

TAMING THE LIONS AND THE LIES:  
A REVIEW OF PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY'S CRISIS  
RESPONSE STRATEGIES  
A THESIS  
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## **ABSTRACT**

**THESIS PROJECT:** Taming the Lions and the Lies: A Review of The Pennsylvania State University's Crisis Response Strategies

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This thesis examined how Pennsylvania State University administrators managed the Sandusky sex abuse scandal in 2011. Coombs' (2006) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) strategic response strategies were the theoretical basis for this thesis.

This study found Penn State primarily demonstrated the corrective action response strategy. This content analysis also uncovered the dominant tone of Penn State's messages, which was a traditional public relations tone, as defined by Fitzpatrick and Rubin (1995). This content analysis focused on newspaper articles between November 5, 2011 and January 22, 2012, which were collected from *The New York Times* and State College's local newspaper the *Centre Daily Times* that were reporting on the Sandusky crisis.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

At the very top of many notable colleges, winning and maintaining a flawless reputation often precedes integrity, leadership, and honesty; often resulting in cover-ups and scandals. Recently, a number of colleges and universities' athletic departments have experienced full-blown crises while trying to maintain their spotless image. Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) is no exception. With more than half a million alumni and an athletic program ranked third in 2011 with a value of \$100 million, Penn State was recognized as a distinguished and profitable university that appeared untouchable. However, no one is immune to experiencing a crisis (Mitroff and Anagnos, 2001). The impact of a crisis extends beyond just the affecting the organization's reputation.

A crisis can be legally, financially, and reputably damaging for an organization. In the Sandusky crisis, Penn State experienced all three types of damages. Top university administrators faced several criminal charges including lying to a grand jury. Financially, the university was penalized by the National Collegiate Athletics Association's (NCAA), including a \$60 million fine, a four-year reduction of grants-in-aid and other sanctions, and donations dropped. Penn State's reputation was also tarnished. The public opinion rapidly changed when news spread that Penn State administrators had prior knowledge of Sandusky's sex abuse but did nothing to stop him from preying on other boys.

On March 31, 2011, *The Patriot-News*, a local newspaper in University Park, Pennsylvania, published a front-page story highlighting former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky legal troubles. He was the focal point of a grand jury investigation involving allegations of child sex abuse (Ganim, 2011). A grand jury heard testimony regarding the sexual abuse allegations for at least 18 months after a 15-year-old boy made sexual abuse

allegations in 2009 against Sandusky. Penn State President Graham Spanier, Senior Vice President for Finance and Business Gary Schultz and Athletic Director Tim Curley were also questioned in the grand jury proceedings. Each testified regarding their knowledge concerning Sandusky's alleged abuse within Penn State athletic facilities. Sandusky was indicted on November 5, 2011. That same day Schultz and Curley were charged with perjury and failure to report sex abuse. Curley was placed on administrative leave and Schultz returned to retirement on November 7 (Penn State, 2011a, para. 1). Then, Penn State's Board of Trustees announced at a press conference on November 9 that its 46-year-long head football coach Joe Paterno was no longer Penn State's coach, and Spanier was no longer Penn State's president.

Almost a year after the initial charges were filed against Sandusky, Curley, and Schultz, Attorney General Linda Kelly, along with the Pennsylvania State Police, charged Spanier, Schultz, and Curley with obstruction of justice, endangerment, and conspiracy on November 1, 2012 (Eder, 2012, para. 5). These charges were in addition to Schultz and Curley's perjury and failure to report charges from 2011. Spanier, Schultz, and Curley allegedly "conspired among each other and did in fact engage in many acts to obstruct justice" (Grand Jury Report, 2011, p. 34.) Schultz and Curley also were charged with perjury because of allegations that they lied to the grand jury investigating Sandusky (Malawskey, 2012).

According to Mcaloon (2011), the Penn State crisis is an example of the worst-case scenario for a collegiate athletic program.

