, procedures, and overall climate, which demands strong and prepared leadership (Moylan et al., 2021). All participants emphasized the importance of aligning crisis planning with the university's mission and vision. **Table 6** provides a concise comparison of the mission and focus areas of each university's CEMP, which were consistently reinforced throughout the interviews. This information was used during the interviews and is recounted below to show the similarities and differences between each statement.

The mission statements of each university's Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) reflected common goals while highlighting unique priorities. These plans emphasized flexibility, preparedness, and ensuring mission continuity, yet each brought a distinct focus to emergency management. Despite variations in phrasing, all plans shared a commitment to mitigating risks, protecting communities, and sustaining institutional missions during crises.

For example, University 1's CEMP adopted an all-hazards perspective, focusing on scalability and flexibility while assigning roles for disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Similarly, University 5 prioritized an all-hazards and whole-community approach, underscoring scalability and adaptability to maintain the university's operations and mission.

Universities 2 and 3 centered their CEMPs on supporting institutional missions, with University 2 emphasizing the preservation of life, property, and knowledge dissemination, and University 3 highlighting continuity of operations to sustain the university's core mission.

Other universities placed distinct emphasis on specific aspects of emergency management. University 4 highlighted protecting human life, minimizing infrastructure damage, and supporting research, while University 6 aspired to national leadership in higher education

Table 6
CEMP Institutional Comparison

University	Key Focus Areas	Purpose of the CEMP
University 1	All-hazards approach, flexibility, and scalability	Assigns responsibilities for disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Provides a framework for detailed emergency procedures to reduce vulnerabilities and respond to planned/unplanned incidents effectively.
University 2	Life preservation, property protection, and mission continuity	Offers all-hazard guidance to preserve life and property while managing incidents to ensure the continuation of the university's mission of advancing knowledge, personal growth, and quality of life.
University 3	Continuity of operations and mission focus	Establishes a framework to ensure emergency management programs support the continuity of the institution's mission.
University 4	Policies, procedures, and response structure for large-scale emergencies	Protects human life, mitigates infrastructure damage, and ensures university operations can resume, prioritizing research and the university mission.
University 5	Scalable, flexible, all-hazards and all-phases approach	Supports efforts in mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery to maintain the university's capability to fulfill its mission.
University 6	Safety, security, and emergency management leadership	Focuses on preventing, mitigating, responding to, and recovering from emergencies to maintain a safe living, learning, and working environment, positioning the university as a leader in higher education emergency management.
University 7	Health, safety, and emergency preparedness	Ensures preparation for, response to, recovery from, and mitigation of emergencies affecting the health and safety of the university community.
University 8	Emergency planning and continuity of operations	Enables responders and staff to perform critical emergency functions to save lives, prevent and minimize damage, and ensure continuity of essential services.

emergency management by fostering safety and security. Similarly, University 7 underscored the importance of health and safety for those living, working, and studying at the university and its surrounding areas. Finally, University 8's CEMP focused on equipping emergency responders and staff to save lives, prevent damage, and ensure continuity of operations, aligning with a broader goal of minimizing disruption to university services.

From the analysis of the 8 university comprehensive emergency management plans shared by participants in this study, it was apparent that although there are similar key aspects and structure, a comprehensive emergency management plan (CEMP) varied from university to university as there is no true format for a CEMP varying in detail and context based on the institution and its mission and vision.

The second theme identified in the document analysis was the importance of clear resources, policies, programs and procedures. During an interview with Kay from University 6, she recommended that I refer to the CEMP to review the structure of the plan in full. Elizabeth recommended the same stating that "Our CEMP is the "one-stop" for all policies and procedures. Each of the 8 plans outlined in detail the structures, policies and procedures that were in place in the event of a crisis. Beginning with an affirmation from the university president and Executive leadership, each plan outlined in great detail university resources and planning. Resources in each plan included emergency contact numbers for internal and external stakeholders, and in line with the Incident Command System, the varying levels of response that individuals could expect during each type of crisis. Each university also detailed 3-5 "most common" crises that they have full-scale plans prepared for including fire, severe weather, medical emergencies, active shooter/active threat, bomb threat, chemical spill and utility failure. Each plan also included

resources for “After the Emergency” including a list of mental health resources and where to locate additional training resources.

At all universities except for University 8, a public-facing version of each plan can be found on the respective university's website. Bertie spoke specifically about the importance of having the public-facing version of their CEMP available, sharing that:

> Although every member of our university may not read the CEMP in its entirety, every department and office are required to have a continuity of operations plan that’s focusing on all of the essential functions and services they provide day to day. And they need to look at who are the people they need to continue to perform those functions. It is important they know and understand that plan and have access to it on multiple platforms.

The CEMP at University 5 highlighted a similar importance, stating that:

> This plan has been designed as a strategic plan to provide the administrative procedures necessary to cope with most campus emergencies. Any university’s overall ability to respond to an emergency will reply upon building emergency plans and business continuity plans developed by its individual departments.

Study participants stated that a positive student experience depends on a university’s ability to respond to and manage crises efficiently. This responsiveness is only possible with a clearly defined and easily accessible Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) that outlines the necessary resources and strategies for action. Without such a plan, swift and effective crisis management becomes significantly more challenging. John stated:

> It is our responsibility to help students, and the university community return to normalcy, even if it's not necessarily normal. We try to put the genie back in the bottle as much as possible, but it's important to recognize that we're not really returning to normal; we're returning to normalcy.

All participants agreed that a quicker response leads to faster recovery. The efficiency of a university's CEMP depended significantly on the ease of access to information. Bertie remarked, "Having information available just makes for a better response and recovery." Elizabeth concurred, adding that although every crisis on a university campus is unique, "you've got to react quicker. You've got to solve it faster. You've got precious charges."

The document analysis did not add additional information to this study but was important for analysis to confirm what participants shared in their interviews. From the analysis of the 8 university comprehensive emergency management plans shared by participants in this study, it was apparent that although there are similar key aspects and structure, a comprehensive emergency management plan (CEMP) varies from university to university as there is no true format for a CEMP varying in detail and context based on the institution and its mission and vision.

Unexpected Findings

During the 8 participant interviews, two unexpected findings, not previously supported by the literature, came to light, including unique types of crises such the significance of university brand and reputation and the idea of a "good crisis". A second unexpected finding was the importance of frequent policy evaluation. Support for both of these unexpected findings can be found below.

Unique Crises

When asked to provide examples of crises they had faced in their careers, each participant mentioned issues related to the university's reputation. Although literature does talk about the importance of university reputation, it does not classify it as a type of crisis. The findings below indicate that, according to the participants, a reputational crisis can be the most dangerous of all crises, if not handled swiftly and properly. Bertie stated that mitigating damage to institutional reputation is always on the forefront of the crisis conversation:

> I think a big part of the crisis in higher education is reputation damage to the university's brand. That is the one of the first things that anybody will strive to mitigate. If there is an incident at a university, whatever it is, that is how they will always be remembered. If you haven't really taken a hard look at what that damage can do to your reputation, then you really need to, because it will impact you down the line.

Warren agreed that reputation is always considered when deciding what is a crisis, he shared that a crisis is anything that threatens the reputation of the institution believing that if the reputation of the institution is threated, the ability to fulfills the university's mission is compromised and resources may become scarce.

