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Crisis Communication and Executive Leadership: Ethical Shortcomings in Government

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Crisis Communication and Executive Leadership: Ethical Shortcomings in Government

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Abstract

This research thesis project is an analysis of how and why governments fail in their attempts at crisis communication. The hypotheses tested are: there exists a negative correlation between unethical leadership and successful crisis communication practices. And governments are more likely to experience these failures due to ethical disconnects in modern politics. Research includes a review of relevant academic literature regarding crisis communication theory, as well as the ethical framework that can be applied to that theory. Cases considered are Hurricane Katrina, the choking death of Eric Garner, and the COVID-19 global pandemic. The research project concludes with a recommendation for organizations to use the academic theories as tests, and the examples set by the specific organizations as tools with which to pass those tests.

Crisis Communication and Executive Leadership: Ethical Shortcomings in Government

Chapter One: Introduction

General Introduction to the Research Project

As an inherently collaborative process, American democracy is predicated upon consistent communication between lawmakers and the citizens who elect them. When these lawmakers take public office, their constitutional duty to the people is to create and implement public policy that improves upon or benefits the greater good of American society. This ultimate goal encompasses numerous areas of everyday life, including financial regulations, protections for race, sex, and religion, and even the safety of communities. Communication throughout the lawmaking process is critical in each and every policy area, but perhaps no more so than in the struggle to keep the American people safe.

With this perspective in mind, this research project looks to examine the current state of crisis communications within the various levels of the United States political system. In this current year, 2020, a singular pandemic crisis has dominated the political news cycle, and highlighted the unacceptable shortcomings in crisis communication practice in government at all levels. From a broader analysis than just the United States' response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this research project looks to identify the reasons for these shortcomings, as well as provide an applicable model with which those shortcomings could be remedied. Likewise, the research presented in this project is usable outside the realm of public service – private organizations and nonprofits alike are vulnerable to crises. Because crises are inevitable yet random, organizations must be perpetually prepared to meet them with effective communication to employees, stakeholders, and the general public. Therefore, this research project culminates in an executive

summary designed to be a usable roadmap for governments and companies alike to successfully navigate future crises.

Research Problem

From an academic perspective, crisis communication is well-documented and extensively studied as a critical aspect of organizational procedure in both public and private arenas. In fact, many corporations employ extensive public relations teams whose primary purpose is to effectively communicate the decisions of the organization to the public and the media. However, in government, these communicative duties rest primarily within the executive offices of presidents, governors, and mayors. These are the elected officials to which the American public looks for information on the various issues at hand, and how governmental bodies are responding to those issues. And even more so during a crisis, the public relies heavily upon executive leadership to act as the navigational beacon that leads society through troubled times.

Because government has the unique responsibility of ensuring public safety, it is chiefly important that its executive leadership consistently practices successful crisis communication. Therefore, the research problem centers around the failures in crisis communication within government, and specifically why those failures may have occurred. The research problem must be solved – through an identification of trends and norms in governmental crisis communication failure. Through further research centering around successful efforts to similar crises, this research project both clarifies the problem and reveals the solution.

Rationale for the Research Project

Many organizations, especially in the private sector, are consistently successful in their communication efforts in the wake of a crisis. For decades, companies responded to unforeseen crises with urgency and grace; for example, in 1996, Odwalla beverage company was struck with an E.coli outbreak in their apple juice products. Immediately, CEO Stephen Williamson recalled the products, costing Odwalla over \$6.5 million, while also taking responsibility for the crisis and pledging to cover the medical costs of those affected (Kim Bhasin, 2011). Practices like those used by Odwalla suggest a critical ethical component to successful crisis communication, specifically how the organization in question often must prioritize public safety over financial profits or reputation.

This ethical perspective acts as the rational foundation for this research project, as it assumes that a significant amount of governmental failures in crisis communication occur due to ethical missteps by executive leadership. Whether these missteps are errors of omission or commission, political executives are uniquely concerned with reputation – and specifically their efforts towards reelection. When crises occur, these executives may lose sight of their ethical responsibilities as public servants due to the negative impact of the crises on their reputations. With the research problem properly defined, and the rationale in perspective, this research project looks to compare and contrast various organizations – both governmental and not – and their crisis communication practices. Solutions to crisis communication shortcomings in political executives must come from an ethical perspective.

Definition and Explanation of Key Terminology

For the purposes of this research project, executive leadership is the person or people who represent the organization to the outside world. In corporations and businesses, executive leadership usually comes from upper management, a board of directors, or a CEO. In government, it refers literally to the executive branch, which contains the offices of presidents, governors, mayors, and the bureaucratic agencies they oversee. These executives are comparable in times of crisis, as they all have the same ethical responsibility to their constituencies – navigating any given crisis with open and honest communication.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research project is concerned with two large academic ideas: crisis communication and organizational ethics. This research project defines a crisis as a unique moment in time for an organization, and that moment in time must meet three criteria to be considered a crisis. First, it must come as a surprise to the organization, with little to no warning, making specific preparations nearly impossible. Next, the moment must pose an imminent threat to the organization's reputation and/or the safety of its constituents. Finally, the moment must place restraints on the available response time, so that an organization must mobilize to solve the crisis as quickly as possible. When all three of the above criteria are met, the organization is said to be in the midst of a crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, 2019, pg. 5-6). With the above in mind, crisis communication and crisis management are connected yet different disciplines. Crisis management refers to the actual procedures used to combat the negative effects of a crisis, and is not the focus of this research project. Crisis communications refers to the tactics used by organizations to maintain and grow their reputations among the public, media, and stakeholders in the face of a crisis (Ulmer et. al., 2019, pg. 6-9). Because this research

project looks at governmental failures with respect to ethical responsibility, crisis communication is the theoretical framework in question.

There are also numerous ethical theories in question, many of which require explanation into the specific context of this research project. At the most fundamental level, ethics is defined as “the values that an individual uses to interpret whether any particular action or behavior is considered acceptable and appropriate” (Stanwick and Stanwick, 2016, pg. 3). Because each person’s individual ethics are different from another’s, another type of ethics must be introduced: organizational ethics. This research project requires an adoption of a basic core set of ethical values that can be applied to all organizations, both governmental and business. Broadly, organizational ethics are not individual morals, but instead are the “collective values” that determine whether the “behaviors of the organization’s collective members are considered acceptable and appropriate” (Stanwick and Stanwick, 2016, pg. 4).