[The Penn State sex abuse crisis is] a lot worse than any of the pay-for-performance scandals that hit USC, Miami (FL), Ohio State and Southern Methodist University. Granted, a person was not killed in this scandal, like the one that shook the Baylor University basketball program. However, because it involves multiple children and is a more prestigious program, it will impact more people and live on for a lot longer with the university. (Mcaloon, 2011, para. 9)

Few universities have experienced the magnitude of such a crisis. According to Klopman (2012), “Years of child sex abuse at Penn State by longtime assistant Jerry Sandusky may represent the worst scandal in the history of college sports” (para. 1).

In an effort to restore the public’s trust in the university, the Board of Trustees created a special committee “to determine what failures occurred, who is responsible and what measures are necessary to insure that this never happens at [Penn State] again and that those responsible are held fully accountable” (Penn State, 2011b, para. 2). This special committee hired former FBI Director Louis Freeh on November 21, 2011 to independently investigate all aspects of the university’s actions with regard to the allegations of child abuse involving former Penn State employees (Penn State, 2011c, para. 1). After an eight-month investigation, Freeh spoke at a news conference on July 12, 2012 and said, “The most powerful men at Penn State failed to take any steps for 14 years to protect the children who Sandusky victimized” (Associated Press, 2012a, para. 4). The Freeh report came to the conclusion that high-ranking Penn State administrators knew Sandusky was abusing children; however, in an effort to “avoid bad publicity” Spanier, Schultz, Curley and Paterno chose not to report the sex abuse allegations and “failed to protect against a child sexual predator harming children for over a decade” (Freeh Sporkin & Sullivan, 2012, p. 14).

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

“A ‘win at all costs’ attitude still dominates intercollegiate athletics,” Harrison-Dyer (2011) said, “This type of attitude pressures coaches and administrators to violate NCAA rules in an attempt to have any competitive advantage” (para. 11). As a result, universities create an atmosphere ripe for a crisis to emerge. “Crises in college athletics are becoming commonplace. [Crises have the] ability to wreak havoc on a university’s reputation” (Syme, 2012, para. 1).

Multiple challenges were associated with Penn State's management of the 2011 sex abuse crisis. The university was financially affected because contributions dropped and million dollar campaigns suffered. For example, overall contributions to Penn State's athletic department between 2011-2012 dropped nearly \$8.8 million – from \$34.3 million to \$25.6 million (Horne, 2013, para. 2). The timing of the crisis also presented a challenge to the university because it was attempting to close a seven-year \$2 billion capital campaign in June 2014 with still almost \$600 million more to go (Flandez, 2011, para. 8). The university also faced reputational challenges. For examples, the crisis made creditors review Penn State, which had about \$1 billion in debt, for a possible credit downgrade (Marklein and Snyder, 2011, para. 7).

According to Coombs (2006), there are different types of crises and levels of severity. Therefore, each crisis warrants a distinct response. Coombs and Holladay created crisis response strategies for each type of crisis (2002). According to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), there are eight crisis response strategies ranging from defensive, putting organizational interests first, to accommodative, addressing the concerns and victims. "Part of the success of a crisis management's effort is dependent on what an organization says and does after a crisis hits: the crisis response" (Benoit, 1997).

Although collegiate athletics have grown exponentially during the last twenty years, there is a lack of research in the area of crisis management, specifically university management. Given the significance sport hold in American society, and the close relationship that exists between the media and sports, this thesis makes an important contribution to this body of knowledge. An analysis of Penn State's crisis management is important to the public relations profession, because it provides insight into areas of crisis communication responses. Public relations practitioners study crisis situations, like Penn State, to identify best practices in crisis or issues

management.

This research relied on concepts from the Situational Crisis Communication Theory. “SCCT assumes that an organization’s reputation, that is, how the organization is perceived by its publics, is a valued resource that is threatened by crises” (Coombs, Holladay, 2002, p. 167). This study also includes different message tone definitions from work by Martinelli and Briggs’ (1998) and Fitzpatrick and Rubin’s (1995).

