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## **"COLUMBIA PROTECTS RAPISTS": A PUBLIC RELATIONS APPROACH TO MANAGING COLLEGIATE SEXUAL ASSAULT SCANDALS**

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“COLUMBIA PROTECTS RAPISTS”: A PUBLIC RELATIONS APPROACH TO  
MANAGING COLLEGIATE SEXUAL ASSAULT SCANDALS

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Master of Arts

By  
Michelle J. Kolk  
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## **“Columbia Protects Rapists”:**

### **A Public Relations Approach to Managing Collegiate Sexual Assault Scandals**

As the higher education marketplace grows more saturated and competitive each year, colleges and universities must recognize the importance of nurturing positive reputations. As with any institution, a college or university’s image is essential to its public standing (Benoit, 1997). Strong images are only possible when public perceptions of an institution are positive, given that organizations and their stakeholders are interdependent (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). While actions are the foundation upon which stakeholders’ perceptions are formed, it tends to be the case that perceptions themselves are more important than reality (Benoit, 1997). The images that colleges put forth are therefore just as crucial as the actual educational experiences they offer. Given that positive reputations are connected to success in terms of financial performance, recruitment, influence and more (Coombs, 2006), it follows that an institution’s overall public standing is of paramount importance.

In the contemporary higher education sector, “managing the associations between the university and its various publics is increasingly understood as an urgent imperative” (Brass & Rowe, 2009, p. 53). Scholars (e.g., Brass & Rowe, 2009) have argued that a “condition of publicity” is now essential for maintaining an academic reputation, so colleges and universities are turning to public relations (PR) professionals to help them maintain a competitive edge. In these roles, PR professionals are responsible for enhancing the overall reputation of a given institution on a day-to-day basis and mediating disputes between the institution and its various stakeholders, should any conflicts arise (Bivins, 2009). To do this, PR professionals adhere to a relationship

management perspective, based on the understanding that “relationships are the core, defining aspect of public relations” (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, p. 324).

As thorough as an institution’s PR efforts may appear to be, no college or university can fully protect itself from potential crises or scandals. According to Coombs (2007), a crisis is a “sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and reputational threat” (p. 164). Communication is more important during crises than at any other time because the responses that follow the start of a crisis hold serious ramifications for reputation in the long term (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). As it stands, research on crisis communication in the higher education sector is limited. Scholars (e.g., Booker, Jr., 2014; Kelsay, 2007) have found that many institutions fail to write their crisis management plans until after a crisis has occurred.

The current retroactive model for crisis communication in higher education is concerning for several reasons. As Coombs and Holladay (2001) argued, crisis situations carry high stakes and a low margin for error. Collegiate scandals at prominent universities provide “fodder for the 24-hour news cycle and the infotainment circuit,” as audiences are quick to tune in to witness the drama unfold (Carlson, 2007, p. A17). In this way, “an aggressive media makes a private crisis a public circus,” such that scandals can serve to seriously or even irreparably harm an institution’s reputation, and thereby its ability to succeed in a competitive marketplace (Kelsay, 2007, p. 7).

In the event that a college is presented with a scandal, the institution must approach the scandal tactfully, ethically and effectively, lest it risk deterring applicants, alumni engagement, donors, future faculty hires or new institutional partnerships for

years to come. In an incredibly crowded industry, higher education institutions must learn how to appropriately address these issues rather than brushing them under the rug. Being able to navigate and ideally prevent scandals is essential to reputation management.

To date, the most widely publicized collegiate scandals have centered on sexual assault cases, particularly in connection to athletics programs. This comes as little surprise; on a ranking of thirteen man-made categories of crises affecting colleges, Booker, Jr. (2014) ranked “sexual assault” near the top of the list (p. 17). Examples of highly publicized sexual assault cases include the child sex abuse scandal that came to light in the football program at Pennsylvania State University or the prostitution scandal involving recruits for the men’s basketball team at the University of Louisville. Other collegiate scandals have garnered media attention as well, such as the issue of harassment of female cadets at the Air Force Academy or the race-based conflicts seen at the University of Missouri in 2015, yet athletics-based scandals tend to attract the most attention due to the fact that these programs are often financially crucial to an institution’s infrastructure.

Perhaps one of the most publicized, *non*-athletic scandals to take place was the issue of sexual assaults at the prestigious Columbia University in New York City. A number of sexual assault complaints were filed with the university in the 2014-2015 academic year, yet the bulk of the media attention that year centered around the senior project of student Emma Sulkowicz, who claimed she was raped by a fellow classmate and who conducted a visual arts project based on this issue and the unsatisfactory manner in which Columbia’s administration handled her case. As a result of Columbia’s reactions to the allegations against them, or lack of reactions, the university found itself in the

center of a heated debate over sexual assault policies on college campuses and “became a focus of the movement to change how universities address sexual assault” (Taylor, 2015, para. 3). The scandal at Columbia has served to feed the common understanding that campus sexual assault proceedings are unsound and cause women to feel unsafe on college campuses (Shulevitz, 2015).

While scholars have extensively studied how colleges and universities respond to scandals in certain areas of an institution, such as collegiate athletics, few critics have applied similar analyses to the handling of sexual assault crises more broadly. Analyses of this nature could serve to inform crisis management procedures and sexual assault policies in the higher education sector. The purpose of this essay is to explore how colleges and universities should respond to sexual assault scandals, such as that seen at Columbia University, from a PR perspective. Specifically, I apply crisis communication theories, expert opinions, and Bivins’ (2009) ethical decision-making checklist to assess what would have been the most ethical approach for Columbia to take in addressing this scandal, and how colleges in similar situations should react in the future.

In this essay, I first provide a general discussion of the importance of branding and reputation management in higher education, followed by a comprehensive overview of the state of affairs relating to sexual assault on college campuses in the United States. Specifically, I explain the details regarding what happened at Columbia University in the 2014-2015 academic year. This contextual framework complements a review of academic literature on the topic of crisis communication that incorporates consideration of the discipline’s best practices and advances a critique of Columbia’s PR response. Finally, I apply the steps of Bivins’ (2009) ethical decision-making checklist to

Columbia's situation and put forth three recommendations for both internal and external crisis management practices. Ideally this essay will allow for an overview of best practices that administrators can follow when addressing and preferably working against the culture of sexual assault on college campuses. Notably, I use the terms "college" and "university" interchangeably throughout this discussion.

### **Contextual Framework**

In the ever-changing landscape of higher education, it is vital to have an accurate understanding of the context surrounding certain events and responses. The following section provides an overview of the importance of branding for colleges and universities, the culture of sexual assault that exists on college campuses, current government regulations that shape responses to sexual assault cases, and various figures in mainstream popular culture who have influenced public perceptions on this topic.

### **Importance of Branding in Higher Education**

With more institutions than there is demand for them, colleges and universities are forced to compete for students, faculty and external resources (Szekeres, 2010). Traditionally, scholars have been interested in analyzing the publications that universities produce as tangible recruitment materials, such as guides and brochures. More recently, the literature has shifted to focus on topics such as branding efforts and relationship marketing, as it appears that this is where institutions' efforts now lie (Szekeres, 2010). This signifies a shift from the primary goal of merely making an institution visible to the public, to selling the institution as a product.

If an institution hopes to "sell" itself, a positive reputation is required. According to Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009), "A university's brand is a manifestation of the



institution's features that distinguish it from others, reflect its capacity to satisfy students' needs, engender trust in its ability to deliver a certain type and level of higher education, and help potential recruits to make wise enrollment decisions" (p. 85). Universities rely on support from external audiences to survive, so their brands help to mediate positive interactions (Harris, 2009).