During times of crisis, two of the most critical aspects of organizational ethics are transparency and urgency, in both government and business, so that constituencies and stakeholders can be assured of an organizational commitment to meeting the crisis in an effective manner. Transparency is defined as the ability to have “others know what one has decided” (Stanwick and Stanwick, 2016, pg. 131). In specific to this research project, transparency takes the form of open and honest communication between organization and stakeholders, or government and constituencies. Likewise, crises demand effective responses in short timeframes, making urgency a critically important aspect to successful crisis communication; demonstrating urgency in crisis response sends the message that the organization is taking the threat seriously, and has the well-being of stakeholders and constituents in mind (Ulmer et. al., 2019, pg. 6-7).

With the above theoretical terminology explained, this research project continues into a consideration of the theoretical framework in question – specifically the ethical identity of governments and businesses in times of crisis.

Chapter Two: Hypotheses And Theory

Brief Overview of Theoretical Foundations

For all organizations, both governmental and otherwise, there are three fundamental theoretical pillars to ethical crisis communication: responsibility and accountability, access to information, and humanistic care (Ulmer, et. al., 2019, pg. 175).

In the wake of a crisis, organizations, media, and the general public will always question what happened, why it happened, and who is responsible. And while many crises are accidental, inevitable, or otherwise unforeseen, organizations have an ethical duty to accept certain degrees of fault, as they become chiefly responsible for the physical, emotional, and even financial well-being of their stakeholders. Summarily, “Organizations are better able to generate productive crisis responses if they are willing to accept responsibility for any actions that may have caused the crisis” (Ulmer, et. al., 2019, pg. 176). The “actions” referred to in this quote could be errors of omission or commission, as ethical accountability encompasses any decision or behavior that fails to mitigate or remedy the crisis and its negative effects.

Access to information calls into question organizational transparency, as governments and businesses cannot be considered ethical in their crisis communication practices if they willfully withhold pertinent information from their stakeholders or constituencies. Successful crisis communication calls for open honesty both before, during, and after a crisis (Ulmer, et. al., 2019, pg. 177). Transparency in government is an oft-debated issue, as scholars have yet to reach

a consensus as to the degree to which governments should be transparent. Generally speaking, governments approach transparency with two conflicting ideas. On one hand, increased transparency leads to authentic engagement with the community. Conversely, less transparency allows governments more freedom to operate, supposedly making the policymaking process more effective (Wanna, 2018, pg. 11-14). However, in times of crisis, this conflict of governance must take a backseat to a more consistent and unwavering level of transparency, as the health or safety of the community could be in jeopardy.

Finally, humanism and care prioritize the worth of people as human beings over the other goals of the organization. For corporations, this pillar of ethical crisis communication can be especially difficult, especially in Western capitalist societies. Because the United States operates within a free market economy, businesses inherently prioritize financial success over all else, sometimes at the expense of reputation or employee well-being. Governments, on the other hand, are uniquely tasked with the well-being of their citizens, and therefore have an even greater responsibility towards humanism. For both governments and businesses, however, crises are best navigated from a perspective of humanism that stresses an organizational obligation to help those affected within the suffering community (Ulmer, et. al., 2019, pg. 179).

In summary, the theoretical framework of this research project as discussed above inextricably links successful crisis communication to ethical decision-making. Effective crisis response demands accountability, transparency, and humanism; organizations in the midst of crisis must be willing to be publicly responsible for their actions, openly honest about their response strategy, and focused on helping those affected.

Whether it be a governmental body, a large corporation, or any other organization that may find itself in the midst of a crisis, the decision to act ethically comes almost exclusively

from positions of leadership. These executives take different names in different industries, but all have the same responsibility to represent their various organizations in the public and the media, both in image and policy.

Literature Discussed, Reviewed, and Applied

The connection between ethical executive leadership and effective crisis communication is both theoretically and statistically proven, beginning with a universally applicable crisis leadership theory. With regular consistency, the general public looks to leadership for “direction, inspiration, motivation, resources, support, and comfort” (Ulmer, et. al., 2019, pg. 111). In times of crisis, such a relationship between leadership and public becomes of chief importance to the crisis communication effort. At the onset of a crisis, leaders must become “an emergency manager coordinating response efforts, providing comfort and reassurance, disseminating information, speaking to the media, and providing a vision for response, recovery, and renewal” (Ulmer, et. al., 2019, pg. 112). Leaders can be successful in these endeavors if they are aptly engaged to the situation at hand – directly bringing into question the ethical integrity of these leaders. Communities must trust their leaders in times of crisis, and that trust stems from an “ethical and accountable leadership” focused on “collective benefits or value” (Wanna, 2018, pg. 14). During a crisis, the “benefits or value” refers to the successful mitigation of the crisis itself, as well as the preservation of the organization and community through successful crisis communication efforts.

In fact, effective leadership is statistically linked to successful crisis communication, as evidenced by the 2008 study by P.H. Longstaff and Sung-Un Yang, entitled *Communication Management and Trust: Their Role in Building Resilience to “Surprises” Such As Natural*

Disasters, Pandemic Flu, and Terrorism. Their research project was borne out of the larger idea of organizational resilience to crises; they identified various industries that could benefit from their research, including “governments, nongovernmental organizations, media, telecommunications, and electric utilities” (Longstaff and Yang, 2008, pg. 2). With this foundation, Longstaff and Yang entered the statistical research with two main hypotheses in regards to leadership and crises. Generally, they posit that there exists “a positive effect of leadership on crisis preparedness and the coordination of crisis communications...”; specifically:

1. In hypothesis 1a, the effectiveness of the leadership in dealing with a crisis is positively associated with the preparedness for a crisis.
2. In hypothesis 1b, the effectiveness of the leadership in dealing with a crisis is positively associated with the internal coordination of crisis communications.

(Longstaff and Yang, 2008, pg. 3)

Their research consisted of 82 crises from history of seven types: environmental, fiscal, natural disaster, legal, military, political, and technological. As each type of crisis could involve different or overlapping industries and organizations, the results of the study can feasibly be applied to both governments and businesses alike. In testing leadership as a variable for successful crisis communications, Longstaff and Yang discovered a positive correlation between leadership and both crisis preparedness and coordination of communications. Only when the level of surprise in a given crisis was controlled did leadership fail to show statistical significance (Longstaff and Yang, 2008, pg. 11).