More specifically the researcher studied the communications from Penn State University during the Sandusky crisis, because communication (words and actions) affects how stakeholders perceive an organization during a crisis (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Benoit, 1995, 1997; Hearit, 1994, 1996, 2001). First impressions form quickly and alter the remainder of stakeholders’ reaction of the crisis communication efforts; hence, selecting the appropriate response strategy is important (Sen & Egelhoff, 1991).

## **CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The review of literature includes defining a crisis, exploring similar crisis situations in collegiate athletics, studying the timeline of the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) crisis, and explaining the different types of message tones as defined by Martinelli and Briggs' (1998) and Fitzpatrick and Rubin's (1995).

### **CRISES DEFINITIONS**

A crisis can threaten the organization's very existence (Barton, 2001; Coombs, 2002; Seeger, 2002). According to the Institute for Crisis Management (2008) a crisis is "a significant business disruption that stimulates extensive news media coverage. The resulting public scrutiny will affect the organization's normal operations and also could have a political, legal, financial and governmental impact on its business" (para. 1). According to Fearn-Banks (2002) a crisis is "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name" (p. 2). Crises are "low probability/high consequence events," according to Weick (1988) "that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organization" (p. 305).

Hermann (1972) characterized a crisis as "a situation that threatens the high priority of goals of the organization, restricts the amount of time available for response, and surprises decision-makers by its occurrence, thereby engendering high levels of stress" (p. 13). Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) agreed and stated a crisis is "a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threatens or are perceived to threaten high priority goals" including property and well being of the community (p. 233).

Fink, Beak, and Tadeo (1971) said “a human system (individual, group, organization or other) is assumed to be in a state of crisis when its repertoire of coping responses is not adequate to bring about the resolution of a problem which poses a threat to the system” (p.16-17). A crisis exists, according to Khandwalla (1978), when “no immediate means are available to cope with a threat to a system” (p. 151).

Once an organization experiences a crisis, actions are taken to respond and cope with the particular crisis. To manage a crisis means to manage decisions (Fink, 1986). Mitroff (1994) suggested managing the crisis by preventing the crisis from spreading to unaffected areas of the organization and limiting the duration of the crisis for the organization. An organization must be aware of crisis response strategies in order to stop the crisis from spreading and reduce the crisis’ impact on the public’s opinion regarding the organization. A crisis situation undoubtedly creates stress, thus resulting in the public searching for information about what happened to cause the crisis. “An organization’s communicative response to a crisis can serve to limit and even to repair the reputational damage,” according to Coombs and Holladay (2002, p. 166). If an organization is unable to communicate its message skillfully during a crisis it can prove fatal for the organization (Fink, 1986).

A company that demonstrated an exemplary strategic response during a crisis and crafted a strong enough message to turn a tragedy in a triumph was Johnson & Johnson. In 1982, its crisis – commonly referred to as the “Tylenol crisis” – involved the replacement of Tylenol Extra Strength capsules with cyanide-laced capsules, and stocked the bottles on shelves of at least a half-dozen pharmacies and food stores in the Chicago area. Seven people died as a result of purchasing and consuming the poison cyanide capsules. The person or persons responsible were never identified. The impacts of this crisis were minimized because Johnson & Johnson’s staff

responded to the public with open communication, empathized with the public and victims, and demonstrated a willingness to withdraw the Tylenol product at all costs. This example demonstrates one company's ability to limit or repair any reputational damage by having specific, clear messages. These actions also manage the crisis and reduce the spread of the crisis within the organization and public. The Tylenol crisis is an example of success when the organization's existence was threatened. However, not all crises are managed as successfully.