Interestingly, John pointed out that reputational harm is a piece of crisis management that does impact every other piece of the response:

> I've learned that it doesn't actually matter how well you manage things, it's how well it is perceived that you are handling things. So, that becomes a very large part of managing a crisis.

John provided additional examples of reputational crises he had faced, including how the university's response to protests often amplified the issue beyond the protests themselves. Kay

and Elizabeth also provided examples, such as hazing incidents mishandled by institutions where they had previously worked, and a crisis involving a university executive leadership team member who fabricated research. While each of these crises did not directly affect day-to-day campus operations at the time, all participants noted that they significantly hindered the institution's ability to fulfill its mission.

University reputation influences its brand, and as Phyllis mentioned, a strong brand can enhance the notoriety and support an institution receives, particularly during a crisis. Phyllis stated:

> When I think about places that have experienced shootings, I consider how the news unfolds. Take CNN, for example. Recently, larger flagship institutions that have had active shooter incidents often dominate the news cycle for hours, with live updates throughout the night. But then, I wonder—if this had happened at Institution 3, would it have even made the news? Part of it seems to come down to the institution's brand and the level of notoriety it carries. The location and reputation seem to influence whether an event like this gets the widespread attention it deserves.

Due to the unique nature of a reputational crisis, Bertie pointed out the large number of people affected by it, in contrast to the small group responsible for managing the institution's reputation in all circumstances. Bertie stated:

> Whether it's faculty, staff, students or alumni, they carry that university's reputation with them, for better or worse. But still, there's this small group of individuals that are carrying that reputation and are responsible for steering it, which is a tall order.

Maddox explained the need for a smaller, more intentional team to respond to such events:

> When it comes to reputational crisis, it is handled at a much higher level, and then it would come down from the VP to me about how we can support some of the objectives that were identified. I would say the process is slightly different when it comes to reputation because it is so important.

Kathleen agreed and offered that:

> If it is a true brand reputational that doesn't really have to do with those “normal” type of crises, if you will, then there's a separate team that would take care of that very much by executive leadership team and our marketing and communications and the organizations that are directly involved.

The concept that a university's reputation is the greatest crisis it can face was a recurring theme in all participant interviews, as maintaining the institution's integrity and reputation is essential for fulfilling its mission.

A second unexpected crisis example mentioned during the interviews was that of a "good crisis." Elizabeth explained, "Even the best crises require solutions." When asked for an example, she provided the following:

> I always use the example when Institution 1 went to the Final Four, that was a good crisis, but we had to suspend our normal decision-making processes. For example, we needed to address, in a crisis way, our IT because we had so many people going to the website, it was close to coming down, which is an issue. We had to respond to audiences and alumni and media as we never had before.

Another example involved a faculty member at University 1 who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. While this was a tremendous honor for the university, it required extensive preparation and

a coordinated response, which was best managed through the crisis management structure they had in place. Warren cited another example, explaining that winning back-to-back national championships at their institution generated excitement and incredible support for the university, but also brought a large number of people to campus. This required the university to halt normal operations for an extended period due to the celebrations, prompting the use of the crisis response structure to ensure the safety of attendees, preserve the campus, and maintain the integrity of the event. Warren said, "If a crisis occurs during the celebration because we were not prepared, what will people remember? The celebration or the crisis that took place during it?"

Bertie also spoke to the importance of managing a good crisis to ensure that it remains a good crisis:

> It was a good crisis, but we had to handle it just like we would in any negative situation. It was a crisis where we could have easily messed up by not capitalizing on the positives, but by staying focused and attentive, we avoided the stress that typically comes with negative crises. Still, it was a situation where things could have gone wrong if we weren't careful.

Kathleen agreed and elaborated:

> My main point is to remind everyone that even a good crisis needs the same level of attention as a bad one. If you don't manage it properly, even something positive can turn into a negative, and people will be upset because they feel like we ruined a good opportunity.

Frequent Policy Evaluation

A second unexpected theme prevalent during the interviews was the importance of frequent policy evaluation as the needs of the university were always changing. Phyllis, when referring to the need for policy evaluation shared that:

> We often don't anticipate things. Crises happen, and it's like, oh shoot, we don't want it to be this strict, or we need it to be stricter. Everything is situational. When the policy is maybe too strict, we can use more discretion. The bigger issue is when you have a policy that is not strict enough and then your hands are tied until you fix it, which can be months away.

Elizabeth stated that sometimes the actual policy is fine, but it doesn't protect or apply to all necessary parties and so needed to be reevaluated:

> We have a policy that covers, for example, students in a situation but doesn't cover faculty. You may need to cover the whole community, not just students. For example, our reservation of space applies to students, and it's pretty clear what needs to be done, but for faculty it's not. In present day things, the things you're trying not only to protect the students but protect the university, faculty could totally circumvent because we don't really have a policy that covers them. And really, we looked at it and thought this policy should be for the whole university community, not just students.

John cited a similar example of a space policy that was not strict enough and caused an issue as it had become a "catch-all" policy and with the recent uptick in protests it wasn't really aligned to do what the policy needed to do to protect the students and the campus.

Maddox, although agreeing that policy review is important, was more concerned about the impact of rushing policy decisions, leading to individuals not fully understanding a policy

which can cause unintended consequences, especially when a policy is created only to create a specific issue causing unintended consequences. His example was that of an essential employee policy that was created when they re-wrote the university's CEMP but those that were newly considered non-essential were not informed of this new policy. He stated:

> The essential employee policy was created to correct a problem that existed in the past. And I think because it is so new and was so rushed, there's a lack of understanding of how to implement it. And so therefore that is creating a little bit of a problem. There was never any policy prior to me getting here for who is designated as essential, an essential worker here at the university and who is not essential. So that was recognized from a past emergency, was identified in the after action, and the corrective action plan was to create a policy. So, the policy was created, but as you would imagine, you've got people who were hired here who were never told they were essential, never had that expectation on them, have always been able to go home and stay at home until the university reopened. And now we're requiring departments to look at how they would maintain continuity of operations, how they would staff all the responsibilities outlined in the emergency management plan, and make those designations and bring those people in. And again, communicate to those people what those expectations were.

Each participant was asked about the process for evaluating and revising policies that needed to be re-evaluated. Of the 8 participants, only 2 were able to identify structured processes for policy re-evaluation, while the other 6 noted that it could take months or even a full academic year to revise policies, which impacted their ability to do their jobs effectively. Of those with formalized policy revision structures, Kathleen stated that:

> Our team in Compliance and Ethics has been really working on overhauling our policies for the past several years, and they've put an outstanding process in place. There's an entire process that policies have to go through before they get signed. Because of this process, we can certainly get things done if we need to expedite due to some emerging situation or crisis.

Phyllis outlined a similar structure noting that they have a regimented policy process with a major policy review being done every 5 years. There is a constant cycle of looking at a policy, identifying any changes or additions that need to be made and then review through the shared governance process. Phyllis also noted that, when not doing the full review, she was still able to elevate any policy that needs to be added or reviewed. She explained:

> If there was such a policy, we could kick that over to the policy committee, and within probably a month's time, it could be reviewed and updated. So, we have, in my opinion, one of the best policy review processes that I've ever experienced on a campus that is not being held up by bureaucratic monsters.