Their conclusion applies the data to tangible scenarios, and makes clear where certain statistical findings exist in the real world. For the effectiveness of leadership both before and during

the crisis, Longstaff and Yang focus on mutual trust between organization and community. They conclude that trust is a “two-way street,” and that when leadership becomes “a trusted source of information,” crisis response within the community benefits (Longstaff and Yang, 2008, pg. 12-13). With obvious ethical connotations in the above study (mutual trust), this research project continues to use this theoretical framework to analyze the crisis communication practices of various organizations in select crises, both resolved and current.

Hypotheses

For this research project, there are two hypotheses in question:

1. Unethical executive leadership is negatively correlated to effective crisis communication practices.
2. Political executives are generally less successful in crisis communications than are nongovernmental executives, due to an ethical disconnect inherent in modern politics.

Chapter Three: Methods

Study Method and Design

This research project uses the theoretical framework presented above as a test applied to specific relevant crises in recent history and current events. Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger have established a three-part litmus test for successful crisis communication, highlighting responsibility, access to information, and focus on human care. All three standards must be met in order for the crisis communication response to be considered successful. Additionally, Longstaff and Yang statistically linked effective leadership to successful crisis communication

responses; therefore, it can also be assumed that failure in crisis communications can likewise be linked to ineffective leadership.

Therefore, the study method looks to analyze crisis communication responses first for success or failure, and then identify the leadership techniques or qualities exhibited by the executives therein. For the failures, especially in the cases involving government as the organization, the research hopes to prove an ethical component to those failures. Using the principles set forth both by Stanwick and Stanwick as well as Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, the results of the case studies hope to prove that executive failure in crisis communication is largely a function of ethics.

Description and Justification of Analytical Techniques

This research project is primarily qualitative in nature, as it looks to prove positive correlation between ethical leadership and successful crisis communication practices using theoretical tests applied to various case studies. However, determination of success or failure in those case studies will inevitably involve some degree of quantitative consideration; for example, poor communication in the wake of a viral outbreak may lead to a higher death toll that could have conceivably been mitigated. Therefore, statistical data will play a major role in determining success or failure in crisis communication practices.

The attribution of the failures to unethical leadership will, however, take the form of qualitative conclusions drawn primarily from contrasting successes. For example, in consideration of one singular crisis, contrasting leadership techniques will likely expose ethical flaws in the organization that failed in its crisis response.

The crisis events and corresponding communication practices considered in this research project are drawn nearly exclusively from secondary research, as is the case with the theoretical framework already discussed. These crises are either moments in history or current events, and therefore the communication techniques used by any involved organizations are documented either internally or externally by media and news outlets.

Assumptions and Implied Limitations

This research project assumes first and foremost that the theoretical framework regarding both crisis communication and ethics as presented above can be universally applied. Though the theories in question are designed to be applied to any crisis situation, each and every new crisis presents a unique set of circumstances and roadblocks to the organizations that face them. Therefore, each crisis communication effort must be specific to the crisis at hand, suggesting that the applicable theories could require constant updates. Without access to these updates in real time, this research project assumes the currently held theories are sufficient in examining both current and past crises.

The most critical limitation to this research project is the absence of primary research. Though originally in-scope for this research project, the current COVID-19 pandemic has killed any opportunity for primary research, including interviews, surveys, or experiments. First-hand statements from certain executive leaders in government and business in regards to their crisis communication practices would have provided critical qualitative data to supplement the case study analyses. However, with most businesses closed, and governmental bodies reeling to meet the moment of this current coronavirus crisis, primary research is now out of scope.

Chapter Four: Findings

Hurricane Katrina (2005)

The various crises considered here prove a fundamental ethical roadblock to successful crisis communications within executive government. This research project does not go so far as to suggest that nongovernmental organizations are always successful in the same crisis endeavors, but instead that governmental bodies have a unique obligation to public safety and the democratic process that demands a higher level of ethical accountability. While certainly unethical, corporations are more or less assumed to prioritize profitability over other factors. Governments, on the other hand, are obligated to prioritize the wellbeing of their constituencies over all else. Therefore, these case studies highlight how governments fail to meet this basic standard where other organizations succeed in the same endeavors.

As the first case considered in this research project, Hurricane Katrina is one of the most documented and well-known crises in United States' history. Forming and then dissipating over the course of eighteen days, Katrina made landfall in the southern United States on August 29th, 2005, and today stands as one of the costliest natural disasters in recorded history. The cost of Katrina could not be overstated, as the natural disaster was responsible for over \$125 billion in damage, as well as over 1,200 deaths and over 1 million people displaced (Knabb, Rhome, and Brown, 2005, pg. 2-4). In addition to Katrina's identity as such a prominent crisis, it represents one of the starkest contrasts in crisis communication practice between governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

Hurricanes, by nature, are the least spontaneous of the major types of natural disasters, as tornadoes, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and even tsunamis are less predictable. Even though a specific "point of landfall is difficult to predict," hurricanes move along a "pattern that may be

observed and tracked over time” (Cole and Fellows, 2008). With ample time to predict the direction, strength, and potential damage of the hurricane, the crisis response abilities of organizations like governmental agencies, media outlets, and other institutions are not hindered by any outside circumstance.

With the above in mind, the crisis communication effort before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina made landfall in the United States is staggeringly dichotomous; while news outlets, disaster response teams, and scientific organizations demonstrated active and urgent crisis communication, while executive leadership within various levels of government demonstrated a notable degree of apathy. In the federal congressional investigation of Katrina, the Select Bipartisan Committee concluded that “there was no failure to predict the inevitability and consequences” of Katrina; however, the Committee also concluded that “there was a failure of initiative to get beyond design and organizational compromises to improve the level of protection afforded” (Cole and Fellows, 2008).

Specifically, criticism of a few key executive leaders within the United States’ government stand out as significant within the context of this research project. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco utterly failed their constituents in the face of Katrina’s destruction. Despite the known gravity of the situation, neither the mayor nor the governor communicated that gravity until far too late. In fact, neither executive used appropriate language when informing the public about the impending disaster, instead using mitigating phrases like “precautionary,” “voluntary,” “recommended,” “highly recommended,” and “highly suggested” when referring to evacuation procedures. Astonishingly, Nagin and Blanco had not issued a mandatory evacuation of the city of New Orleans or state of Louisiana until less than 24 hours before Katrina made landfall (Cole and Fellows, 2008).