### **COMPARABLE CRISES TO PENN STATE**

Operating a university sports program is similar to running a business. Successful, large athletic programs bring in substantial revenue for colleges and universities and are growing at a rapid pace. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the overall annual revenue for college athletics programs was about \$10.6 billion in 2008-2009 (2013a, para. 11). However, corruption is becoming commonplace in big college athletic programs. According to author Henry Giroux, sports are stained with dishonesty and arrogance (as cited in Stannard, 2012),

Let's face it, coaches are now tainted by the corruption created by a mindless celebrity culture in which self-interest, narcissism, and an indifference to public values play such a powerful role... Treating coaches as gods and looking to them for providing a brand name for colleges, not to mention lucrative profits, is antithetical to what higher education should be all about. Universities are crucial public spheres that play a formative role in shaping informed, critical, and knowledgeable citizens. They should not be transformed into entertainment centers... (para. 6)

As college athletics are on the rise, the opportunity to experience crises also increases (Delatte, 1993, p. 4). For example, the point shaving crisis of 1951 involved a number of universities in the Midwest including New York University, City College of New York, Long Island University, Bradley University, University of Toledo, St. John's University and the University of

Kentucky. In each case gamblers recruited university players to purposely change the outcome of the athletic event in exchange for money. Overall, 32 players from the Midwest were accused of receiving money from gamblers to shave points in various basketball games (Thompson, 2007, para. 5).

Because of this crisis, the NCAA took its first formal enforcement action against a university (NCAA, 2013b). The mission of the NCAA is to protect student-athletes. The NCAA created three divisions of the NCAA. Each division creates its own rules governing personnel, amateurism, recruiting, eligibility, benefits, financial aid, and playing and practice seasons – consistent with the overall governing principles of the association (Staples, 2012). In order to participate in college athletic competitions, college athletic programs must abide by the rules and regulations set by the NCAA. Programs are punished if they do not. For example, after an investigation into the point shaving crisis, the NCAA banned the University of Kentucky for the 1952-53 season.

Another well-known crisis in athletics involved Southern Methodist University (SMU) in 1987. For a record seventh time, SMU violated NCAA rules and regulations. A massive slush fund was discovered which had paid players since the 1970s; in some cases exceeding \$60,000. These payments were made with the full knowledge and approval of athletic department staff, including the athletic director, the recruiting coordinator and SMU's head football coach. The NCAA had already given SMU a three-year probation, two-year bowl ban and one season live TV ban for previous recruiting violations in 1985. Once the slush fund was discovered, the NCAA "effectively demolished one of the nation's most glorious – and historically corrupt- football teams" (Sullivan and Neff, 1987, para. 2). NCAA gave the university's football program the death penalty, as it is known in athletics, banning the football program from competition for

two years. According to the NCAA, the death penalty was given in order “to eliminate a program that was built on a legacy of wrongdoing, deceit and rule violations” (Goodwin, 1987). Other

NCAA penalties given to SMU included:

- The 1987 season was canceled; only conditioning drills were permitted during the 1987 calendar year
- All home game in 1988 were canceled. SMU was allowed to play their seven regularly scheduled away games so that other institutions would not be financially affected.
- The team’s existing probation was extended until 1990. Its existing ban from bowl games and live television was extended to 1989.
- SMU was limited to 15 new scholarships per season over four years.
- SMU was required to ensure that generous boosters previously banned from contact with the program were in fact banned, or else face further punishment.
- The team was allowed to hire only five full-time assistant coaches, instead of the typical nine.
- No off-campus recruiting was permitted until August 1988, and potential recruits could make no paid visits to campus until the start of the 1988-89 school year.

Comparisons have been made between SMU and Penn State’s crises, specifically what penalties the NCAA should enforce Penn State for unethical behavior of top administrators involved in the Sandusky sex abuse case (Brown, 2012; Rittenberg, 2012; Smith, 2012b; Stahl, 2012).