As evidenced by the participants in this study, policy evaluation is important to crisis management on a university campus and frequent policy evaluation coupled with training can mean the difference between, as Phyllis described it, “a surprise that costs the university or a structure that saves it”.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 presented the findings of the qualitative data from eight university administrators respectively. A description of the background for each administrator including biographical information was presented. The eight administrators have a combined service

record in higher education of 106 years and have served in varying roles where crisis management and response were their main responsibilities, culminating in their positions in higher education. Chapter 4 explored the realities of crisis preparation, planning, and response in universities from the lens of a university administrator, emphasizing the importance of agency among university administrators to make decisions and the collaboration of the campus community in ensuring campus safety and well-being. This was analyzed through four key themes with support of the conceptual framework the study is framed in. Utilizing the six phases of the Crisis Management paradigm (Mitroff & Pearson, 1993), I aimed to acknowledge university administrators understanding of crisis related to definition, preparation and response. Chapter 5 concludes the study by discussing crisis response in university settings and presenting a holistic crisis response framework developed from the research findings. Implications for scholars and practitioners will be presented. Future research opportunities based on the findings of this study and the researcher's reflections will conclude the chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine institutional crisis in higher education to understand how university administrators define, prepare, and respond to crisis utilizing a crisis management plan in the face of the everchanging higher education landscape. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do university administrators define institutional crisis?
2. How do university administrators prepare for institutional crisis?
3. How do university administrators respond to institutional crisis?

In this final chapter, I use Mitroff and Pearson's Six-Phase Crisis Management Model (1993) as a framework to analyze the findings and guide the discussion on how university administrators define, prepare for, and respond to crises on campus. Next, I explore how the findings relate to the three research questions and themes of the study, applying the concepts of Mitroff and Pearson's six phases of crisis management. In this chapter, I present my own model based on the study's themes to discuss the various considerations university administrators must make when determining what constitutes a crisis and how to prepare for and respond to it. Finally, I conclude the chapter by addressing the limitations of this basic qualitative study, its implications, recommendations for future research, and concluding thoughts.

Discussion of the Findings

As reflected in this study's literature review, multiple studies related to crisis response focused on specific crisis examples highlighting the ways in which universities responded to each unique crisis situation (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Carello and Butler, 2014; Coombs, 2021,

Eckert, 2010; Flynn & Sharma, 2016; R Slage et al., 2021). However, few studies spoke about the university's preparation for and response to crisis and its relationship to the barriers and difficult decisions university administrators face and the needs they have that limit their effectiveness when leading the university and campus community through crises. Eckert (2010) found that institutional crisis response is crucial to the future success of any institution. Furthermore, ensuring that the entire campus understands the importance of crisis preparation and education—before a crisis occurs—promotes the effective application of crisis response and student support. This includes utilizing external resources, communication systems, and support services to develop intervention and response plans tailored to the unique needs of the university's student body (Coombs, 2021; Flynn & Sharma, 2016; R. Slage et al., 2021).

Throughout this study, I explored university administrators' responses to three research questions: (1) How do university administrators define institutional crisis? (2) How do university administrators prepare for institutional crisis and (3) How do university administrators respond to institutional crisis? Findings from this study are discussed below, highlighting each research question in relation to themes that emerged during the participant interviews.

Research Question 1: How do university administrators define institutional crisis?

Theme One, Crisis Definition: An Exercise in Experience and Theme Two, Crisis Factors and Susceptibility, addressed findings related to research question one. As found in the literature, crisis is context specific and, therefore crisis is perceptual (Coombs, 2021; Weick, 1988). The leadership of an institution may perceive a situation as a crisis depending on their personal definitions of the perceived threat or impact to the organization and so the heightened awareness of the university community in relation to their administration's definition crisis will encourage

and promote a safer and more productive academic community (Beatson et. al, 2019). All eight study participants confirmed this, sharing their personal definitions of crisis, each noting that their definitions were informed by personal experience and context.

These individual definitions, while varying in their nuances, shared a common language emphasizing the importance of determining whether an event rises to the level of a crisis, based on its scope, impact, and required response. This shared understanding emphasizes the importance of preparedness and the need for swift, effective action during disruptions. Based on the findings, the following definition of crisis has been developed in the context of institutional response:

> A crisis is defined as any event or situation that creates a significant disruption to the normal operations of the university. It is characterized by the need for non-routine or abnormal access to resources and essential staff support. Such events often have a broad impact on the university community, leading to the institution's inability to fulfill its mission and necessitating immediate attention.

Crises are unpredictable phenomena (Coombs, 2015) and are a prominent circumstance of organizations (Roitman, 2014). The findings in this study supported these claims with each participant sharing unique crises that their universities have faced, each highlighting unique experiences at each campus and the importance of understanding the scalability of crisis situations. Examples provided included loss of infrastructure due to fire and severe weather while other examples included human-made crises including mass violence, incidents of hazing, student deaths and crises of character related to leadership or members of the university community. This study’s findings reflected the seriousness and emphasized the importance of

understanding the context within which the university is situated and the scale upon which crisis is understood and managed. This scale varies from university to university, with the access to internal and external resources varying by university.

As acknowledged by Rollo and Zdziarski (2007), "The impact of crises on the facilities and the institutions' ability to accomplish their educational mission must be addressed, but it is the human side of the equation that begs our attention as educators committed to serving our communities" (p. 3). As represented through the findings, administrators reflected on both the university mission, captured in the crisis definition shared above, while also reflecting on the importance of the human side of crisis and community support. Findings determined that this literature is valid. It was obvious from study participants that community support and resources were essential to priority setting in a crisis. Carden (2007) found that university campuses and administrations can only provide so much to its student body without the external supports and resources of the surrounding community and that when internal and external constituents are involved, it is possible that great leaps can be made in caring for and encouraging students using combined resources and a shared vision.

The findings in this study establish the importance of where the university is situated and how it operates within the greater community as crucial to offsetting the prolonged impact of a crisis and the importance of protecting the entire community.

Research Question 2: How do university administrators prepare for institutional crisis?

Theme 3, The Cycle of Crisis: Write, Train and Exercise, addressed findings related to research question 2. As found in the literature, since 2001 universities have begun to understand the importance of crisis preparation and education campus-wide prior to a potential crisis,

including the use of external supports, communication systems and resources ensuring that training is provided to all faculty and staff that will encourage effective application of crisis response and student support, implementing intervention and response plans that are unique to the needs of the student body of their specific university (Coombs, 2021, Flynn & Sharma, 2016; R Slage et al., 2021). The findings in this study supported this trend, with study participants placing great emphasis on the importance of campus-wide planning, preparation and training for all with great time spent on the development of comprehensive emergency management plans (CEMP) and the training necessary for individuals to understand, interact and practice the plan.

Clearly, each study participant believed that ongoing training and university leadership development was key to crisis response. Literature suggests that when greater focus is put on campus-wide engagement, preparation, and training of all faculty and staff the university is better situated to respond (Slage et al., 2021)**.** The research study findings aligned with this literature, as each participant expressed the goal of fostering a culture of preparedness at their university, where individual readiness directly contributes to overall institutional preparedness.Furthermore, study participants detailed the importance of comprehensive emergency management plans (CEMP) complete with table exercises and after-action plans as a way of preparing for future crises. This ongoing effort to train and evaluate the CEMP was confirmed by Barker and Yoder (2012) who shared that additional time spent preparing for the intervention phase and the university resources may require a wider sense of support for crisis response planning from the entire university community.