Researchers seem to be in consensus that it is worthwhile to establish a unique department of marketing within higher education institutions to enhance branding efforts. As Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009) found, "Favorable opinions of a university's brand translate into very positive affective, reputational, and conative consequences, suggesting that resources allocated to brand building are worthwhile" (p. 97). Curtis, Abratt and Minor (2009) conducted a case study of branding at a private U.S. university in which the researchers interviewed top administrators and studied the university's documents and archives. They found that college officials are no longer concerned with their institution just being visually identifiable. Instead, it is now necessary to establish an internal department "tasked with the overall goal of managing the brand and enhancing the organization's reputation" (p. 410).

In conducting their work, marketing departments must consider many stakeholders who play vital roles in the grand scheme of higher education. As Coombs (2007) stated, stakeholders are "any group that can affect or be affected by the behavior of an organization" (p. 164). Stakeholders form their perceptions of different organizations on the basis of firsthand, secondhand and mediated information. As far as colleges and universities are concerned, "under every ivy leaf hides another audience" (Paine, 2011, p. 208). Colleges must cater messaging to faculty, staff, alumni, students,

parents, prospective students, parents of prospective students, donors, federal government entities, state government entities, local elected officials, local community members, local media outlets, national media outlets, trade media outlets and more. Each of these groups has different needs and interests, so, as Paine (2011) argued, colleges have “a lot of listening to do and a lot of possible issues to keep track of” (p. 208). The interests, concerns and goals of faculty differ greatly from those of parents of prospective students, for example, so being mindful of differing perspectives is essential to successful communicative efforts (Benoit, 1997).

### **Culture of Sexual Assault on College Campuses**

Offices tasked with branding efforts have their work cut out for them when sexual assault crises hit, in part because most people do not expect college campuses to be dangerous environments in the first place. According to neoinstitutional theory, “Organizations are expected to behave in certain ways” that align with “societal norms/expectations” (Coombs, 2007). In this line of thought, most people expect colleges to provide educational experiences and real-world training for their students and to care for the wellbeing of their student bodies. Sexual assaults prompt a sort of cognitive dissonance as they fly against expectations.

The culture of sexual assault on college campuses is unfortunately undeniable as decades of research show it is a serious problem (Richards & Kafonek, 2016). As defined by the Department of Education, sexual violence refers to “physical sexual acts perpetrated against a person’s will or where a person is incapable of giving consent” (Gonzalez & Feder, 2016, p. 17). In a country where over half of all rapes are sadly unreported, studies have shown that someone is raped every two minutes and the chance

of that victim being a female college student is four times greater than for any other group (Burnett et al., 2009). In fact, one in five female students is likely to be sexually assaulted by the end of her college career (Wallace, 2015). A recent survey by the Association of American Universities found that, among female college students, nearly a quarter of them (23%) had “experienced some form of unwanted sexual contact, ranging from kissing to touching to rape, carried out by force or threat of force, or when they were incapacitated because of alcohol and drugs” (Wallace, 2015, para. 2). This survey involved more than 150,000 students from some of the most prominent universities in the country, the majority of which to date have failed to tackle these issues head on. Notably, though prevalence rates for sexual assault rank highest among female students at 20-25%, these issues also impact male students, transgender students, and other groups.

Part of the prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses has been attributed to the existence of rape myths and certain social norms (Burnett et al., 2009). Students face ambiguity when it comes to defining concepts such as consent, thereby marginalizing meaningful discourse on the topic and further solidifying a culture that allows for rape. While college administrations have the power to “validate date rape experiences by preventative education and post-rape support,” Burnett et al. (2009) found that such validation does not openly exist, and students feel the need to “explain the experience away so as not to contradict the mainstream” (p. 478).

As for dealing with this reality, there seem to be more examples from college administrations on what *not* to do than on what *to* do (Sander, 2008). More often than not, college administrations come off as guarded to the point where students feel their concerns have been ignored or trivialized. As Hayes-Smith and Hayes-Smith (2009)

argued, “It is an institution’s responsibility to create an atmosphere that is conducive to living safely and developing an education for both women and men, yet universities disproportionately ignore and trivialize [sexual assault] issues despite a large body of research showing the implications of such neglect” (p. 121).

### **Government Regulations**

Over the past several decades the federal and state governments have addressed sexual assault by implementing legislation meant to provide students with appropriate resources (Hayes-Smith & Hayes-Smith, 2009). Currently, two federal laws enforced by the Department of Education address sexual violence on college campuses: (1) the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act of 1990, which was renamed the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act (Clery Act) and was amended to include the Campus Sexual Assault Victims’ Bill of Rights in 1992; and (2) Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. Under these laws, two categories of duties exist: preventative and responsive (Gonzalez & Feder, 2016). These laws were spawned by the revelation that “rape victims were being silenced to protect universities’ reputations, contributing to underreporting” (Hayes-Smith & Hayes-Smith, 2009, p. 121).

Both laws apply to schools that receive federal funding and mandate that schools investigate and address sexual violence allegations by their students (Richards & Kafonek, 2016). Under the Clery Act, colleges must track crimes on and around campus, report the data, and publish campus safety policies. Said policies must incorporate a sexual assault policy, which is to be included in an Annual Security Report (e.g., John Carroll University, 2015; Richards & Kafonek, 2016). Under Title IX, which is a civil

rights law, colleges must display gender equality in education, and sexual assault cases must be fully resolved within 60 days of the initial reporting (Kingkade, 2015).

Other government regulations or regulatory bodies include the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act's (VAWA) Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act (SaVE Act, VAMA of 2013), which expands on the Clery Act, and the White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault, which was created by the Obama administration in 2014. As recently as 2016, a significant number of states had proposed new legislation aimed at strengthening their colleges' policies regarding sexual violence (Richards & Kafonek, 2016).

While they were developed based on good intentions, government regulations can have the effect of complicating and perpetuating scenarios involving sexual assault rather than preventing them. Current governmental policies about how to handle sexual assault cases on campuses can be seen to work against higher education institutions. As Shulevitz (2015) explained, "The Department of Education has very forcefully told schools to handle sexual grievances themselves and given them very detailed instructions about how to do so," and how to do so quickly (para. 5). Title IX and Clery provisions are solely reactive, meaning compliance falls exclusively on colleges and universities unless noncompliance is suspected and an investigation is prompted (Richards & Kafonek, 2016). While the Department of Education's instructions are technically recommendations, "The Office of Civil Rights can put any school that fails to follow them on the list of colleges under investigation and even take away its federal funding" (Shulevitz, 2015, para. 6). Most colleges and universities to date have accepted these instructions willingly and have done little to work toward revision of them, likely because

they are shortsightedly more fearful of the removal of government funding than they are of the issue of sexual assault on campus and the accompanying loss of reputation itself. College admissions offices are also quite resistant to reporting negatively impactful figures regarding crime on campus so as not to deter prospective students.

A parallel between the greater campus and the athletics department exists in that, in both contexts, actions speak louder than words. In studying the consequences, or lack thereof, of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) athletic sanctions, Smith (2015) argued, "The Association's uneven enforcement of existing rules and the difficulty in getting members to agree on proscribed behaviors are underlying factors in the history of constant violations" (p. 98). This implies the importance of consistency and follow-through, as well as the overarching need for colleges and universities to apply similar, effective responses to sexual assault scandals in the future. Just as "deterrence does not work if sanctions are not effective in reducing some outcome" in the world of athletics (p. 98), colleges impacted by sexual assault cases need to work purposefully toward change if they actually hope to make a difference and deter future sexual assaults and the ensuing harm to their reputations.