A crisis similar to Penn State happened with members of Duke University’s men’s lacrosse team. In March 2006, they threw a team party at an off-campus house, hiring two strippers to perform. The following day, one of the strippers told North Carolina Durham Police that three members of the team beat her, raped her, and sodomized her. Later that month, Duke University canceled two scheduled lacrosse games citing the team’s decision to hire “private party dancers and underage drinking at the party” (CBSNews, 2006). A month later, Duke President Richard Brodhead canceled the team's season. However in 2007, prosecutors dropped all charges against the three players, saying “the athletes were innocent victims of a ‘tragic rush to accuse’ by an overreaching district attorney” (Hochberg, 2007, para. 2). Duke University

faced civil lawsuits from three-dozen current and former lacrosse team players in early 2008.

Duke University also faced reputational damage and financial problems as a result of the lacrosse sex scandal. Wall Street journalists Stuart Taylor, JR. and KC Johnson (2012) argued how Penn State and Duke University had leaders that preferred “to hide their eyes and ears from evidence” instead of finding the courage to resist the demands of power and campus culture (para. 15). In 2007 Duke University announced an undisclosed financial settlement with the three players that were charged and exonerated (Associated Press, 2007). Then Duke University announced in 2013 that it settled out of court with 38 members of its 2005-06 men’s lacrosse team (Gronberg, 2013).

In 2010, Ohio State University made national headlines with a scandal involving its football program and head football coach Jim Tressel. Five players received tattoos in exchange for memorabilia such as rings and jerseys. The crisis deepened when news spread that Tressel had been aware of the situation, yet failed to report the actions (Karp, 2011). As a result, Ohio State received multiple NCAA penalties. Penalties included:

- Banned from post season play for one year,
- Stripped of four more scholarships on top of Ohio State’s self-imposed forfeiture of five scholarships over three seasons (from a total of 85 to 82), and
- Placed on 18 months of probation in addition to Ohio State’s self-imposed, two-year probation (Ludlow, 2011, para. 11).
- Tressel was fired.

In comparison to Ohio State, Penn State’s NCAA penalties and unprecedented fines were staggering. The penalties Penn State received for its role in concealing Jerry Sandusky’s sexual molestation acts demonstrated the severity of the crisis and NCAA’s anger toward the university (Wetzel, 2012). NCAA president Mark Emmert said at a press conference, “[The penalties]

reflect the magnitude of these terrible acts but also assures Penn State will rebuild an athletic culture that went horribly awry” (Wetzel, 2012, para. 5). Penn State’s NCAA penalties included:

- A \$60 million fine,
- A four-year ban on postseason play,
- Five years of probation
- A four-year reduction of grants-in-aid, and
- Vacated wins since 1998 (NCAA, 2012, para. 4-5).

While there may be crises similar to Penn State, no two crises are alike. Each crisis has its own threats, reputational damages, duration, and mysteries. However, by studying the Penn State crisis, researchers can have a better understanding of what types of crisis response strategies might be most beneficial for this type of crisis in the future.

## **PENN STATE CRISIS BACKGROUND**

The first incident involving Sandusky and a young boy was in 1998. The incident involved an 11-year-old boy, (later identified in the 2009 grand jury report as Victim 6), who told his mother Sandusky made him feel uncomfortable with physical contact such as excessive hugging (Chappell, 2012). The boy’s mother immediately contacted university police, which triggered a short investigation. University Police Chief Thomas Harmon allegedly told Detective Ronald Shreffler to close the investigation, and Centre County, PA., district attorney decided not to file criminal charges against Sandusky due to the lack of concrete evidence (Chappell, 2012). At the same time another boy reported Sandusky’s behavior to Shreffler, no additional action was taken.

Then in 1999, Sandusky retired as assistant football coach from Penn State's football program. Penn State administrators gave Sandusky "emeritus" status, which allowed him access to campus facilities, including keys to the locker rooms, and an office in the Lasch Football

Building (Chappell, 2012). Late in 2000, former Penn State janitor Jim Calhoun told a co-worker and his supervisor that he witnessed “Sandusky engaged in sexual activity with a boy in the assistant coaches' shower” (Chappell, 2012). Calhoun did not report it to Penn State administration for fear of losing his job.