Another important factor that study participants addressed was the lack of consistency in CEMPs. From the analysis of the 8 university comprehensive emergency management plans

shared by participants in this study, clearly, although there were similar key aspects and structure, a comprehensive emergency management plan (CEMP) varied from university to university as there was no true format for a CEMP, with each varying in detail and context based on the institution and its mission and vision. Flynn and Sharma (2016) shared that immediate response and intervention, communication and ongoing needs assessment are needed outcomes of crisis management. The findings of this study confirmed this, with study participants placing a strong focus on the use and value of table-top exercises and after-action plans having tremendous impact on their planning and preparation, informing gaps in resources, information and understanding. Research suggests that early communication and prolonged support for faculty, staff and students are crucial to offsetting the impact of a crisis (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Eckert, 2010; Scott et al. 1992; Siebert et al., 2018). Administrators stressed the necessity of communication in every crisis, highlighting the significant role that communication plays in responding intentionally and with one voice preserving the mission of the institution by providing a detailed CEMP and proper training provided to faculty, staff, and students.

Research Question 3: How do university administrators respond to institutional crisis?

Theme 4, Process or Procedure: The Importance of Emergency Operation Structures, addressed findings related to research question 3. A lack of university preparation and campus community buy-in impacts the intentional use of university crisis response plans (Alvarez, 2017). Study participants described the reporting structure of crisis response on their individual campuses, emphasizing the critical need for their voices to be represented within executive leadership with a focus on quick and efficient responses only being possible when operation structures were in place. Literature stated that there is a need for agility and shared decision-

making when responding to a crisis and the inclusion of processes for creating appropriate infrastructures for providing resources and information (Slage et al., 2021). Participants underscored the significance of this literature explaining that the tenets of Incident Command Systems (ICS) have guided their work. ICS is a standardized approach to the command, control, and coordination of emergency responses providing a common hierarchy within which responders from multiple agencies, internal and external, can be effective, ensuring efficiency in the wake of a crisis. All participants spoke to the tenets of the Incident Command System (ICS) as being pertinent to their structure, although not always appreciated or fully understood.

Misunderstanding of the crisis response structure has created barriers to successful university response. A lack of university preparation and campus community buy-in at participants institutions has impacted the intentional planning and preparation of university crisis response plans (Alvarez, 2017). For the administrators who participated in the study, buy-in from executive-level leadership played a crucial role in fostering widespread preparedness and forward-thinking approaches that created buy-in from the university community. Findings from this study supported existing literature on the importance of university preparation and response reaffirming that institutions have a high-priority goal of always ensuring student safety, which requires extraordinary security measures as well as comprehensive emergency, risk, and crisis communication strategies encouraged by whole university buy-in (Barker & Yoder, 2012). Crises have occurred and will continue to occur on college campuses (Slage et al., 2021) but, as participants in this study pointed out, it is the critical nature of structured response using ICS tenets and university buy-in that determine the successful response of the university.

Discussion of Conceptual Framework

The data from this study were examined through the lens of Mitroff and Pearson's 6-phase Crisis Management Model (1993). The six-phase paradigm of crisis management highlights the time phases or stages through which nearly all crises pass- from early warning signals and prevention to damage containment, recovery and organizational learning (Mitroff, 2005). To fully understand the impact a crisis can have on an institution, evaluating the crisis management process from beginning to end, including defining crisis, identifying crisis key indicators, containing effect, if possible, and then mitigating impact and ensuring proper response, is essential (Mitroff, 2005).

This discussion section reflects the synopsis of the basic qualitative analysis of data collected for the research resulting in a model for Institutional Crisis Management. There are many factors to be considered when evaluating if something is a crisis. Signal detection refers to the 'pre-crisis' phase of crisis management and involves monitoring and responding to the early signs of a possible crisis, (Mitroff et al., 1987) putting emphasis on the importance of understanding the definition of crisis under which universities operate. The second stage, probing and preparation, involves searching for risk factors of a crisis and deciding on an action plan should an emergency arise (Mitroff, 2005; Pearson & Mitroff, 2019), highlighting the importance of intentionally written and well-planned crisis response plans. Important to the study findings and illustrated through the cycle of crisis: write, train and exercise, the third stage of the model (containment) focuses on limiting the damage of a crisis, while the fourth (recovery) addresses recovery programs that are implemented to resume normalcy within an organization (Mitroff, 2005). Through the findings, administrators detailed the importance of comprehensive

emergency management plans (CEMP) complete with table exercises and after-action plans as a way of preparing for future crises. These plans and the table exercises and after-action plans that were shared reflect the fifth stage in the six-phase paradigm of crisis management. 'No fault learning' involves reflection on the crisis and evaluation of the damage as well as the organization's vulnerabilities and strengths (Mitroff, 2005).

HOPE: A Model for Institutional Crisis Management

Mitroff and Pearson's model is presented as a linear cycle through which most crises pass and is used by organizational leadership, beyond higher education, to effectively mitigate risks incurred from internal and external crisis (Simola, 2005). When addressing crisis specifically on university campuses, findings showed the phases through which crises pass were less linear and more clustered. University administrators, as evidenced through the findings, shared that sometimes, as reflected in the current model, crisis management requires a backwards step into a previous phase or the skipping of a phase all together depending on the crisis at hand. The findings revealed that it may be more beneficial to explore the human factor of crisis and the context of the institution where the crisis occurs, rather than focusing solely on the six phases outlined by Mitroff and Pearson (1993).While there are crises where their model can be applied as written, the unpredictable nature of crises on university campuses suggests that a more flexible, clustered approach—comprising broader themes—might be more effective. This approach would adapt to the evolving needs of the university while still incorporating the core elements of Mitroff and Pearson's model. Given these findings and participant responses to the research questions, Mitroff & Pearson's 6-phase Crisis Management Model (1993) was utilized to develop the HOPE Model for Institutional Crisis Management (**Figure 3**) considering the