### **Popular Culture**

Though rape on college campuses has likely been occurring indefinitely and government entities have put forth legislation to address it, the issue has only recently reached the national public stage. From the Obama administration's "It's On Us" campaign, to Joe Biden's public letter applauding a recent college rape survivor for her bravery in court, to Emma Watson and HeForShe's campaign against sexual assault at colleges (Vagianos, 2016), to celebrities like Channing Tatum and Amy Schumer

weighing in on unjust court proceedings, there is no ignoring this issue (Armus & Bryan, 2015). Popular culture outlets are beginning to trumpet the cause themselves, creating added pressure for college administrations to take action.

*The Hunting Ground* (2015) is a recent pointed attack on the issue from the film industry. Directed by Kirby Dick, produced by Amy Ziering and accompanied by the musical stylings of musician and sexual assault survivor Lady Gaga, *The Hunting Ground* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2015. It documents the stories of college students who have been raped on campus and who face retaliation as they fight for justice against unjust college administrations. The documentary, which received extensive press and is widely available to view on Netflix, argues that college campuses foster an environment of victim blaming (i.e., framing victims as responsible for the crimes that befall them) as administrators care more about protecting their institutions' brands than they do about protecting their students. Popular culture sources such as *The Hunting Ground* directly call into question the reputation and integrity of colleges and universities among the general public.

In a more comedic approach to the issue, CollegeHumor produced a video to shine light on the absurdity of college administrations' lack of action in combatting the systemic issue of sexual assault. Titled "What if bears killed one in five people?" the video features five male friends relaxing in a basement when one of them goes to grab a beer from upstairs. Upon opening the door, he is met by a large, angry bear, and rather than sharing in his concern, one of his friends reasons to just pretend it is not there. When pushed, he continues, "I don't think it's going anywhere but I don't know what to do about it, so I just ignore it," and explains that the bear will only kill one in five people,

but not necessarily one of them. His argument concludes with, “You guys know the old saying...bears will be bears” (CollegeHumor, 2015). His friends are enraged that he would blame the bear, stating that he needs to get rid of it or at least warn people of its existence. The correlations to the “ostrich effect” most college administrations fall into are clear, meaning the tendency is for administrators to hide their heads in the sand and attempt to cry foul when criticized. By way of presidential programs, documentaries and popular culture critiques, the overall tone in society has shifted from a sense of slut shaming (i.e., criticizing women for their sexual activity) on the topic to a critique of victim blaming, which has put colleges and universities in a heated situation.

### **Literature Review**

As the prior discussion illustrates, sexual assault on college campuses is an epidemic in this country and can seriously harm a college’s reputation, therefore warranting an investigation from a PR perspective. This section serves to review current scholarly research in the field of crisis communication, including a discussion of crisis communication generally, agenda setting and media framing, Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1997) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 1998).

### **Crisis Communication**

Crisis communication is a subcategory of public relations wherein practitioners work to respond to threats against an organization’s reputation. Scholars who study crisis communication tend to view the process as dialectic, meaning of or relating to an investigation of the truth. In this sense, crisis communication is intended to establish a common truth from reasoned arguments between the institution in question and the media or other outside parties (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). The underlying process is not



linear. Instead, it tends to ebb and flow. In other words, “image repair is not a simple, linear process, but dynamic and organic” (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 169). Given this, organizations facing crises cannot blindly rely on hunches, recommendations or blanket approaches when crafting their messaging (Coombs, 2006).

According to Benoit (1997), two components must be present for a crisis to exist: (1) “The accused is held responsible for an action,” meaning they are seen to have “performed, ordered, encouraged, facilitated, or permitted to occur” a certain act, and (2) “The act is considered offensive by a salient audience,” meaning an audience composed of stakeholders who “may sever ties to the organization and/or spread negative word of mouth about the organization” (p. 178). Assuming both components are present, crisis situations can be understood to fall on a continuum of control ranging from weak to strong (Coombs, 1998). In this model, audiences are known to judge organizations based on the level of control they had over preventing the crisis from occurring. How much possible control existed prior to the crisis will determine what crisis communication strategy an organization will take.

As Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) explained, multiple factors influence how able an organization is to rescue its image once a crisis hits. These factors include outside perceptions of crisis responsibility, the type of crisis at hand, and the existing organizational reputation, which is based on performance history. At a more micro level, the organizational reputation is dependent on both relationship history and crisis history (Coombs & Holladay, 2001).

When responding to a crisis, the first concern an organization should have is public safety, not reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Crises cause stress and an

accompanying need for information, thereby requiring an organization to provide “instructing information.” According to Coombs and Holladay (2001), instructing information is “the information stakeholders need including precautionary actions they need to take (e.g., boil water or stay indoors) and a description of what happened in the crisis” (pp. 321-322). Three types of instructing information exist: (1) crisis basics, (2) protection (meaning what stakeholders need to do to protect themselves from harm), and (3) correction, or “what the organization is doing to correct the problem/prevent a repeat of the crisis” (Coombs, 2006, p. 246). It is often advisable to express concern for victims at the third level, which, notably, is not the same as admitting guilt.

Throughout these stages, “frames” heavily influence crisis communication by impacting the way the crisis information is presented, both by the organization in question and by the media. According to Coombs (2007), frames shape the way people “define problems, causes of problems, attributions of responsibility and solutions to problems” (p. 167). The frames that the news media apply are most often the frames that stakeholders adopt given the media’s implied third party objectivity to an issue.

In regard to sexual assault cases, the public in the United States is primed for, or sensitive to, these stories due to a phenomenon known as agenda setting. As Croteau, Hoynes, and Milan (2012) stated, agenda setting is the “ability to direct people’s attention toward certain issues” (p. 232). In this sense, the media are able to select and shape the relative importance of different issues into what becomes the news. Agenda setting helps explain how the media select and display news stories, and how this in turn relates to audience perceptions. News items already on the agenda will influence which other stories are chosen, so if multiple stories about rapes on college campuses have received

attention, for example, it is likely that the news stations will pursue further investigative reports in that vein.

Although the media cannot tell audiences what to think or believe, they are able to influence what audiences are concerned about by exposing them to certain issues and topics (Jensen, 2012). Previous research has found that increased media attention relating to a certain issue, such as sexual assault on college campuses, will considerably increase overall levels of public concern regarding that topic (Lewis & Speers, 2003).

Additionally, studies have shown that media outlets are one of the primary sources from which people get their information, and that whatever information is available shapes their opinions (Lewis & Speers, 2003).

Media's opinion-shaping function is of particular significance to agenda setting as a theoretical lens. As Lewis and Speers (2003) suggested in their study, audiences typically forget the details of mediated content and only recall the major themes. The authors conducted surveys with viewers of news stations and found that viewers dismissed most of the details of a given story but were able to remember key terms or themes from the coverage (Lewis & Speers, 2003). With regard to sexual assault in the higher education sector, audiences tend to take away the notion that college administrations are letting sexual assault run rampant on college campuses. What we tend to see is "a distinctive pattern of learning, whereby people absorb a dominant media framework, and then use it to make suppositions" (Lewis & Speers, 2003, p. 915). Essentially, audiences focus on media content's surface value and then use this basic framework to draw conclusions.

Media framing as a concept aims to expose how different news outlets frame the news stories that make it through the agenda setting process. Behind all media stories rests a selection process that requires highlighting certain aspects of reality over others. For instance, a journalist reporting on a rape case could choose to interview the victim, report on what she was wearing, delve in to the issue of underage alcohol consumption, critique the college administration for failing to take action, or countless other approaches. These choices result in the promotion of certain interpretations or recommendations relating to the topic at hand. By framing the news from particular angles, the media actively influence social constructions regarding various topics (Putnam, 2007).