The crisis communication decisions made by Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco were utter failures, and held grave consequences. A resident of New Orleans is directly quoted as attributing the incomplete evacuation of the affected areas to the governor and mayor, saying “Governor said on TV, you didn't want to go, you didn't have to go, cause it was no threat to us, she said.... They didn't give us no warning.... When they said leave, it was already too late” (Cole and Fellows, 2008). The number of casualties or lives altered directly at the fault of Mayor Nagin and/or Governor Blanco is unclear, however their crisis communication practices are unequivocally lacking in ethics. With more than ample time and no shortage of information, these two executive leaders chose to understate the gravity of the impending hurricane, endangering tens of thousands in a futile effort to become the public’s source of optimism and calm. Bringing into question the theories of Stanwick and Stanwick in regards to ethical transparency, this analysis of local and state crisis communication practices concludes that Nagin and Blanco employed willful dishonesty with the public in the face of a deadly crisis.

Unfortunately, the ethical failures by governmental executives during Hurricane Katrina do not stop with Nagin or even Blanco. The Bush Administration likewise failed in its own crisis communication efforts, through deliberately ignoring the very need for federal attention to be paid towards natural disasters. Specifically, the White House failed to prioritize Hurricane Katrina within the federal budget, instead choosing to maintain hefty tax cuts and funding for the War on Terror (Cole and Fellows, 2008). Just a year after winning reelection largely upon a platform of tax cuts and the War of Terror, the Bush Administration communicated to the American people that even facing a historically destructive natural disaster, consistency of politics took precedent over public safety. As the United States’ highest executive leader, the president has the largest constituency, and therefore has the largest responsibility to ethical

consistency. Furthermore, the president's responsibility is magnified, because local and state executive politicians often take their cues from the federal government. Lack of ethics in the Bush Administration not only directly harmed the affected populations, but also damaged the overall system of communication between governments and other involved agencies.

Despite crisis communication failures in local, state, and federal government, the Katrina crisis did see certain other organizations succeed in the same kind of crisis communications. In the same congressional report that vilified Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco, the U.S. House of Representatives commended numerous bureaucratic agencies for early and consistent crisis communication, especially highlighting the work done by the National Hurricane Center. The stark contrast in response can even be quantified, as the NHC "provided 471 media interviews and its Web site received over 900 million hits" (Cole and Fellows, 2008). Such proactive communication and active transparency represent successful crisis communication tactics, not to mention a testament to the ethical decision-making of a bureaucratic agency.

It is critical to note that the NHC's efforts were all but overshadowed by the missteps of the various political executives discussed above. Despite being the national authority on hurricanes, the NHC was unable, despite their best efforts, to overpower executive apathy with their clear and constant communication. In summary, the Hurricane Katrina case proves just how much influence executive leaders within government have on the public consensus. Despite exceptionally available information detailing the grave danger posed by Katrina, residents of New Orleans, Louisiana, and other affected areas were influenced primarily – and in some cases exclusively – by their mayors, governors, and/or president.

Choking Death of Eric Garner

On July 17, 2014 in Staten Island, New York, African-American man Eric Garner was approached by NYPD officers on the street, who accused him of selling single cigarettes out of the pack without tax stamps. Upon arriving on the scene, the officers attempted to arrest Garner, placing him in a chokehold and wrestling him to the ground. Despite Garner repeating the phrase “I can’t breathe” eleven times as he was restrained on the ground, Officer Daniel Pantaleo continued the chokehold until Garner lost consciousness. He was pronounced dead at the hospital just an hour later (Goldstein and Santora, *New York Times*, 2014). After the autopsy confirmed suffocation by strangulation as the cause of Garner’s death, Officer Pantaleo was placed on desk duty without his badge or handgun. Meanwhile, the incident spread through national news outlets like wildfire, and brought race-relations and police brutality to the forefront of American sociopolitical discourse (Goldstein and Santora, *New York Times*, 2014). Opinions came flooding into the public forum from each ideology, with some coming to the defense of the NYPD’s actions, while others cried for justice for Eric Garner. Seemingly overnight, the New York Police Department and the New York City government had a crisis on their hands.

As quickly as the Garner incident occurred, the New York City government’s response was far less swift, and lacked urgency and decisiveness. Despite convening a July 31st roundtable between both sides of the conflict, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio produced little new information, and in fact managed to further intensify the public crisis fallout. Specifically, the roundtable culminated with the mayor calling Garner’s death a “terrible tragedy” and suggested that everyone work “to heal the wounds from decades of mistrust and create a culture where the police department and the communities they protect [and] respect each other” (de Blasio, 2014). While certainly a positive message, the summarizing quote from de Blasio fails several crisis

communications and ethical tenets. The mayor's statement failed to decrease uncertainty among the public, media, and most of all the stakeholders involved. Likewise, instead of assuming a strong leadership role in remedying the situation, de Blasio shifted the onus upon the people themselves to make peace with one another. Lastly, and perhaps most notably, de Blasio failed to take accountability for the actions of the officers that are ultimately under his government's control.

The ethical missteps in de Blasio's crisis communication effort are apparent; as he undoubtedly shirked his responsibilities in the wake of a political crisis. Deliberately vague statements and superficial behavior replaced genuine expression of accountability and assurance of action. As the executive leader in charge of the NYPD, de Blasio communicated to the people of New York City that he did not consider Eric Garner's death to be significant in any capacity, neither from a judicial perspective nor as a sociopolitical discussion.

His failures were mirrored by another key executive figure, as NYPD Commissioner William Bratton announced that he would conduct an internal investigation into the police procedure regarding appropriate force an officer may use while detaining a suspect. Despite being a seemingly beneficial crisis response by the NYPD, in reality the review only served to increase uncertainty regarding responsibility in Garner's death, and waste over \$35 million taxpayer dollars (Briquelet, 2015). In an interview with an unnamed NYPD officer, the New York Post reported that the exercise was patently ineffective, and actually led to less certainty in the legality of Officer Pantaleo's actions (Briquelet, 2015). By violating the first tenant of successful crisis communication, Commissioner Bratton's was unable to demonstrate any urgency in his review of police procedure (no conclusion was drawn), and therefore fanned the flames of uncertainty among the public and police officers alike.