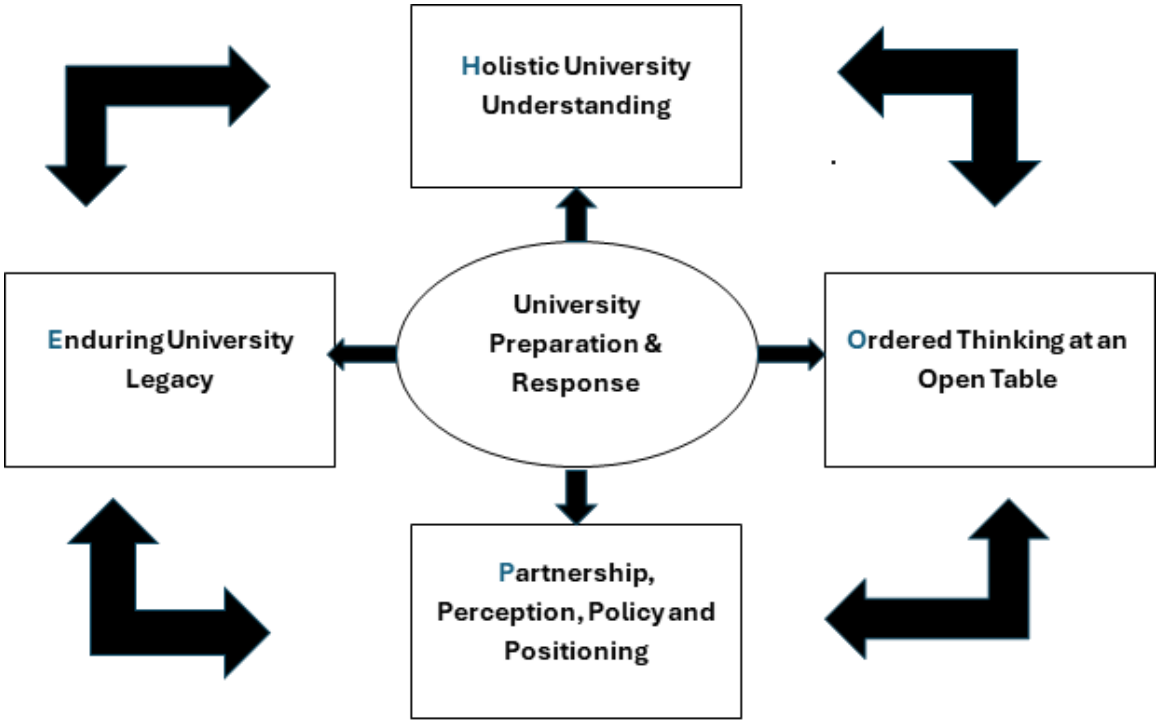


Figure 3
HOPE Model for Institutional Crisis Management

Human factor of crisis and its impact on the university. This model provides broad-value based ideas that university administrators can explore to ensure that their crisis preparation and response are in line with the mission and values of the institution and community that they serve.

H: Holistic University Understanding

Having a holistic understanding of the university is crucial to identifying the associated risks, both internal and external, for a crisis. This stage of the HOPE Model requires university administrators to reflect on the university within the context of three areas: university mission, university location and university susceptibility to identified risk factors. Slage et al., (2021) reported during the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of reclaiming the mission of higher education in the face of crisis with findings from the study echoing the importance of grounding all crisis preparation and response in the values of the institution and an understanding of the geographic and demographic makeup of the university. During this new stage, influenced by Mitroff and Pearson (1993), signal detection, probing, and preparation occur. On a human level, this phase addresses the study participants' call to ensure that all decision-makers in a crisis have a vested interest in and a thorough understanding of the university's context. This enhanced understanding enables intentional planning tailored to the university's specific needs and fosters institutional buy-in by ensuring that everyone can see their role reflected in the work being undertaken.

O: Ordered Thinking at an Open Table

This stage of the HOPE Model encourages the importance of a well-written comprehensive emergency management plan (CEMP) that outlines, in detail, a university structure for responding to crisis. Beyond the basic tenets of Incident Command Systems, this

stage asks university administrators to first reflect on the order or hierarchy that is in place to ensure that it is not just based on positionality but is based on expertise and ability. Through the findings, administrators shared their frustration with the hierarchical nature of their structures and how, although necessary to maintaining order, it could create a barrier to efficiency. Similar to the third stage of Mitroff and Pearson's (1993) model, this stage is critical to the containment of a crisis as it challenges universities to critique and question if they are providing access to the right people and resources during a crisis, ensuring that the structures they have in place serve to provide order during chaos while also allowing a space for those who have the expertise to lead through crisis.

P: Perception, Policy, Partnership and Positioning

This stage of the HOPE Model, drawing from the recovery and no-fault learning phases of the Mitroff and Pearson (1993) model, challenges universities to evaluate both the crisis that has occurred and their response to it. This evaluation is framed through four critical areas: perception, policy, partnership, and positioning. The study's findings highlight the importance of reflection in the aftermath of a crisis. To meet this need, this stage prompts university leadership to ask four guiding questions:

1. **Perception**: How do internal and external stakeholders perceive the university's handling of this crisis?
2. **Policy**: Are there policies that should be reviewed or adjusted to ensure they are supportive and not barriers in future crises?
3. **Partnership**: Could new internal or external partnerships have been beneficial in this situation?

4. **Positioning**: How has the university's handling of this crisis positioned it for future opportunities or challenges, both positively and negatively?

These questions encourage administrators to reflect deeply, not merely on logistical outcomes but on collaboration and the potential for future success. This reflective process aligns with Barker and Yoder's (2012) call for measured changes that protect and strengthen the university. By examining the crisis experienced through this lens, administrators can identify opportunities for improvement and ensure a more resilient and supportive campus moving forward.

E: Enduring University Legacy

This stage of the HOPE Model, influenced by the redesign phase of Mitroff and Pearson's (1993) Model, asks administrators to evaluate the reputation of their university and the enduring legacy that they have established. Although literature does talk about the importance of university reputation (Harris & Jones, 2020; Moylan et al., 2021), it does not classify it as a type of crisis. According to the participants, a reputational crisis can be the most dangerous of all if not handled swiftly and properly. By frequently evaluating the reputation of the institution, listening to both internal and external constituents, university leadership can work to maintain the university so that it can fulfill its greatest purpose. Confirmed by the literature, Kezar and Fries-Britt (2017) recognized the need for active listening as a way of capacity and community building on college campuses as an effort to better understand the needs of the campus community. Through the redesigning and evaluating of systems to ensure the university is able to respond quicker and more efficiently in the future to ensure university success and the creation of an enduring university legacy of which all constituencies can be proud.

Summary of the Discussion

The emphasis on the university administrator's perceptions of crisis definition, preparation and response through the lens of Mitroff and Pearson's (1993) 6-phase crisis management model and their lived experience were reflected in this basic qualitative study's discussion. The university's comprehensive emergency management plans and administrator interviews provided rich and descriptive findings. I analyzed university administrator's perceptions and experiences through Mitroff and Pearson's (1993) framework to help create a model for institutional crisis management that provides a more holistic and humanistic approach to crisis management which, in turn, influences crisis response. A crisis, as reflected in this study, is defined as any event or situation that creates a significant disruption to the normal operations of the university, creating the need for non-routine or abnormal access to resources and essential staff support. University administrators, according to this study's findings, rely on their experience and expertise to define crises on their campuses, emphasizing the significance of context and the community in shaping their approach. Crisis preparation is an ongoing process, grounded in the deliberate development and training of comprehensive emergency management plans. These plans are implemented through carefully designed emergency response structures influenced by the principles of Incident Command Systems. Executive leadership support is critical, ensuring that this commitment permeates the university. As a result, even during a crisis, the institution's ability to fulfill its mission remains intact.

Limitations

Several limitations were identified during this study. One of the limitations of this study was that only large Research-1 institutions in the Southeastern United States were involved in

this study. Due to the basic qualitative research design, a small sample size was included in the study to ensure that a rich description of their lived experiences could be captured. Furthermore, only university administrators who volunteered to participate in the study were included.

Implications for Practice and Research

The past three decades have brought significant changes in the types of crises universities face and address. As the nature of these crises continues to evolve, the ways in which universities respond must also adapt. This study centers the voices of university administrators at the forefront of crisis preparation and response on campus. By offering a more personal understanding of crises, it provides implications for both scholars and practitioners in higher education that impact the whole university. The findings and their implications for research and practice are presented below.

Scholars

This study has the potential to expand the literature by incorporating the perspectives of administrators, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of crisis definitions, preparation, and response. Additionally, it highlighted the importance of fostering a holistic understanding among scholars regarding the value of crisis education and training for faculty and staff. Drawing on peer-reviewed research, a staff training workshop could be developed to outline effective coping strategies and emphasize the importance of crisis response procedures (Scott, 1992, p. 231). Such a workshop would provide university faculty and staff with an additional tool to support their preparedness and success in navigating crises.