Framing works to enact a number of audience effects. To begin with, framing has a strong influence on how viewers perceive risk, what their opinions are on political institutions, and how they attribute responsibility (Putnam, 2007). Prospective students viewing a news report on a rape case at their top choice college, for instance, may decide to reevaluate where they want to attend. Different frames will lead audiences to assume diverse judgments toward a given topic and to embrace ideological viewpoints to varying degrees, though not all frames influence viewers in the same way. Additionally, frames can shape people's future intentions and behaviors (Lee, 2011). According to Lee (2011), message tactics can significantly sway how individuals seek out and respond to information even after taking individual differences into account.

The concepts of agenda setting and media framing are particularly relevant to crisis communication for obvious reasons. In this field, frames can equate to "crisis types," meaning the frame through which people interpret the crisis scenario. As Coombs

(2007) explained, “A crisis manager tries to establish or shape the crisis frame by emphasizing certain cues” (p. 167). Whatever crisis type is attributed to a crisis determines how stakeholders “evaluate the attributions of personal control, or the organization’s ability to control the event, and crisis responsibility, or how much the organization is to blame for the event” (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 167). Examples of crisis types include natural disasters, criminal actions and human errors. In the event that competing crisis frames are presented, stakeholders tend to select the frame they find the most credible (Coombs, 2007).

### **Image Repair Theory**

One popular framework for studying crisis communication is Image Repair Theory (IRT). Developed by Benoit (1997), IRT has roots in the rhetorical concept of apologia, which views image as an asset and communication as a tool for self-defense. Image can be understood as the “perceptions of a communicative entity shared by an audience” which are shaped by the entity’s words and deeds (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009).

IRT offers five broad categories of repair strategies that institutions can implement when their images are threatened: (1) denial, (2) evasion of responsibility, (3) reducing offensiveness, (4) corrective action, and (5) mortification (Benoit & Pang, 2008). The following chart used by Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009, p. 168) outlines the subcategories within each of these strategies, as well as the key characteristics that accompany each option:

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Key Characteristic</i>
<b>Denial</b>	
Simple denial	Did not perform act
Shift the blame	Act performed by another
<b>Evasion of responsibility</b>	
Provocation	Responded to act of another
Defeasibility	Lack of information or ability
Accident	Act was a mishap
Good intentions	Meant well in act
<b>Reducing offensiveness of event</b>	
Bolstering	Stress good traits
Minimization	Act not serious
Differentiation	Act less offensive
Transcendence	More important considerations
Attack accuser	Reduce credibility of accuser
Compensation	Reimburse victim
<b>Corrective action</b>	Plan to solve or prevent problem
<b>Mortification</b>	Apologize for act

FIGURE 1 Image Restoration Strategies. Adapted from Benoit and Pang (2008, p. 248)

Organizations that choose to respond by evasion of responsibility may claim that they were provoked or lacked adequate information or ability to respond appropriately (Benoit, 1997). While college administrations have responded this way in the past, more often than not they default to the third strategy of reducing offensiveness. Within this strategy, bolstering allows for organizations to stress their good traits and draw upon existing goodwill. As a sort of halo effect, bolstering carries deflective power and may lead stakeholders to “ignore negative implications from the crisis or unfounded speculations” and even “be more receptive to the organization’s interpretation of the crisis” (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, p. 324).

Perhaps the most advisable strategy for colleges to take within the IRT framework is corrective action, whereby they offer a plan to correct or prevent a problem. As Benoit (1997) explained, corrective action “promises to correct the problem” and “can take the

form of restoring the state of affairs existing before the offensive action, and/or promising to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act” (p. 181).

Colleges also often benefit from IRT’s fifth strategy category, which is mortification. Mortification can be understood as the acceptance of guilt (Hart & Daughton, 2004). In this approach, an organization takes full responsibility and apologizes for an action (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009). While mortification may open organizations to legal liability, depending on the severity of the crisis an apology might actually lessen litigation’s accompanying financial damages (Coombs, 2006).

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

A second common theoretical framework in the field of crisis communication is Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Originally proposed by Timothy Coombs in 1995, SCCT is a theory-based and empirically tested approach that applies the concepts of agenda setting and framing to crisis communication. SCCT predicts how stakeholders will react to certain depictions of crises and proposes crisis response strategies to match different situations.

In this approach, Coombs (1998) argued that the situation should influence how an organization responds. In other words, “SCCT is premised on matching the crisis response to the level of crisis responsibility attributed to a crisis” (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 166). Situations differ in regard to how much perceived control an organization had over a crisis and what type of performance history existed prior to the crisis surfacing. Correspondingly, response strategies range from denying any responsibility to fully admitting fault based on how severe the situation is (Coombs, 2006). The severity of a situation equates to the “amount of financial, physical, environmental or emotional

harm a crisis can inflict” (Coombs, 2006, p. 243). In higher education, financial concerns translate to loss in donors, federal financial aid, incoming tuition dollars due to decreased enrollment, and so on.

According to Coombs (2006), three clusters of crisis frames exist: (1) victim, (2) accidental, and (3) preventable. Crises in the preventable cluster involve “intentionally placing stakeholders at risk, knowingly violating laws or regulations, or not doing enough to prevent an accident or a defective product from reaching the market” (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 180). The following chart by Coombs (2006, p. 244) illustrates each of the crisis clusters:

TABLE 1. Crisis Clusters

<p><i>Victim Cluster:</i> In these crisis types the organization is also a victim of the crisis.</p> <p><i>Natural disaster:</i> Acts of nature that damage an organization such as an earthquake.</p> <p><i>Rumors:</i> False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated.</p> <p><i>Workplace violence:</i> Current or former employee attacks current employees on-site.</p> <p><i>Product tampering/Malevolence:</i> External agent causes damage to an organization.</p>
<p><i>Accidental Cluster:</i> In these crisis types the organizational actions leading to the crisis were unintentional.</p> <p><i>Challenges:</i> Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.</p> <p><i>Megadamage:</i> A technical accident where the focus is on the environmental damage from the accident.</p> <p><i>Technical breakdown accidents:</i> A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident.</p> <p><i>Technical breakdown recalls:</i> A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.</p>
<p><i>Preventable Cluster:</i> In these crisis types the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions, or violated a law/regulation.</p> <p><i>Human breakdown accidents:</i> Human error causes an industrial accident.</p> <p><i>Human breakdown recalls:</i> Human error causes a product to be recalled.</p> <p><i>Organizational misdeed with no injuries:</i> Stakeholders are deceived without injury.</p> <p><i>Organizational misdeed management misconduct:</i> Laws or regulations are violated by management.</p> <p><i>Organizational misdeed with injuries:</i> Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.</p>

To match these clusters, SCCT presents three primary crisis response strategies: (1) deny, (2) diminish, and (3) deal. Whether an organization decides to deny, diminish or



deal with a crisis varies depending on which “cluster” the crisis falls into. The following chart by Coombs (2006, p. 248) illustrates these options:

TABLE 2. Crisis Response Strategies by Response Option

**Deny Response Option**

*Attack the accuser:* Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.

- The organization threatened to sue the people who claim a crisis occurred.

*Denial:* Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.

- The organization said that no crisis event occurred.

*Scapegoat:* Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.

- The organization blamed the supplier for the crisis.

**Diminish Response Option**

*Excuse:* Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.

- The organization said it did not intend for the crisis to occur and that accidents happen as part of the operation of any organization.

*Justification:* Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

- The organization said the damage and injuries from the crisis were very minor.

**Deal Response Option**

*Ingratiation:* Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization.

- The organization thanked stakeholders for their help and reminded stakeholders of the organization's past effort to help the community and to improve the environment.

*Concern:* Crisis manager expresses concern for the victims.

- The organization expressed concern for the victims.

*Compassion:* Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.

- The organization offered money and products as compensation.

*Regret:* Crisis manager indicates the organization feels bad about the crisis.

- The organization said it felt bad that the crisis incident occurred.

*Apology:* Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

- The organization publicly accepted full responsibility for the crisis and asked stakeholders to forgive the mistake.