In 2001, Mike McQueary, a Penn State graduate student and football assistant, reported seeing Sandusky in the same shower with a boy at the Lasch Football Building. McQueary initially informed his father (Grand Jury Report, 2012, p. 23). The following day, McQueary called then head football coach Paterno to report what he had seen. Paterno called Curley (Paterno’s immediate supervisor) to discuss the incident (Collegian Online, 2011). A few weeks later, Mike McQueary stated he met with Curley and Gary Schultz, vice president for finance and business, to discuss the situation further. However, Schultz alleged McQueary did not specifically report “anal sex or anything of a sexual nature whatsoever” and termed the conduct as merely ‘horsing around’ when discussing the shower incident when Schultz testified in Grand jury proceedings, (Pennsylvania Attorney General, 2011). Curley testified he informed Penn State’s President Graham Spanier regarding information Curley received from McQueary and about how he recovered Sandusky’s keys to Penn State’s facilities. Spanier testified to the Grand jury that he approved the manner in which Curley and Schultz handled the situation. However, Penn State never took any of the allegations against Sandusky to local law enforcement.

A Grand jury investigation into Sandusky’s actions began in 2009 after police were notified of another incident involving Sandusky and a high school boy, known in the Grand jury report as Victim 1, having contact in the boy’s high school locker room showers. Victim 1’s mother initially reported the incident to her son’s high school principal and head football coach in Clinton Valley, and then she went directly to the Clinton County Children and Youth Social

Services office. High school administrators took action and ban Sandusky from the premises and notified Pennsylvania State Police.

After a two-year Grand jury investigation, on November 5, 2011, Jerry Sandusky was arrested and charged with 45 criminal counts of serial sex abuse of minors. The Grand jury's report was released the same day. Numerous detailed accounts of the abuse victims experienced over a period of years were provided while Sandusky was an assistant football coach at Penn State and after he retired.

The following day university administrators had an emergency meeting and placed Athletic Director Tim Curley on administrative leave. Interim Senior Vice President for Finance and Business Gary Schultz decided to return to retirement (Penn State, 2011a). The following day Curley and Schultz were arraigned on charges of making false statements to the Grand jury and failing to report the possibility of abuse of a child (Chappell, 2012). After the two Penn State administrators were arrested, negative public perception increased that Penn State top-ranking administrators had knowledge of the sex abuse and failed to report it. According to Seeger (2002), Weick (1988), Fearn-Banks (2002), and ICM (2008), Penn State's situation could be labeled a crisis.

On November 9, 2011, for the first time since Sandusky was arrested, Penn State's Board of Trustees spoke to the public at a late night press conference. John Surma, Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees, announced the board had unanimously voted to remove head football coach Joe Paterno and university president Graham Spanier "effective immediately" (Frantz, 2011). Surma announced Rodney Erickson would replace Spanier as interim president and Tom Bradley would replace Paterno as interim head football coach. In response to the news, Penn

State students rioted on the campus damaging a media van, tore down lampposts, and threw rocks and fireworks at police who responded with pepper spray (Schweber, 2011, para. 4).

The following day, November 10, Erickson issued a statement regarding the situation involving Sandusky and the students' reactions to the removal of Paterno as head football coach.

I share your anger and sadness in this time, but always remember that your actions reflect on the entire Penn State community. Please set an example that will make us all proud. Moving forward is the only responsible course to take in the coming months (Penn State, 2011d, para. 8).

Later that day Penn State administrators placed McQueary on administrative leave citing multiple threats on McQueary's life. The university also believed "it would be the best interest of all" (Penn State Athletics, 2011, para. 1).

The next day the Board of Trustees announced two board members would serve on a special investigation committee: Trustee Ken Frazier, serving as chair of the committee, and Trustee Ron Tomalis, serving as vice chair. Erickson also shared his promises with the Penn State community in a video message. Erickson's promises were as follows:

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

On November 15, 2011, Rob Pangborn, former Vice President and Dean for Undergraduate Education, was named Executive Vice President and Provost effective immediately (Penn State, 2011f). The following day Penn State administrators announced a change in leadership within the athletic department. David Joyner, a Penn State distinguished alumnus and member of the Board of Trustees since 2000, was named Athletic Director effective immediately. Joyner suspended his responsibilities on the board to accept his new role.