Additional implications of this study for scholars and universities include the critical issue of resource allocation. The findings highlighted that access to resources is essential during

a crisis, with administrators emphasizing the need for additional resources and the ability to make swift decisions regarding their allocation. In some cases, this may require bypassing standard budgetary processes. Revisiting the institutional budget model, informed by research and literature, could lead to significant changes in current practices. This might include creating specific allocations or alternative funding mechanisms designated for crisis situations, ensuring institutions are better prepared to respond effectively.

Practitioners

The findings from this research study may lead to a wider sense of support for crisis response planning from the entire university community as they consider the impact the lack of preparation has had on the university community. With a broader sense of campus support, a potential change in the makeup of crisis responses management teams may allow campus constituencies, not initially included in the conversation about crisis management planning, to have an opportunity to speak into a well-thought-out and student centric plan. Also, this widening of responsibility may allow university administrations to see beyond the crisis planning phase and into the intervention phase, ensuring that training is provided to all faculty and staff that will encourage effective application of crisis response and student support, implementing intervention and response plans that are unique to the needs of the student body of their specific university.

Finally, we see that university campuses and administrations can only provide so much to its student body without the external support and resources of the surrounding community. As illustrated by Carden (2007), when internal and external constituents are involved, it is possible

that great leaps can be made in caring for and encouraging students using combined resources and a shared vision.

Furthermore, campus-wide crisis preparation and education must be prioritized before potential crises arise. This could include utilizing external support, communication systems, and resources, as well as providing training to all faculty and staff to ensure effective crisis response and student support. Universities could also implement intervention and response plans tailored to the unique needs of their student body (Coombs, 2021; Flynn & Sharma, 2016; R. Slage et al., 2021).

Recommendations for Practice and Research

Throughout this study, university administrators identified key opportunities for both their individual institutions and higher education as a whole to evolve in the coming years. Their insights are invaluable, offering the potential to shape the development of innovative, student-centered crisis management plans that will influence both practice and research for years to come, ultimately changing the narrative of crises on university campuses. The findings, along with their applied recommendations for research and practice, are presented below.

Scholars

As demonstrated in the findings and supported by the literature, institutions must provide essential resources for crisis management, including policies, programs, and procedures. However, these resources alone are insufficient. They must also take into account the institution's history, recognizing how past events, policies, and procedures may have contributed to the current crisis (Harris & Jones, 2020; Moylan et al., 2021). A recurring theme in the findings was the importance of regularly evaluating policies, as the needs of the university are

constantly evolving. If policies do not adapt accordingly, they can become barriers to effectively managing a crisis. Scholars need to explore future research into the development of a framework that universities can use to establish a comprehensive annual policy review process. This framework would require institutions to assess their policies in light of the changing needs of their student population, university community, and the broader landscape of higher education. As highlighted by participants in this study, regular policy evaluation is crucial to crisis management on university campuses. Paired with training, frequent policy reviews can mean the difference between, as one administrator noted, "a surprise that costs the university or a structure that saves it."

Practitioners

The literature highlights ongoing efforts to strengthen the capacity of leaders in higher education (Gmelch & Buller, 2015). Through professional development, training, and support, university leaders are continually expanding their knowledge and resources to meet the evolving needs of students and the university community. However, a significant gap remains in the area of crisis management. Each administrator in this study emphasized that the effectiveness of crisis response largely depends on the individuals working at the university, both on the frontlines and in other roles. Therefore, future research may address training and leadership development for successful crisis management.

While on-the-job training is essential for preparing university employees for crisis situations, the level of focus on crisis management professional development varies across institutions. The perceived value of this training differs from one university to another, which influences the extent to which it is incorporated into leadership development efforts. To

standardize crisis management education, there is a clear need for higher education master's programs nationwide to include a dedicated course focused on crisis response and preparation. Such a course would provide future higher education professionals with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences as students and as emerging professionals, helping them develop their personal definitions of crisis and understand the value of their work within the context of crisis management. While this course may not address the needs of all university employees, particularly those entering the field through non-traditional paths, it represents an important step toward integrating crisis management education into the higher education curriculum. After all, managing and responding to crises is a responsibility all higher education professionals will face, and the way we respond has far-reaching consequences.

Future Research

University administrators in this study expressed increasing concern about the growing number and complexity of crises their universities face. They emphasized the importance of the cyclical nature of their work in safeguarding student safety and upholding the university's mission. Future research on crisis definition, preparation, and response could focus on examining each stage of the Cycle of Crisis—Write, Train, Exercise—to determine whether these stages adequately address the evolving needs of universities. Additionally, while all study participants referenced the use of the Incident Command System (ICS), it is noteworthy that ICS was originally designed for organizations and not specifically tailored for university settings. As highlighted in the literature, the unique nature of each crisis and the specific characteristics of university campuses influence the necessary support structures and processes (Beatson et al., 2019). Given this, recommendations for future research might include an examination of

adapting the current principles of ICS to better meet the distinct needs of universities, improving its accessibility and flexibility for higher education contexts in the future.

To build upon the research conducted in this study, incorporating a broader range of institutions would provide valuable insights. The current sample focused on eight Research-1 institutions in the Southeast—large universities with substantial funding and access to resources that smaller institutions may lack. Expanding the study to include Research-2 institutions or smaller, religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges could highlight the unique needs of different types of institutions, reinforcing the importance of context in effective crisis preparation and response.

This study included university administrators who serve as key crisis responders on their campuses. While participants held varied titles, two worked within the field of Student Affairs. Notably, these individuals brought a distinct perspective, emphasizing a holistic approach to crisis response that prioritized the student experience above all else. Although all participants underscored the importance of student well-being, those in Student Affairs approached this responsibility with a palpable sense of mission. Their responses revealed a deep concern for the whole student, both inside and outside the classroom, reflecting a commitment to preserving the sacredness of the college experience. To further this finding, future research could focus exclusively on Student Affairs professionals. Such a study might uncover specific resources and support needed by those in student-facing roles, who often shoulder a significant share of crisis response responsibilities. Eckert (2010) underscoreds this dynamic, noting that in many institutions, protecting the student body is seen as the primary responsibility of Student Affairs

offices. While faculty members typically build strong relationships with students through their teaching, the duty of ensuring students' overall well-being is rarely assigned to them.

As crisis response continues to evolve, these findings suggest a potential shift in focus. Institutions may increasingly prioritize equipping Student Affairs professionals with the resources and training necessary to safeguard not only the operational aspects of crisis response but also the institution's heart: its students and their college experience.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this study, I explored university administrators' definitions of crisis and their understanding of crisis preparation and response. This research calls for a broader, campus-wide commitment to crisis management—amplifying the voices of those administrators who, often behind the scenes, are doing some of the hardest and most meaningful work on campuses. They are creating thoughtful, student-centered plans that not only support the immediate needs of students but also safeguard the long-term success of both the institution's mission and its students, far beyond their time on campus.

As a higher education professional at a large Research-1 institution in the Southeast, I knew this research would be deeply personal—bringing to light both the best and the most challenging aspects of working in higher education. With every interview, the weight of the stories shared became clearer, and the responsibility to tell this story well felt more urgent. Crisis management is not just an administrative task; it is a moral imperative. Championing resource allocation, fostering professional development in crisis response for faculty and staff, and continuously evaluating policies—these may seem like small steps, but they are critical in

ensuring the safety of everyone on campus and preserving the legacy of higher education institutions.