According to SCCT, the greater the perceived responsibility, the more accommodative the response strategy should be. When an organization or industry's performance history includes a record of past crises or questionable actions, stakeholders derive that an ongoing problem exists. This “velcro effect” shades their interpretations of current situations (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, p. 321). This point is salient in a higher

education sector where sexual assault is heavily documented and reported about on campuses across the country.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Finally, discussion of crisis communication requires a consideration of ethics. In this field, concern for people should precede concern for reputation. As Coombs (2007) argued, “Ethics recommend that the physical and psychological needs of the stakeholders be the top priority in a crisis” (p. 173). Any crisis response strategy must put the needs and safety of an organization’s stakeholders above the concern for reputation. Bivins (2009) put forth an ethical decision-making checklist that can help to account for these considerations. The checklist is as follows:

- 1) “What is the ethical issue/problem?”
- 2) “What immediate facts have the most bearing on the ethical decision you must render in this case?”
- 3) “Who are the claimants in this issue and in what way are you obligated to each of them?”
- 4) “List at least 3 alternative courses of action. For each alternative, ask the following questions: What are the best- and worst-case scenarios if you choose this alternative? Will anyone be harmed if this alternative is chosen, and how will they be harmed? Would honoring any ideal/value (personal, professional, religious, or other) invalidate the chosen alternative or call it into question? Are there any rules or principles (legal, professional, organizational, or other) that automatically invalidate this alternative?”

- 5) “Consider ethical guidelines and ask yourself whether they either support or reject any of your alternatives.”
- 6) “Determine a course of action based on your analysis.”
- 7) “Defend your decision in the form of a letter addressed to your most adamant detractor” (pp. 100-106).

### **Columbia University: A Case Study**

With the preceding literature review in mind, I now turn to a discussion of the case study at hand. Emma Sulkowicz, a visual arts student at Columbia University, reported that she was raped on the first day of classes during her sophomore year in 2012. She claims the assault took place on her dorm room bed and was committed by Paul Nungesser, a fellow student with whom she had previously engaged in consensual sex. Several weeks later, Sulkowicz filed a complaint with the university that led to a hearing before a panel; the panel found Nungesser not responsible, and this decision was upheld upon appeal (Smith, 2014). By the summer before her senior year, Sulkowicz had grown enraged by what she called “a flawed university disciplinary proceeding” and chose to conduct a performance piece as her senior art thesis. The project, which was sanctioned by the university and advised by a faculty mentor, was titled “Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)” (Vilensky, 2015). It involved Sulkowicz carrying a standard issue dorm mattress with her everywhere she went on campus, with the intention to “call attention to her plight and the plight of other women who feel university officials have failed to deter or adequately punish such assaults” (Smith, 2014, para. 2). Sulkowicz described the premise of her project to the university’s paper, the *Columbia Spectator*, stating: “I was raped in my own dorm bed, and since then, it’s become fraught, and I feel

like I've carried the weight with me everywhere since" (qtd. in Vilensky, 2015, para. 16). She vowed to continue carrying the mattress with her until the university took action to remove her rapist from campus, whether through expulsion or graduation.

Sulkowicz's project garnered widespread attention, as the weight she was carrying was far more symbolic than literal. Her message resonated with victims of sexual assault and with activist groups across the country, demonstrating the pervasive sense of discontent that exists regarding college administrations' handlings of sexual assault complaints nationwide. In her commencement speech to Barnard College, Samantha Power, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, praised Sulkowicz's efforts, stating, "We have too often seen colleges and universities falling short of adequately investigating and disciplining perpetrators, and of protecting victims" (qtd. in Vilensky, 2015, para. 18). Sulkowicz was even invited to attend the President's State of the Union address in 2014 with Senator Kirsten E. Gillibrand, Democrat of New York, who was pushing a bill that would "require every college to survey its students about their experiences with sexual violence, create a uniform disciplinary process for accusations of assault, and give law enforcement agencies a greater role" (Taylor, 2015, para. 6). As Gillibrand's invitation to the Columbia senior suggested, "Sulkowicz herself has become the face of a national movement to raise awareness about sexual assault" (para. 5).

"Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)" came to its end upon Sulkowicz's graduation in May 2015 when she carried the mattress across the stage with her as she received her diploma. This final action was particularly impactful because the administration had sent an email to all students the day prior to the ceremony, stating, "Graduates should not bring into the ceremonial area large objects which could interfere

with the proceedings or create discomfort to others in close, crowded spaces shared by thousands of people” (qtd. in Maycan, 2015, para. 3). The email did not specify the reason for the policy change, but the policy had not been in place in previous years, leading the student body to draw a clear connection to Sulkowicz’s mattress. Notably, according to multiple news outlets, university spokespersons declined to comment when questioned about the email.

At the ceremony itself, Sulkowicz claims she was asked several times not to bring the mattress on stage, and when she ultimately did, Columbia University President Lee Bollinger turned away when Sulkowicz approached to receive her diploma and failed to shake her hand, as he had done with all the other graduates (Taylor, 2015). Victoria Benitez, a spokesperson for Columbia, later claimed the mattress had been in the way and no snub was intended. In addition to Sulkowicz’s actions, the ceremony as a whole carried anti-administration messages, including one by the keynote speaker, Mayor Eric Garcetti of Los Angeles, who alluded approvingly to Sulkowicz’s protest in his speech (Taylor, 2015). Many fellow graduates wore red tape on their mortarboards to signify support of Sulkowicz via the student anti-sexual-assault activist group No Red Tape.

Apart from “Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight),” other students also took action against Columbia University in the 2014-2015 academic year regarding sexual assault complaints. Most notably, 20 male and female students filed a joint Title IX and Title II complaint with the federal government’s Department of Education against Columbia University. The complaint charged that Columbia “mishandled their individual gender-based misconduct or sexual assault cases” (Smith, 2014, para. 12). This complaint came after an initial federal complaint filed in April 2014 against Columbia for violations

of Title IX, Title II and The Clery Act, which, as mentioned previously, requires colleges and universities that receive federal funding to share information about crime on their campuses as well as information about how they are working to improve campus safety (Smith, 2014). On top of all of these complaints, Paul Nungesser, the student accused of raping Sulkowicz, also filed a suit in Manhattan federal court against Columbia, the university's president, and the professor who approved Sulkowicz's thesis, asserting that he was the victim of "a harassment campaign" following Sulkowicz's public allegations (Taylor, 2015, para. 8). A judge recently dismissed this suit on the grounds that it would set a dangerous precedent for Title IX rape cases (Jackson, 2016).

To draw even further attention to all of these complaints and the clear cultural issues that exist on campus, the student group No Red Tape took up protests against Columbia's sexual assault policy in an effort to "raise awareness among incoming freshman about the issue of sexual assault on college campuses" (Taylor, 2015, para. 18). The largest of these protests took place during a prospective student visit day when the group projected messages onto the side of Low Library on campus and held banners reading "Rape Happens Here," "Columbia Protects Rapists," "President Bollinger: Carry That Weight," "We Deserve a Safe Campus," "Do you want a rapist as your RA?" and "Columbia has a rape problem" (see Appendix A for news images of these protests). The activists chose a campus visit day for the protest in an effort to provoke the administration to react to their demands, yet the university declined to comment when asked about the incident (Armus & Bryan, 2015).

Throughout the academic year, the administration's response to these various issues was fragmented at best, never truly addressing the problems at hand. President

Bollinger (2014) attempted to acknowledge the situation directly in an op-ed piece, stating “the national attention to issues of sexual assault and other gender-based misconduct is both welcome and long overdue” (para. 4), yet the rest of his article deferred to defeasibility messaging and a shifting of blame, sending a similar message as the other actions taken by his administration that they were not at fault.