In summary of the two major executive leaders involved in the Eric Garner crisis, both Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Bratton committed egregious ethical mistakes in the manner in which they handled the public fallout of Garner's death. In a city of intense diversity, de Blasio failed to address his constituents of color and their pressing concerns about race relations and police brutality. Ethical crisis communication in the Garner case demanded urgent reaction from both the mayor and the commissioner, so that a community of millions can continue entrusting their safety to the NYPD. Instead, vague statements and wasteful investigations showed that the underlying issues between people of color and police did not constitute any kind of pressing issue for the New York city and state governments. In fact, Officer Pantaleo remained willfully employed by the NYPD for five years following his killing of Garner, and was finally fired in 2019.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Perhaps no event highlights the disparity in crisis communication practices between executives in government and executives in other organizations than the current COVID-19 global pandemic.

Originating in Wuhan, China in early December 2019, COVID-19 is a virus of novel origin that spreads quickly through close contact, including sneezes, coughs, or even talking. The virus is respiratory in nature, causing fever and dry cough as the most common symptoms; in severe cases, COVID-19 causes sudden acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and can be deadly in patients of advanced age, existing respiratory conditions, or other immunodeficiencies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The imminent global threat posed by the virus was seemingly obvious, as the World Health Organization officially declared the COVID-

19 outbreak a “public health emergency of international concern” on January 30, 2020, and as a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic quickly established itself as the most prevalent pandemic crisis in over a century; as of April 20, 2020, COVID-19 has infected nearly 2.5 million people worldwide, and has claimed more than 165,000 lives (Johns Hopkins University, 2020).

As COVID-19 spread across the globe unhindered during the first few months of 2020, organizations of all kinds found themselves facing the same crisis, and with it came the need for effective crisis communications. A unique aspect to the COVID-19 crisis not present in the others considered above is the international threat the virus poses to this day. This global reach allows comparisons to be drawn between governments and organizations alike at the any level: international, national, state/province, and even local. The research benefit here is that the COVID-19 crisis can determine whether or not size or scope of the organization has any bearing on successful crisis communications practices.

As perhaps the largest organization involved in the COVID-19 crisis, the World Health Organization is a specialized agency within the United Nations, and is responsible for international public health. In the case of COVID-19, the WHO reaction constitutes successful crisis communication, especially given the extreme time constraints and rapid spread of the virus. Despite much of the world outside of Wuhan, China paying little attention to the COVID-19 outbreak, the WHO warned that “all countries should be prepared for containment” on January 30, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). These warnings towards the end of January were followed by active policy decisions during February, further demonstrating to the global community the urgency of the situation and the high degree of threat posed. On February 12, 2020, the WHO convened a “Research and Innovation Forum,” which paired researchers and

fundlers from across the world to combat the spread of COVID-19, and published a report about the virus' pathological origins in China on February 24, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). In totality, the WHO achieved a successful crisis communication response to the COVID-19 crisis by acting quickly, being accountable for its actions, and practicing transparency to a truly ethical standard. Despite such adequate efforts to educate the global community on the COVID-19 outbreak, the WHO has no authority to implement its suggested measures at any level of government. Therefore, the responsibility to practice successful and ethical crisis communication fell from the WHO to world leaders, many of whom answered the call.

Most notably, however, the United States has lagged behind much of the rest of the world in COVID-19 response; as of April 21, 2020, the U.S. had more positive cases than the next four nations combined (Johns Hopkins University, 2020). The prevalence of COVID-19 in the United States can be attributed to a chaotic, disconnected, and unethical crisis communication response by the Trump Administration. Highlighted by constant contradictions, dangerous misinformation, and inflammatory rhetoric, President Trump's attempt at executive leadership within the COVID-19 crisis can be considered a historically significant failure.

At the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak within the United States, President Trump took a publicly optimistic tone, and downplayed the severity of the situation even at the same time as the World Health Organization advised that countries worldwide prepare to battle the virus. Specifically, on February 26, 2020, Trump stated of the virus: "It's going to disappear. One day it's like a miracle, it will disappear. And from our shores, you know, it could get worse before it gets better. Could maybe go away. We'll see what happens. Nobody really knows" (Al-Arshani, 2020). On the same day, he attempted to clarify the above statement, predicting that the 15 people who had tested positive in the U.S. "within a couple of days is going to be down to close

to zero—that's a pretty good job we've done” (Abutaleb, Park, and Dawsey, 2020). Taken together, Trump’s quotes were neither clear nor accurate, as he contradicted health experts at the WHO as well as himself. Such vague and unclear statements from the president of the United States likely contributed to a sense of ease or apathy among the American people in the face of a deadly pandemic. This type of contradictory communication continued throughout the rampant spread of COVID-19 across the U.S., even as governors across the country imposed their own measures to combat the virus in individual states. After initially claiming that the Constitution granted the individual states the power to enact these measures, Trump on April 12, 2020 claimed to have “ultimate authority” on how and when states would end restrictions (Blake, 2020). Just four days later, Trump reversed course again, assuring governors that they would be allowed to call their “own shots” (Liptak, Holmes, and Nobles, 2020). Looking at this contradictory communication from purely a public health perspective, President Trump discredited established experts within the WHO, and failed to create a clear path for communication between executive leaders in U.S. governments. As the nation’s highest ranking executive leaders, the president of the United States must adequately demonstrate the urgency of the situation and a clarity of intended purpose. President Trump failed in this endeavor, choosing instead to downplay the severity of the situation, compliment himself, and isolate other critical leaders within the U.S. crisis communication effort. From an ethical perspective, the above statements lack any transparency, and prioritize the public perception of President Trump over the safety of the American people.

Likewise, ethical executive leadership during times of crisis requires factual honesty, as misinformation hinders the efficiency of the crisis response, and can put the safety of the public in jeopardy. President Trump in two specific instances willfully spread false information

regarding the COVID-19 crisis. First, on March 13, 2020, Trump claimed that the World Health Organization's mortality figure of 3.4% was a "false number," and stated that the true figure stood below 1% (Walters, Aratani, and Peters, 2020). Trump provided no references, sources, or analysis to support his claim. Second, in reference to a study done by French scientists, President Trump touted the efficacy of two anti-malaria drugs, chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, in treating the COVID-19 virus. In that briefing on March 19, 2020, Trump claimed that both drugs had been approved by the Food and Drug Administration, an assertion that the FDA immediately refuted (Dale, 2020). Furthermore, human trials into those drugs were ceased on April 15, 2020, after just six days, as they turned out to cause potentially deadly cardiac irregularities in a quarter of the test subjects (Weise, 2020). In two alarming instances, President Trump disregarded factual evidence and deliberately communicated to the American people critical falsehoods. As the most prevalent voice in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, President Trump failed his constituents across the nation as a result of an unethical compulsion to appear as in-control as possible. With the knowledge that millions of Americans hang upon his every word for direction in this crisis, President Trump's penchant for disinformation has the potential to be deadly in the case of this specific crisis.