Colclasure et al. (2021) emphasized that meeting the basic physical and emotional needs of individuals is a prerequisite for learning, and they are right. The health and safety of everyone in higher education must remain the top priority, in every circumstance. Students don’t just arrive on campus seeking academic knowledge—they arrive hoping to find a home, a safe space to learn, grow, and discover who they are. Crises are inevitable, but our response can determine whether a student walks across the graduation stage or not. As administrators, our role is about much more than managing; it's about ensuring that our hearts remain focused on the students. Their success, their safety, and their well-being are the core of everything we do.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Permission to use Mitroff and Pearson's Six-Phase Paradigm for Crisis Management

Fwd: Request to Use Six-Phase Paradigm of Crisis Management Framework

Dr. Mitroff,

Good Evening, my name is Hope Adkins and I am a Higher Education Administration PhD student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I am reaching out to you regarding the potential use of the Six-Phase Paradigm of Crisis Management to serve as the framework for my dissertation and research study. My hope is to evaluate the types of crises that take place on a university campus from the view of executive level administrators. By giving voice to these administrators, I hope to have a better understanding of how leadership defines, prepares for and responds to crisis on their campus. I believe that by utilizing the six-phase paradigm of crisis management to frame my study, it will strengthen the research providing a more holistic understanding of university crisis. Would it be possible for me to utilize this framework in my doctoral research?

I am happy to share any additional information that may be helpful to describe my study and potential research.

Thank you for your consideration,

Hope

Crisis Management

Flag for follow up.

IM Ian Mitroff <ian@mitroff.net>
To: Adkins, Hope
Sun 1/28/2024 7:05 PM

You don't often get email from ian@mitroff.net. Learn why this is important

Dear ms Haskins
Yes you can use the framework
Let me know if I can help in any way
Best
Ian mitroff

Reply Forward

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT COMMUNICATION

Email Script for University Administrator

Hello Dr.,

My name is Hope Adkins and I am doctoral candidate in the College of Education, Health and Human Sciences at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I hope this e-mail finds you well. For my dissertation research, I am exploring the topic of crisis preparation and response in higher education through the lens of the university executive administrator.

I am hoping to interview a purposeful sample of senior leaders from a broad cross-section of Research-1 institutions in the Southeastern United States, and I am hoping you will be willing to participate in a 90- minute interview via Zoom. I recognize your schedule must be busy as we near the end of the semester and the summer begins, but I would be most appreciative if you would be willing to assist me in the study of this important topic.

I have received IRB approval to conduct these interviews and plan to begin interviews in May and continue through the month of June. If you are interested in participating, I would be happy to provide you with additional information regarding the scope of the research. Additionally, I have attached a one-page overview of the study for your review. Thank you for taking the time to consider this request.

Sincerely,
Hope Marie Adkins

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-24-08174-XM
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 04/24/2024

APPENDIX C

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) CONSENT FORM

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: A View from the Top: University Administrator's Perceptions of Crisis Preparedness and Response

Researcher(s): Hope Marie Adkins, University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Dr. Pamela Angelle, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because you are a university administrator (President or Chancellor) at a Research-1 Institution in the Southeastern United States.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to examine institutional crisis in higher education to understand how university administrators define, prepare, and intend to respond to crisis utilizing a crisis management plan in the face of the everchanging higher education landscape.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for 1.5 hours and will involve one interview with the possibility for one 30 to 60-minute follow-up if new information emerges from the data.

What will happen if I say "Yes, I want to be in this research study"?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in 1 one and half hour audio recorded interview focused on your experience with crisis management and planning as a university administrator. Questions asked will explore your personal crisis definition(s), planning and response experience at the university level. We will also ask that you provide digital copies of all active university crisis response planning and management documents that the university at which you are employed has on file.

What happens if I say "No, I do not want to be in this research study"?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say "Yes" but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, contact me, Hope Adkins, as soon as possible. There will be no negative consequences. Data already collected for this research will not be used. You can withdraw from the study anytime, even after all of the data has been collected.

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-24-08174-XM
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 04/24/2024
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 04/23/2027

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is minimal because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form. Additionally, participation in this study could lead to potential criticism of the way a crisis was handled by a university and could highlight the legal and/or financial risks that were associated with the way in which the university handled the crisis response.

A possible risk of this study may be the discomfort related to discussing university crisis and the emotional stress that may come with that. This risk is minimal because I will ask general questions about the crisis and your experience. You will determine what emotional issues you'd like to discuss in the interview. If you, as an interviewee, seem distressed at any point, I will give you the opportunity to stop the interview to be rescheduled at a later time. Additionally, there may be confidentiality risks because of the small number of participants in this study. It is possible that someone could identify you based on the information I collect. All measures will be taken to prevent this from happening. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity as well as the university you work at.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may help us to learn more about university crisis planning as related to definition, preparation, and response. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by storing consent forms in a locked box inside a locked office on campus. Only myself and my university advisor will have a key. All interview and observation files will be deidentified and stored electronically on a university sponsored, password protected OneDrive account. This will be kept in a different location from the data and consent forms.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave me information. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information that I collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, I would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

I will not keep your information to use for other research purposes. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study.

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-24-08174-XM
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 04/24/2024
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 04/23/2027

I will not share your research data with other researchers.

What else do I need to know?

About 5-7 university administrators will take part in this study. Because of the small number of participants in this study, it is possible that someone could identify you based on the information we collected for the study. All measures will be taken to prevent this from happening. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity and university.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers: Hope Marie Adkins; hadkins1@utk.edu, (865) 387-6600 or Dr. Pamela Angelle; pangelle@utk.edu, (865) 974-4139

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date

I agree to be audio-recorded during interviews. By signing, I am agreeing to be in this study and be audio-recorded. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-24-08174-XM
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 04/24/2024
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 04/23/2027

Name of Principal Investigator	Signature of Principal Investigator	Date

IRB NUMBER: UTK IRB-24-08174-XM
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 04/24/2024
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 04/23/2027

APPENDIX D

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction: Hello, my name is Hope Adkins and I am a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville completing a degree in higher education administration. Thank you for agreeing to this interview and taking the time to meet with me today. I am conducting this interview as part of my qualitative research for my dissertation. The purpose of this interview will be to explore your lived experience as a university administrator related to institutional crisis and how you define, prepare for and respond to crisis in the face of an ever-changing higher education landscape. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes.

Research Questions:

- RQ1: How do university administrators define institutional crisis?
- RQ2: How do university administrators prepare for institutional crisis?
- RQ 3: How do university administrators intend to respond to institutional crisis?

Consent Information:

This information will only be used for this study. By signing the consent form you are agreeing to the audio recording of this interview. This interview will be recorded through Zoom and through a voice recording app on my phone which will serve as a backup in case we have an audio issue during our time together today. The audio recording and transcript will only be viewed by myself and I will use a pseudonym, a fake name, for the transcript. Additionally, I will share the transcript with you following our time today to ensure that I have accurately recorded your words and answers.

For this interview, I have a set of guiding questions to help frame our conversation. I will ask questions and do more listening as you share your experiences. I might ask follow-up questions throughout to gain clarity. You are the expert of your own experiences. Please know that you do not have to share anything you are uncomfortable sharing.