### **Case Study Critique**

The recent sexual assault scandals at prominent universities such as Columbia University hint toward a larger issue: colleges and universities are not well prepared to handle reputational scandals and crises. Rather, they are ill prepared (Carlson, 2007). To illustrate this point, Mitroff, Diamond and Alpaslan (2006) surveyed 350 major U.S. colleges and universities and found they were only prepared for those crises they had already experienced. Additionally, the institutions were found to be least prepared for scandals in “softer areas such as reputation and ethics” (p. 65). Though this study was conducted in 2006, little appears to have changed since then. What has changed is the general public’s understanding of sex-related offenses. While sexual assault complaints were once a subject of shame, activists such as Sulkowicz have given survivors a platform from which they can call for justice.

The recent sexual assault scandals at Columbia University were never well addressed. It appears as though Columbia did not have a pre-established or trained crisis management team in place, as the university seemed to ignore the situation at first and never issued press releases or held any press conferences on the topic. The university’s failure to accept responsibility or address the scandal head on resulted in an inconsistent and protest-provoking stance.

Apart from this ill-focused response, some members of the administration *did* vocalize and appear to work toward efforts to address the situation, including Suzanna B. Goldberg, special adviser to President Bollinger on sexual assault prevention and response and director of Columbia Law School's Center for Gender and Sexuality Law. A month after Sulkowicz's project began, Goldberg stated, "As the university has made clear in many different ways during the past month, major steps have been taken to enhance the gender-based misconduct policy and resources available to all Columbia University students," (qtd. in Smith, 2014, para. 13). The "many different ways" to which Goldberg referred were never detailed, however, leaving people outside of the university to wonder what steps had actually been taken.

By February of 2015, Goldberg announced the implementation of a new sexual respect education program requiring all Columbia students to complete one of five prevention-programming options, stating, "The essence of this initiative is to reinforce that community citizenship is a critical part of being a Columbia student, and that sexual respect is integral to what it means to be a member of this community" (qtd. in Armus, 2015, para. 3). On a campus where the student body clearly did not believe the validity of that stance, Goldberg's efforts appeared to be aimed more at placating the situation than at making meaningful change. As noted by Columbia public health professor Leslie Kantor, who also serves as Planned Parenthood's vice president of education, the overall purpose for the program was on point, but some of its options were not engaging enough, especially given that sexual respect education needs to be an ongoing process, not just a one-time requirement (Armus, 2015). Altogether Goldberg's actions were a step in the right direction, they were overpowered by the lack of support on the part of President



Bollinger, who failed to shake Sulkowicz's hand at graduation and barely made any personalized efforts to reach out to any of Columbia's stakeholders.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In light of the events that took place at Columbia University, an application of Bivins' (2009) ethical decision-making checklist may prove useful as a first step in determining what crisis communication approach Columbia should have taken in addressing this scandal and how other colleges and universities should react to similar scandals in the future.

The first item on the checklist calls for clarification of the ethical issue or problem at hand. As the preceding sections have illustrated, the overarching ethical issue facing Columbia was the fact that its student body felt there was an atmosphere of danger regarding sexual assault on campus and that the university's sexual assault policies were flawed. With this understanding, the second item on the checklist calls for PR professionals to assess what immediate facts hold the most bearing on the ethical decision they must render. Of the facts that have been discussed, the ones that would hold the most bearing were that a student was conducting a very public protest of the university's handling of sexual assault cases, student activist groups were visibly protesting the university's lack of action, several law suits had been filed against Columbia for its improper handling of sexual assault cases, the university was receiving extensive negative media attention, and, perhaps most importantly, the university was in a position to make a real difference on its own campus and beyond.

Given these facts, Bivins (2009) next calls for consideration of who the claimants are in the issue at hand and how the institution is obligated to each of them. In this

scenario, claimants would include students, parents, school officials, faculty and staff members, the media, the surrounding community members and other related groups. Of course, Columbia would be most obligated to its students, and by extension to their parents, who expect the university to provide a safe living environment for their children. The university is also obligated to the staff and faculty whose lives and careers would be affected if Columbia's reputation was harmed and who care about the well being of their students, and also to college-aged students across the nation who have been impacted by sexual assault.

Fourth, the ethical decision-making checklist asks PR professionals to list three alternative courses of action, purposefully choosing an odd number so as to avoid a stalemate between two extremes. As Bivins (2009) stated, "It is vital to recognize what options will harm which claimants" (p. 103). The first possible course of action Columbia could have taken, which is closest to what resulted, would be to do nothing. This action poorly addresses students' rape claims and serves to perpetuate a system of victim blaming and oppression, clearly harming individuals who are already in a vulnerable position. Second, Columbia could have taken extreme action, fully backing Sulkowicz's claims and revising the university's sexual assault policies accordingly. This action could carry harm, however, by causing increased harassment of the accused student, who may be innocent after all. The third and most useful option would be to turn the scandal into a platform for meaningful change, not speaking directly to any one sexual assault claim but addressing the issue of sexual assault on campus at a more macro level while also taking meaningful steps to rework the overall campus environment.

Next on the checklist, Bivins (2009) calls for PR professionals to consider various ethical guidelines as established by different philosophers over the years to assess whether they support or reject any of the alternatives listed in step four. For instance, one might question, “Is the good brought about by your action outweighed by the potential harm that might be done to anyone?” (p. 104). Applying this question to the second alternative listed above would draw attention to the fact that some students accused of sexual assault may in fact be innocent, and thus could be harmed by the university aligning itself with the students issuing the complaints. Other possible ethical questions to ask might be, “To what degree is your choice based on your organization’s best interests?” and “Is the intent of this action free from vested interest or ulterior motive?” As mentioned previously, it is important for a university to fully accept the blame for a crisis without concerning themselves with how they will look in the short-term; an honest approach to crisis management carries more long-term benefits. Finally, one might ask, “Which of the alternatives will generate the greatest benefit (or the least amount of harm) for the greatest number of people?” (Bivins, 2009, p. 104). From this utilitarian perspective, revising the sexual assault policies on campus at a macro level would both benefit the present stakeholders in the issue and also help to prevent against sexual assault on campus in the future, perhaps even prompting change in these policies at other colleges and universities across the country.

Sixth on the checklist, Bivins (2009) calls for PR professionals to determine a course of action based on the preceding analysis that they will be able to defend if needed. In the context of Columbia University’s situation, I suggest, as Shulevitz (2015) argued, that colleges such as Columbia should demand that the government rethink its

guidelines on this issue and that the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights "clarify its notion of sexual misconduct, now left to each school to define" (para. 10). Sexual assaults on college campuses will not be deterred if each incident is addressed on a case-by-case basis. Rather, meaningful change must be made by approaching the issue at its core, in this case meaning the federal regulatory level, which can then trickle down into revised policies nationwide. In addition to this macro approach, colleges in the position of Columbia University should work toward convincing the campus community that they are truly committed to a new purpose of "never again" (Zimmerman, 2012). There must be open communication from the administration as a united front, working to address the issues not just through one set of sexual respect workshops but through continued efforts such as ongoing workshops and the implementation of "safe spaces" on campus.

In regard to what factors might prevent the issue from being effectively addressed, it could unfold that activist groups do not think the university has done enough, or that the government is entirely uncooperative in addressing Columbia's demands. If enough prominent colleges and universities like Columbia University challenge the government's current sexual assault policies, however, change will have to come.