Lastly, another critical aspect to executive leadership during a crisis is the importance to keep the public calm and cooperating with the necessary response measures. Especially in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which nationwide shutdowns have forced nearly every American to shelter-in-place, the need for steady and reassuring leadership is of paramount importance. President Trump fails in this endeavor as well, using shockingly inflammatory rhetoric to promote public protests against Democratic governors' strict social distancing regulations. Unfortunately, both federal and state-issued social distancing mandates have come

under fire among citizens who are skeptical of the efficacy of those measures or the threat of COVID-19 in general. However, instead of reassuring the public that such measures are vital to stopping the spread of the virus, President Trump chose instead to fan the flames of civil unrest, tweeting out the phrases “LIBERATE MICHIGAN,” “LIBERATE VIRGINIA,” and “LIBERATE MINNESOTA” while referring to the protesters as “responsible” people (Forgey, 2020). From a rhetorical perspective, the use of capitalization and the word “liberate” both create an atmosphere of revolution, especially within those three states. The president’s inflammatory rhetoric paints protestors, a majority of whom are Trump supporters, who violate these critical social distancing orders as liberators, and can be taken as a call to violent action. In the wake of a severe pandemic crisis, President Trump’s language can only be categorized as irresponsible, and can lead to a resurgence of the virus in those communities. Such divisive and violent language does not constitute successful crisis communications, especially because his rhetoric actively undermines the necessary crisis response measures already in place.

In summary of President Trump’s crisis communication response to the COVID-19 pandemic, he fails each of the three tests set forth by Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger – refusing to be accountable for his actions as the United States’ chief executive in favor of self-promotion. Likewise, Trump’s willful engagement in misinformation hinders the ability of the public to freely access true information that would keep them safer. Finally, his divisive rhetoric encouraging citizens to break social distancing measures fails the humanistic test, as such calls directly endanger the lives of citizens who may come into contact with protesters.

In stark contrast to President Trump’s failures, an organization of far fewer available resources has demonstrated consistent success in the crisis communication response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Clark University, as a private institution of higher education, had its own

need for successful crisis communication practices, as its thousands of students, faculty, and other employees looked to Clark's executive leadership for information and direction in the midst of the pandemic. The school's communication was done primarily through emails, as they needed to reach the largest number of people in a short amount of time. In the first of these messages on February 28, 2020, Clark University's Vice President of Government and Community Affairs, Jack Foley, updated the Clark community on the COVID-19 outbreak in China, recommending that travelling students consult the CDC website for further information. Likewise, Foley provided a few "effective illness prevention methods" like covering one's mouth during a cough or sneeze, and compulsive washing of one's hands (Appendix A). As the virus quickly spread throughout the United States, and closer to Clark's campus in Worcester, Massachusetts, the messages became even more decisive. On March 4, 2020, Clark's president at the time, David Angel, wrote to all students, faculty, and staff, informing them of Clark's formation of a COVID-19 Response Team and a corresponding web page that contained pertinent information from the WHO, CDC, and other federal, state, and local governmental agencies (Appendix B). On March 5, 2020, President Angel communicated guidelines for which those returning from spring break in any COVID-19 affected area could safely return to campus (Appendix C). The communications efforts undertaken by Clark University at the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak within the United States can be considered successful – due to the clear and urgent messaging, transparency of information, and focus on the wellbeing of the Clark community.

This success continued even as Clark University chose to pursue a proactive crisis response. Despite there still being no reported positive cases of COVID-19 within the Clark community, President Angel announced on March 10, 2020 the cancellation of all university

events involving large numbers of people, including campus tours, club events, or open houses (Appendix D). Moving quickly and decisively, Clark's COVID-19 Response Team just two days later cancelled all in-class meetings, closed residence halls, and all but shut down the campus. Notably, President Angel communicated that students would receive refunds on their housing costs, and students who had nowhere else to live could be granted exception to stay.

President Angel and Clark's COVID-19 Response Team continued to send updating messages every few days, keeping the university's crisis response consistent with or more stringent than federal, state, and local regulations. As a small, private institution of higher education, Clark University as a whole, and its leadership in specific, undoubtedly succeeded in its crisis communications practices. With a sharp focus on ethics, Clark was exceptionally transparent throughout the pandemic, as President Angel communicated that he would be professionally accountable for Clark's crisis response. Likewise, the constant and informative outreach through email constitutes an impressive degree of communication to students, faculty, and staff. Finally, with respect to humanism, the university has gone above and beyond to provide the Clark community with adequate resources, services, and even financial assistance. This success mirrors the WHO efforts discussed above, with finite attention paid to the honest and efficient dissemination of pertinent information, and public safety as the only goal. Though these two organizations are vastly different in size, industry, and mission, their crisis communications practices are unmistakably consistent, though they are not joined by the executive leadership of the federal government of the United States. Instead, President Trump demonstrated a willfully unethical communication practice, choosing self-interest over public safety through blatant misinformation, alarming contradictions, and inflammatory rhetoric.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Implication of Findings

At a fundamental level, the research provided above asserts that crisis communication benchmarks are universal, in that they do not change as crises change. Whether it be a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina, a sociopolitical incident like the choking death of Eric Garner, or a global pandemic like COVID-19, organizations must be consistent in their communication to stakeholders and constituencies. Though every crisis presents unique challenges, the ideas of accountability, transparency, and humanism are evergreen. Likewise, these ideas do not change as organizations change; regardless of size, scope, or industry, every organization facing a crisis must meet those same requirements. Size may limit the resources available, but successful crisis communication is seldom tied to finances. Instead, these organizations must be rich in ethical leadership that prioritizes open and honest communication over the self-interest of themselves or their companies.

Another critical implication from the research analysis is that successful crisis communication is undeniably linked to executive leadership. In most cases, one singular leader does not unilaterally make all crisis communication decisions, as evidenced by Clark's COVID-19 Response Team or even the entirety of the World Health Organization. Despite this idea that crisis communications is a collaborative effort, one singular leader represents the organization in the eyes of the media and the public. These executives can be presidents, police commissioners, and CEOs, among others, but each of these figureheads is responsible for the success or failure of their organization as a whole. Constituencies and stakeholder groups rarely understand how organizations truly work behind the scenes, so the impetus for ethical executive leadership is primarily driven by the idea that the organization will be judged by the behavior of the executive.