Please feel welcome to ask me to clarify questions or ask them in a different way. If at any point you no longer wish to participate, need to take a break, or skip a question, please just let me know. Now that I have explained the study to you and you have returned a consent form to me, do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information:

1. Tell me about yourself.
    a. Tell me about your family.
2. How did you become a higher education professional?
    a. Tell me about your professional pathway.
    b. Tell me about your educational pathway.
    c. How would you describe yourself as a university administrator?

Crisis Definition:

3. How would you define crisis in the context of higher education?
4. What factors play a role in treating an event as a crisis? In other words, as a senior leader in higher education, how do you know when the situation you are dealing with is a "crisis" as opposed to a more routine problem?
    a. What are the consequences of these events?

b. What reactions from internal and external stakeholders may elevate something to the level of crisis?

5. Can you give me an example of a crisis that your university has faced
    a. Are there other examples you can think of…
6. What do you think makes colleges and universities especially susceptible to crises?

Crisis Preparation:

7. What support services or training is available at ____ for faculty and staff related to crisis preparedness?
    a. Are there resources offered at your institution for faculty and staff to be educated around your university's crisis response plan?
        i. Institution wide or department specific?
8. What role, if any, do you believe leadership development programs play in preparing higher education leaders for organization crisis?
    a. What professional support, if any, have you received that you feel has prepared you to lead through a crisis?

Crisis Response:

9. Is there a particular member of your Leadership Team/Cabinet you often turn to first when determining if an event is a crisis and how to respond? (Key Crisis Respondent)
    a. What competencies do you believe are most important for leading through a crisis?
10. Does your institution have a structured procedure or process for preparing for or responding to a crisis?

b. Is this a systematic approach that is taken every time when preparing for crisis or often used for post-crisis evaluation?

11. Is there an institutional process or policy that may make crisis response more difficult or even inaccessible?
    a. Is there a manageable way, in your opinion, for this process or policy to be changed?

Conclusion:

12. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you feel is important to share?

APPENDIX E

CODE MAP

Final Iteration: Themes

Crisis Definition: Exercise in Experience	Crisis Factors and Susceptibility	The Cycle of Crisis: Write, Train and Exercise
Process of Procedure: The Importance of Emergency Operation Structure		

Second Iteration: Pattern Variables

Administrative Priority/Support	Emergency Operation Center Structure	Policy Examination
Community Connection	External Pressures	Potential Barriers to Response
Continuum of Crisis	Importance of Communication: Controlling the message	Priorities in Crisis Management
Crisis Definition	Key Crisis Responder	Process or Procedure
Crisis Factors	Leadership Development and Training	Reporting Structure
Crisis Preparation	Microcosm of the World	Susceptibility to Crisis
Crisis Response		Types of Crisis
Cycle of Crisis: Write, Train, Exercise		

First Iteration: Initial Codes

Administrative Priority	Educational Pathway	Leaning Forward	Prepare in order to manage
Administrator Traits	Emergency Operation Center Structure	Length of Impact	President/Chancellor Involvement
After-Action Plan	Fast Response, Fast Recovery	Like a City	Priorities in Crisis Management
Amount of Resources Required	Find and Fill the Gap	Mass Violence	Procedure
Autonomy Community Connection	Geography	Microcosm of the World	Process
Background Information	Good Crisis	Misunderstanding of Emergency Management	Public Relations
Board of Trustees Involvement	Human Factor	Natural Disaster	Pyramid Structure
Budget Concerns	Impact beyond college	No end of business	Reporting Structure
Contracted Services	Importance of Communication	Normal to Normalcy	Self-Sufficiency
Continuum of Crisis	Institutional Crisis Definition	People Crisis	Services and Training for Faculty, Staff and Students
Controlling the Message		Policy Examination	
Creeping Crisis		Policy Example	Susceptibility to Crisis
		Political Pressure	Tabletop Exercises
		Potential Barriers to Response	

Crises are random	Key Crisis Responder Leadership Development and Training	Prepare	Train
External Pressures		Types of Crisis	
Crisis Communications		University as a business	
Crisis Factors		University Reputation	
Crisis Preparation		Professional Pathway	
Crisis Response		Visibility	
Cycle of Crisis: Write, Train, Exercise		Write	
Definition		Young and Vulnerable	
Differing Definition			

APPENDIX F

CODE TABLE

Name	Description	Files	Coded References
(RQ1) Institutional Crisis Definition	How do university administrators define institutional crisis?	8	36
(IQ3) Definition	How would you define crisis in the context of higher education?	8	25
Continuum of Crisis		4	6
Creeping Crisis		1	2
Differing Definition	Based on experience	3	7
Misunderstanding of Emergency Management		2	3
(IQ4) Crisis Factors	What factors play a role in treating an event as a crisis? In other words, as a senior leader in higher education, how do you know when the situation you are dealing with is a crisis as opposed to a more routine problem?	8	42
Administrative Priority		6	10
Amount of Resources Required		3	6
Budget Concerns		2	3
Contracted Services		4	6
Crisis Communication Consultants		3	5
Forest Through the Trees		1	1
Crises are random		2	2

External Pressures		4	6
Human Factor		6	10
Importance of Communication		8	15
Controlling the Message	Communication	3	8
Length of Impact		2	4
Normal to Normalcy		1	1
Political Pressure		5	6
Priorities in Crisis Management		8	27
Autonomy		3	3
Community Connection		4	8
Prepare in order to manage		6	11
Better Information= Fast Response, Fast Recovery		3	4
Self-Sufficiency	From the community in the event there's a disaster and resources are stretched	1	1
(IQ5) Types of Crisis	Can you give me an example of a crisis that your university has faced?	8	27
Good Crisis		3	5
University Reputation		8	9
(IQ6) Susceptibility to Crisis	What do you think makes colleges and universities especially susceptible to crises?	8	30
Geography		5	6
Like a city		4	6

Microcosm of the World		3	3
No end of business		2	2
University as a business		2	4
Young and Vulnerable		5	5
(RQ2) Crisis Preparation	How do university administrators prepare for institutional crisis?	8	9
(IQ7) Services and Training for Faculty, Staff and Students	What support services/training is available related to crisis preparedness?	6	13
Impact beyond college		1	1
(IQ8) Leadership Development and Preparation	What role, if any, do you believe leadership development programs play in preparing higher education leaders for organization crisis?	4	8
Cycle of Crisis		3	5
After-Action Plan		3	4
Tabletop Exercises		5	8
Find and Fill the Gap		1	2
Visibility		2	2
(RQ3) Crisis Response	How do university administrators respond to institutional crisis?	8	9
(IQ10) Process or Procedure	Does your institution have a structured procedure or process for preparing for or responding to a crisis?	4	5

Emergency Operation Structure		7	10
Where does Emergency Management belong		4	5
(IQ11) Potential Barriers to Response	Is there an institutional process or policy that may make crisis response more difficult or even inaccessible?	2	2
Policy Examination		4	8
Policy Example		2	2
Pyramid Structure		3	3
(IQ9) Key Crisis Respondent	Is there a particular member of your leadership team/Cabinet that you often turn to first when determining if an event is a crisis and how to respond?	4	5
President/Chancellor Involvement		6	8
Board of Trustees Involvement		2	2
Leaning Forward		5	7
(IQ2) Background Information	How did you become a higher education professional? Tell me about your professional pathway, education, describe yourself as an administrator?	8	20
Administrator Traits		3	4
Educational Pathway		3	3
Professional Pathway		8	13
Reporting Structure		7	8

VITA

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