### **Recommendations**

In light of the application of Bivins' (2009) ethical decision-making checklist to the sexual assault cases at Columbia University, I now propose three overarching recommendations for crisis communication in both internal and external environments at the collegiate level. These recommendations are based primarily on the ideas put forth in

Image Repair Theory (IRT) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Specifically, I argue that, internally, college administrations should (1) be prepared, (2) be flexible, and (3) listen. Externally, I argue that administrators should (1) be timely, (2) tell the truth, and (3) make information easily accessible. As Coombs (2007) argued, “Situational factors can amplify the reputational threat of a crisis and alter the nature of the crisis” (p. 169). In Columbia’s case, multiple ongoing lawsuits, a widely publicized student art project about administrative faults, and intense student activism attacking the culture of sexual assault on campus combined to generate a particularly hostile environment, which can serve as an extreme example for other colleges to study across the country as they face these issues themselves.

### **Three Crisis Communication Essentials Internally**

Internally, organizations should adhere to the following best practices within the field of crisis communication in order to achieve successful results.

**(1) Be prepared.** As Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) explained, most current research on the subject of crisis communication views crises as a natural part of any organization, meaning they are somewhat inevitable. Preparation is therefore key to success and, as Columbia’s administration illustrated, not being immediately ready to respond to an attack against the institution’s reputation can have harmful consequences. In these contexts, “leaders at all levels and people in the public eye should be well-versed in crisis communication and crisis management skills” (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009, p. 170). A lack of planning can cause miscommunication (Sander, 2008) and ultimately can undermine any worthwhile efforts, as was seen with the negative response garnered by

the sexual respect education program that Suzanna B. Goldberg introduced at Columbia, which did in fact have good intentions.

As discussed previously, SCCT holds that the situation in which a crisis unfolds should determine an organization's response to that crisis (Coombs, 2006). When anticipating potential crises, it is crucial to know whether there have been similar crises in the past, whether stakeholders are aware that those crises occurred, and if the media reinforced memory of those crises by way of extensive coverage (Coombs, 1998). In the higher education sector wherein Columbia operates, the university should have known that sexual assault on college campuses has been framed as a contentious issue in the past. The existing situation on this topic made the university's lack of unity on the subject particularly apparent.

In addressing sexual assault scandals like those seen at Columbia, scholars have stressed that one of the essential components of a crisis management program is having a pre-established, trained, multidisciplinary crisis management team in place at all times. As Mitroff, Diamond and Alpaslan (2006) argued, most colleges fall far short when it comes to crisis management preparation, particularly in regard to what the authors referred to as "ticking time bombs" such as rape on campus. What the colleges that the scholars surveyed considered to be crisis management teams were really emergency response teams, as they did not involve "thinking about and planning for a wide range of crises and especially for their interactions" (p. 62). The situation that unfolded at Columbia illustrated a clear example of a crisis with overlapping interactions at a university that did not have a trained, unified crisis management team in place. Crisis management teams allow an institution to recover much faster and at less cost than

“winging it,” so to speak, so PR experts advise teams to train together in order to “function as cohesive units in the heat of an actual disaster” (Mitroff, Diamond & Alpaslan, 2006, p. 64). Further, crisis management teams are advised to engage with all parts of the system, meaning the university, so that the approach resonates genuinely from all angles.

To practice teamwork and preparedness, tabletop exercises are a worthwhile endeavor. A tabletop exercise is a meeting in which members of the crisis response team consider different emergency situations and practice their responses in a low-stress environment (Papandrea, 2016). By embracing complexity and thinking ahead, teams tend to be more adaptable in the heat of the moment.

In regard to who should compose crisis management teams, PR experts advise that the team members should come from multiple disciplines to allow for a variety of perspectives. Typically crisis leadership falls to vice presidents, deans, and directors, yet including staff from residence life, academic affairs, admissions, campus police, public relations and other offices can also be valuable to allow for a variety of perspectives and considerations (Leeper & Leeper, 2006). That said, teams should be kept relatively small to prevent the phenomenon of having “too many cooks in the kitchen.” As John Hachtel, associate vice president for university marketing and communications at Case Western Reserve University, advised, “Keep the crisis-response team small—limited to key players and key administrators—to cut down on the effort needed to coordinate a response” (Carlson, 2007, p. A17).

The small number of people who are included on the crisis management team should also be what Zimmerman (2012) calls “people of character” (p. 52). As

Zimmerman (2012) stated, “The people who assume leadership roles... must raise people’s standards and transform people’s expectations of themselves. They must make it absolutely impossible to even consider looking away when you know that something wrong is happening in the organization” (p. 52).

When actually faced with a scandal or crisis, the crisis management team should make a clear, direct plan early on and then should stick to it, rather than allowing media speculation to undermine their response. In making the plan, the team must consider how various stakeholders will respond to their actions, both positively and negatively (Mitroff, Diamond & Alpaslan, 2006), and should be careful that the messages they put forth tell the truth.

Having crisis portfolios for each of Coombs’ crisis clusters within SCCT is also recommended. PR professionals do not have time to develop a specific plan for the subvariations of each cluster, so having predetermined portfolios is a crucial piece of being prepared. Lauer and Barnes (1998) outlined six steps that should be followed when establishing a crisis communication plan: (1) “Identify the person responsible for managing the situation, usually the chief communication officer, with the close involvement of the president”; (2) “Outline procedures for gathering the facts”; (3) “Define public versus private information; State the university’s views on privacy, open records and confidentiality”; (4) “Decide how spokespersons will be identified. Who will be the chief spokesperson?”; (5) “Determine how the university will handle overly-aggressive reporters”; and (6) “Decide what the organization will say when it cannot—or does not want to—say anything” (p. 253). Considerations such as these will go far to



ensure that an organization is able to effectively respond in a crisis situation at a moment's notice.

**(2) Be flexible.** While having a plan of action prepared ahead of time is important, PR practitioners must also be willing to respond flexibly. Each situation must be considered on a case-by-case basis, and the differences in each must be accounted for. As Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) explained, the complicated nature that accompanies crises makes it “very difficult to predict what strategies will be most effective at any given time” (p. 181). Gilpin and Murphy (2006) suggest a naturalistic approach, whereby organizations learn throughout the process of the crisis rather than trying to determine every step beforehand. In the case study about Columbia, the administration could have chosen to display flexibility by allowing Sulkowicz to cross the stage with her mattress without trying to stop her. Instead, they stuck to their initial plan of fighting her from doing so when being flexible about it may have attracted less additional criticism on graduation day.

Flexibility in crisis communication can take the form of creating different variations of one core message to cater to different stakeholder groups. For instance, while sexual assault crises can make current students uneasy, they can deter prospective students from applying altogether. Messages to both groups ought to address the issue at hand, though while the current student population might want information on a granular level, prospective students would be more concerned with assurances that the institution itself is safe (Kelsay, 2007).

**(3) Listen.** A final essential recommendation for internal considerations in regard to crisis situations is to listen attentively over the crisis's lifespan. Given that PR is based

on relationship maintenance, it is essential to not operate as a closed system. The value of two-way communication in crisis scenarios cannot be understated. As Coombs (2007) explained, reputation can be defined as “an aggregate evaluation stakeholders make about how well an organization is meeting stakeholder expectations based on its past behaviors” (p. 164). When organizations fail to “hear” their stakeholders and readjust their approaches, that behavior factors into the public’s assessments and negatively impacts the corresponding reputations.

At Columbia, a failure to listen manifested when the administration did not respond to student activists and protests on campus. As Leeper and Leeper (2006) argued, “Failure to communicate, meaning both speaking and listening, with a group of individuals who will be directly and negatively impacted by decisions, will encourage the development of an activist public” (p. 136). Columbia’s situation is a clear example of this phenomenon. Ethically, Columbia’s administration should care about the students above all else, but they have done little to express this concern (Coombs, 2007).

### **Three Crisis Communication Essentials Externally**

In addition to considerations within an organization and between its internal constituents, several important factors should be considered in the external context.