This fundamental tenet of crisis communications calls into question the hypotheses set forth in Chapter Two of this research project.

Discussion of Hypotheses

The cases analyzed above support both hypotheses, first suggesting a negative correlation between unethical leadership and success in crisis communications. Most notably, unethical leadership manifests in these executives in the form of apathy, as evidenced by Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco during Hurricane Katrina. More obvious examples of unethical leadership are disinformation and inflammatory rhetoric, as featured by President Trump in the COVID-19 pandemic. Such ethical pitfalls indicate that crisis communication is a difficult landscape for any executive to navigate, as they must provide publicly strong leadership in coordination with the preservation of the organization. The common mistake, either by commission or omission, is prioritizing the preservation of self or organization over the physical, emotional, or financial wellbeing of the constituency or stakeholders. And in fact, that error in priority actively works against the preservation of self or organization. For example, in the case of the NYPD in the choking death of Eric Garner, the ethical missteps of Mayor Bill de Blasio and Commissioner William Bratton actually harmed the NYPD's reputation in the community. In general, roadblocks to successful crisis communication rarely materialize as lack of resources or any other tangible constraint; more often than not, the roadblocks take the form of ethical shortcomings within leadership.

The research also supports hypothesis #2, in that political executives demonstrate a higher degree of ethical failure in crisis communication practices than their nonpolitical counterparts. The evidence suggests that this disparity is due to a fundamental obsession with

reputation and image within the political community as a whole, and specifically in executive leaders. Organizations like the World Health Organization, the National Hurricane Center, and Clark University all featured leaders who were able to set aside their popularity or public image in times of crisis. In stark contrast, political executives like mayors, governors, and even two presidents failed in the same endeavor. Unable to deliver clear, concise, and honest crisis communications, they all either refused or were unable to set aside their marriages to ideological platform and status quo politics. For President Bush during Katrina, his platform of tax cuts and the War of Terror took precedence over the federal response to a massively destructive hurricane. For President Trump and the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to play authoritative contrarian came at the expense of the federal response to a viral outbreak that has killed tens of thousands in the United States. Because of such a magnetism between political consistency and these executive leaders, crises have a tendency to force poor ethical decisions.

With the research hypotheses confirmed, this research project looks to conclude with a discussion of how the successes and failures presented within the research analysis above can guide organizations through future crises. The academic theories presented by Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger in crisis communications demand a standardization of procedure – while Stanwick and Stanwick cast a blanket of ethical consideration over the entirety of that procedure.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Recommendation

The theoretical framework presented above represents the benchmarks of successful crisis communications practices – organizations can use these theories as usable tests to analyze their own techniques. Likewise, the analysis of the crises themselves provide specific examples

of successes and failures within the theoretical tests. Organizations can then study crisis communication practices of other groups so that they can incorporate successful techniques and eliminate unsuccessful ones. This research project thereby concludes with a usable roadmap to ethical leadership and successful crisis communications. Applicable to any type of organization, this roadmap best serves executive leaders within government, as they are especially prone to the ethical shortcomings that prevent effective crisis communications.

As Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow have established three benchmarks to successful crisis communications, reaching those benchmarks is a function of ethics. In the first benchmark test, leaders must demonstrate active accountability in the face of a crisis. In order to pass this test, executive leaders must fight the gravitational pull towards apathy, and instead work proactively to formulate and implement response measures. Within the paradigm of a roadmap, an organization would adopt a communication method similar to that used by Clark University with its COVID-19 Response Team and stated commitment to the physical, emotional, and financial well-being of students, faculty, and staff. Lack of accountability takes the form of inconsistent communication as seen in Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco's response to Hurricane Katrina, or Mayor Bill de Blasio's superficial roundtable in the wake of Eric Garner's death.

In the second benchmark test, leaders must facilitate a free exchange of information from expert groups to constituencies or stakeholders. Ethical success in this test requires comprehensive communication of relevant facts, statistics, and realities. For example, the World Health Organization's published study on COVID-19 in China provided the world with useful and pertinent information on the virus, and allowed for nations to implement measures to curb its spread. Organizations looking to pass this second test can look to President Trump's COVID-19

tactics for exactly what not to do – namely willful disinformation regarding the severity and outlook of the crisis at hand.

Finally, the third benchmark test set forth by Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger has undoubtedly the largest ethical implications. It calls for organizations to prioritize humanism over any other consideration in the wake of a crisis. This test is likely the most difficult and never truly ends as long as the crisis is ongoing. Because executive leaders have a multitude of priorities to consider, the third benchmark test is continual – at no point should humanism take a backseat to profit, reputation, or other self-interest. For example, Clark University's commitment to refunding housing costs to displaced students in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak demonstrated an unwavering commitment to humanism, even as the measure undoubtedly hurts the institution financially. President Bush's decision not to reallocate federal funds away from his biggest platform issues in the wake of Hurricane Katrina shows quite the opposite – suffocating self-interest that put lives in jeopardy.

By using real-world examples of ethical missteps as theoretical red lights, organizations in need of direction during times of crisis can easily navigate a roadmap to successful crisis communications.

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Appendix A



VOL. 21, February 28, 2020

Update on Coronavirus/COVID-19

We are writing to follow up on previous messages sent to the Clark community regarding the novel coronavirus, now referred to as COVID-19, to inform you of recent developments that may impact your current or upcoming travel, including travel you may be considering for spring break.

While new cases in China appear to have decreased in the past few days, diagnoses of COVID-19 have risen significantly in South Korea, Iran, and Italy. Other countries have confirmed new cases as well. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) and the [U.S. Department of State](#) have now elevated travel advisories for some nations. It is important that anyone planning to travel abroad consult both websites for travel advisories.

We urge those of you with plans to travel over spring break to consult the [CDC COVID-19 website](#) for updates on the virus. A page specific for [Spring Break Travel](#) has helpful tips. Should you choose to travel internationally, please register your travel with the U.S. State Department's [Smart Travel Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#) which gives you access to alerts from the local embassies and consulates.

Regardless of where you are, we also urge you to follow some simple but effective illness prevention measures:

- Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds to avoid spreading any virus to others, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Cover coughs and sneezes in your elbow or sleeve.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- If you feel unwell, stay at home in order to protect yourself and other people.