**(1) Be timely.** While internal considerations in crisis communication are essential to success, the outside public’s perceptions can hold even more weight. The primary recommendation in crisis situations is for communication to be quick and timely (Kelsay, 2007). In handling scandals and crises such as those surrounding sexual assaults on college campuses, PR experts first advise institutions to never revert to an ostrich effect by ignoring the issue. As Fortunato (2008) stated, “A response is necessary because some

responsibility for the crisis occurring is being attributed to the organization” (p. 168). Not taking any action implies guilt or indifference on the part of the college itself, which can seriously damage its reputation. While some institutions may feel that addressing the issue would be an inconsequential waste of time, Smith (2015) argued that the symbolic value of doing something, even if it has a fleeting impact, is preferable to doing nothing.

Timeliness is more of a challenge for institutions of larger sizes like Columbia. In these settings, it can be difficult for the bureaucracy in place not to hold up the process (Sander, 2008). Regardless, PR practitioners need to treat reputational scandals with “the same urgency [as] natural disasters or security breaches” (Sander, 2008, p. A4). As Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) argued, “The earlier a communicative entity rises to defend itself, the better chances it has of rescuing its reputation” (p. 184).

**(2) Tell the truth.** A second best practice for crisis communication practitioners in the external context is to tell the truth. Despite the importance of quick responses, it is essential not to sacrifice accuracy for speed. Even if the public perception is off base, colleges need to respond forthrightly, accurately and with a tone of respect. As Benoit (1997) explained, “The key question is not if the act was *in fact* offensive, but whether the act is *believed* by the relevant audience(s) to be heinous” (p. 178). Acknowledging this influence with clearly stated facts will go a long way in earning the public’s trust.

In the event that an act was indeed offensive, most PR practitioners will advise to “tell the truth, tell it first, and tell it all.” Per the advice advanced in IRT, Benoit (1997) argued that, “An organization that falsely denies responsibility for offensive actions risks substantially damaged credibility if the truth emerges” (p. 184). To avoid this, offending institutions should “accept responsibility for the incident and take corrective action”

(Fortunato, 2008, p. 117). It is important to only communicate ideas that are true; the approach should *not* be concerned with protecting the institution, but rather with being open, honest and genuine (Carlson, 2007). This will do more to protect the institution's reputation in the long-term.

**(3) Make information easily accessible.** Finally, apart from being timely and truthful, messages are only effective if they reach their intended audiences. Dispersion of a message over multiple media platforms may be vital to the message's success. In a world where most people immediately turn to the internet when questions arise, websites are a crucial component of crisis communication efforts. As John F. Burness, senior vice president for public affairs and government relations at Duke University, advised, PR professionals should "harness the internet and other technologies to communicate with the news media and the public more quickly" (Carlson, 2007, p. A17). Virtual platforms allow organizations to directly tell their side of a story, reduce uncertainty, and address multiple stakeholder groups at once. In fact, "the level of preparation that goes into developing crisis communication on the web may be the difference between weathering a crisis or succumbing to it" (Madere, 2007, p. 17). At Columbia, the relevant information on the university's website at the time that media exposure about the sexual assault cases was growing was relatively limited and hard to access. Today, however, information on sexual respect, university policies and more are easily accessible and prominently positioned.

During crisis situations, institutions may also consider making use of social media platforms. As Utz, Schultz and Glocka (2013) argued, "An organization that uses social media to inform its stakeholders about an organizational crisis signals that it is eager to

inform its stakeholders quickly and directly and that it is willing to engage in a dialogue with them” (p. 42). Social media efforts ought to go hand in hand with use of other, more traditional platforms, yet only when crisis communication teams are adequately staffed to effectively address incoming comments and concerns. Altogether, a multi-media approach helps to ensure that the institution’s perspective reaches multiple target audiences and stakeholder groups so as to prevent confusion.

Ease of accessibility regarding crisis information also involves how a message is worded. While a message may reach its intended audience, if the language within it is overly complex or ambiguous it will not serve to calm concerns. Rather, confusion and distress is likely to grow. In this sense, transparency and openness are assets (Varma, 2011). At Columbia, text heavy emails from administrators to the student body did nothing to help the situation. The way that Columbia communicated its response left students unsatisfied. Michela Weihl, an organizer for No Red Tape, stated: “It has become abundantly clear to us that the issue they truly care about is one of public relations, not student safety” (New, 2015). A lack of transparency can cost universities (Bazelon, 2015), so it is advisable to stick with clear, genuine messages that leave little room for adverse interpretation.

### **Policy Suggestions**

Based on the best practices listed above, I now advance several considerations for policy revisions on an administrative level that may help to work against sexual assault crises in the future. Above all, policies pertaining to sexual assault cases should be preventative, not reactive. The goal should be to stop crises before they start (Papandrea, 2016). To do this, the pre-established crisis communication teams mentioned earlier

should identify possible future crises at an early stage. As Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) argued, “A proactive approach is more effective in securing a positive or balanced news story than a reactive approach” (p. 183). In this way, colleges cannot simply rely on compliance with the minimum requirements of government regulations.

As part of a preventative approach, a culture of respect needs to be embedded from the top down. This trickledown effect is important, because “if there is no commitment by leadership or top administrators, there will be no successful planning” (Booker, Jr., 2014, p. 19). Cultural change can occur by way of sensitivity training tools, campus resources, and more (Bazelon, 2015), which is relevant to crisis communication because “the overall culture in which the organization resides will also have an affect on how image repair strategies are perceived” (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2009).

By making deeply embedded policy changes, colleges such as Columbia have the opportunity to set an example for the rest of the higher education sector. Situations like the case study in this essay illustrate the power of agenda setting within the media in that they garner extensive coverage. With the vast resources available at institutions of higher education, including intellect, academic ambition, activism and manpower, colleges, especially with reputations as prestigious as Columbia’s, could choose to leverage this media attention in a positive way and hopefully inspire change on campuses nationwide.

Perhaps the best advice for policy revisions from the field of crisis communication comes from Zimmerman (2012) who stressed the need to use the scandal to “shape a new brand mission: Never again” (p. 52). In moving forward with this new brand mission, “All of the stakeholders, from the parents of the newest college freshman up to the most elite alumni and the richest donors, need to believe it” (p. 52). Fortunato

(2008) put forth a similar argument, stating that colleges and universities need to “provide a feeling that steps are being taken to help ensure that a similar incident will never happen again” (p. 117). As IRT argues, stakeholders find it reassuring to “know that steps have been taken to eliminate or avoid future problems” (Benoit, 1997, p. 184).

### **Final Thoughts**

As Weick (2001) argued, crises with small beginnings in human action have the potential to grow into national incidents, cumulating with other events and constructing “an environment that is a rare combination of unexpected simultaneous failures” (p. 228). While the sexual assault cases that unfolded at Columbia University may have been more contained to campus in the past, these issues have combined with sexual assault concerns across the higher education industry to the point where administrations can no longer deny that a systemic issue exists.

Given this environment, news stories about sexual assault cases on college campuses have become commonplace, providing ample opportunity for future research not just on crisis communication as it relates to these stories but on how administrations choose to address these issues more granularly. As Stanford law professor Michele Dauber stated, “We are at a real watershed moment in the public perception of campus sexual assaults” (qtd. in Fuller, 2016). Colleges and universities that address future sexual assault scandals by way of corrective action in the manner I have suggested will help to break down the belief that college administrations are insensitive to rape victims and will set the stage for positive, systemic changes to unfold. My hope is for colleges and universities to tackle the issue of sexual assault culture head on, not just affecting change on their own campuses but inspiring similar change on campuses nationwide and beyond.

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Appendix A

Images of student activism on Columbia University's campus

(Retrieved from Armus & Bryan, 2015)