Clark's staff in Health Services and Dean of Students office, along with city and state agencies, are doing as much as possible to keep our community healthy and are preparing for a range of possible developments. The University has activated a subset of the members of our emergency response team who are continuously monitoring the situation, responding promptly to developments, and figuring out how best to support our faculty, staff and students.

We hope you all have a safe and enjoyable break!

Jack Foley
Vice President for Government and Community Affairs
Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester, MA 01610
jfoley@clarku.edu
508-793-7444

Appendix B

March 4, 2020

To Students, Faculty and Staff,

I write to update you on several new developments surrounding Clark University's response to the COVID-19 outbreak. There are no known cases of COVID-19 at Clark University or in Worcester County.

At this time, we have the following updates:

- Clark has formed a COVID-19 Response Team, which is comprised of senior administrators representing every area of the University and is closely monitoring developments in this rapidly changing situation. As needed, it will implement procedures and protocols that can help safeguard the health and well-being of the campus community.
- We have created a [web page](#) to keep the Clark community informed about the University's COVID-19 response, specify personal preventative measures recommended by global health experts, maintain University updates, and provide links to an array of related resources, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the U.S. State Department, the World Health Organization, and the Mass. Department of Public Health. The page also lists the members of the COVID-19 Response Team. Because of the rapidly changing circumstances surrounding COVID-19 and its potential impact on the University, we suggest checking the website frequently for the latest Clark updates.
- On Saturday, February 29, Clark advised 12 students studying at the Umbra Institute in Perugia, Italy, to return home following the U.S. State Department's elevation of the travel alert in Italy from Level 2 (exercise increased caution) to Level 3 (reconsider travel). While no cases of COVID-19 are reported in Perugia, the Institute has suspended in-class activities as a precaution, and students will complete their coursework online. Given the public health considerations, it is with an abundance of caution that we have asked the students returning from the Italy program not to come to the Clark campus for 14 days after their arrival in the U.S.
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health has announced that it can now test for COVID-19. This will improve the turnaround time for any such testing that may become necessary. Previously, CDC had been the only center in the country that could test for the virus. There is one confirmed case for COVID-19 in Massachusetts, and that person is showing positive signs of recovery. Read more [here](#).

We will send further updates as information changes or the situation necessitates. All such updates will be sent via email as well as being posted on the University's COVID-19 [web page](#). As we continue to address the many issues related to the virus, we ask that you refer to that web page as your primary source for related Clark updates and information.

Sincerely,

David P. Angel
President

Appendix C

Dear Clark Students,

We hope you are having a safe and enjoyable spring break.

The health and safety of all our Clark community are of paramount importance. As Clark prepares to resume classes on Monday, we want to provide you with the following updates regarding COVID-19 (coronavirus) and how they might affect you.

- **There are no reported cases of COVID-19 at Clark or in Worcester County.**
- **For all returning students:**
In the interest of safeguarding your health, and that of others on campus, we urge you to follow the simple but effective illness-prevention measures outlined by the [CDC](#).
- **For students who have traveled to China, Iran, South Korea or Italy:**
 - If you have traveled to a country that has been assigned a Level 3 travel advisory by the U.S. State Department due to verified cases of COVID-19 – at this time, these countries are China, Iran, South Korea, and Italy – we have special instructions for you: please do not return to Clark or Clark housing and please limit your interactions with others, including avoiding visits with other Clark students.. This instruction is guided by related CDC recommendations for those returning from China, as you will see [here](#).
 - This instruction also means you should not come back to the Clark campus for 14 days after having returned from your trip to any of these countries.
 - Instead of returning to campus, email the office of the Dean of the College, which will assist you in arranging accommodations with your instructors to continue your coursework during this time. The email address to use is dean@clarku.edu. Graduate students should contact grad_dean@clarku.edu.
 - Meanwhile, carefully monitor your health for 14 days after returning to the United States.
 - If you show any symptoms of illness, please follow the CDC's guidance for such travelers specified [here](#).
- **If you are exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 (high fever, cough, shortness of breath) while at home, please immediately call (don't visit) your health service provider. If you exhibit such symptoms after returning to campus, please immediately call (don't visit) Clark Health Services at 508-793-7467. Please do not come to Health Services without first calling.**

We will send further updates as information changes or the situation necessitates. New information and updates will be posted on the University's dedicated COVID-19 [website](#). In light of this rapidly changing situation, we encourage you to check that website frequently for the latest updates. If you have further questions or concerns, email them to covid-19-info@clarku.edu.

Thank you for your efforts to address these unexpected challenges and help keep yourself and others safe.

Sincerely,

David P. Angel
President

Appendix D

Dear Students, Faculty, and Staff,

Clark University has no known cases of COVID-19, but we want to share the announcements below with you.

Before we do so, it is important to re-iterate that based on all the information available to the University at this time, there remains a low risk of anyone contracting the virus while on campus. We are aware that these are anxious times and want to re-assure you that we are monitoring developments continuously, that we will be direct and forthright in all of our communications, and that we have robust plans in place should additional actions be required. Further, we would like to express our appreciation to all members of the Clark community for your support for steps we are taking to address the COVID-19 challenge.

As you know, the situation affecting other places in the U.S. and beyond continues changing rapidly. In light of these developments and the imperative of protecting Clark's students, faculty, and staff, our COVID-19 Response Team and senior cabinet have made the following decisions:

- The University is cancelling all admissions events involving large numbers of visitors from off-campus, including the open houses previously scheduled for April 4 and April 19. We are also suspending classroom visits and overnight stays by admissions guests. The Bassett Admissions Center remains open, and Admissions will continue to offer daily information sessions and tours.
- The University is cancelling all off-campus alumni events.
- The University is cancelling all events on campus that had been scheduled by outside groups of any size.
- The University is cancelling all international faculty/student programs this spring and summer, including, for example, the May Term in Luxembourg.

The University is informing individuals, offices, and organizations impacted by these decisions as rapidly as possible. These decisions will remain in effect until further notice.

Amid this fast-moving situation, the University is evaluating all dimensions of University operations on a constant basis, reviewing related decisions by other universities and colleges, and remaining fully abreast of the guidance that continues to emerge from local, state, and federal health officials. As we make any resulting decisions, we will inform you promptly through email updates. Please visit Clark's dedicated [website](#) regularly for the latest information. We have expanded and reorganized the FAQs there for easier reference.

We urge you to take care of yourself and to continue being especially kind to one another during this stressful and complicated time.

Sincerely,

David P. Angel