During a special meeting November 18, the Penn State Faculty Senate endorsed a resolution, which expressed support and sympathy for the victims of sexual abuse and committed to “fostering an environment in which reports of abuse are regarded with full impartiality” (Penn State, 2011g, para. 2). In addition, the resolution requested an independent special committee to study the structure and practices of the Board of Trustees and make recommendations for improving governance and communication at Penn State. The majority of the participants were to be unaffiliated with the university (Penn State, 2011, para. 6). Lastly, the resolution endorsed President Rodney Erickson's five-point promise to the Penn State community to restore public trust in the university.

In an effort to demonstrate transparency and honesty, Erickson, along with seven Penn State administrators, attended a town-hall forum organized by student government leaders on November 30. While Erickson aimed to be transparent, he said legal concerns and the ongoing investigation limited the university's ability to be forthcoming with certain information.

Key events identified during December 2011: a meeting with Penn State's Faculty Senate (December 6), the school's decision to no longer license the name, likeness or image of former coach Joe Paterno (December 10), and a new senior vice president for finance and business (December 14).

In an attempt to move forward, Penn State hired Brown University graduate Bill O'Brien as the new head football coach on January 6, 2012. O'Brien was the first new head football coach in nearly a half-century. This decision came almost two months after Joe Paterno was removed after serving as the head football coach for 46 years. Although Paterno was an influential figure, possibly one of the most powerful leaders, at Penn State, he was not in an administrative position that would affect how Penn State responded to the Sandusky sex abuse crisis. Also, Paterno was never criminally charged like Spanier, Shultz, and Curley. Therefore, Paterno's quotes/paraphrased statements did not play a significant role in answering this study's two research questions.

In mid-January 2012, Erickson spoke at three town hall meetings in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and New York City. The meetings consisted of alumni and friends who had the chance to ask difficult questions about the handling of the sexual abuse allegations against former football coach Sandusky, and Paterno's removal.

Almost a week and a half later, Penn State introduced Karen Peetz, President of BNY Mellon, as the new Board of Trustees Chair. Steve Garban, former chair, resigned from the Board of Trustees. Garban had prior knowledge concerning developments in the Sandusky situation, and still "did not share what he knew with the entire board" (Associated Press, 2012b, para. 3).

## **CRISIS TYPES**

According to Weiner (1985, 1986, 2006), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) has its roots in attribution theory. Attribution theory theorizes that people search for the causes of events (attributions) especially those events that are negative and unexpected (Weiner, 1985). "SCCT extends upon this Attribution Theory base to predict the reputational threat

presented by a crisis and to prescribe crisis response strategies designed to protect reputational assets” (Coombs, 2007, p. 166).

Based on the work of Benoit (1995), Coombs (2006) developed and refined SCCT, which focuses on understanding how to manage an organization’s reputation during a crisis. It is comprised of three core parts: 1) identifying the crisis situation, 2) selecting crisis response strategies, and 3) matching the type of crisis and response strategies.

The first core element of SCCT is identifying the type of crisis the organization is experiencing. Early works by Coombs (2006) identified three types of crises: victim, accidental or intentional. In the victim cluster an organization is the victim (natural disasters, product tampering); in the accidental cluster the organization did not have the intention of experiencing a crisis (recalls or damage); and the intentional cluster deliberately places others at risk. According to Fink (1986), “[O]nce the crisis is identified and isolated, you will have a clearer idea of what actions you will need to take to rectify the problem” (p. 83). Identifying the crisis type also enables an initial assessment of the amount of crisis responsibility that publics will attribute to a crisis situation. Responsibility is the link between crisis types and crisis response strategies.

Secondly, SCCT assesses what type of crisis response strategies will be most effective and successful. The SCCT strategies funnel into three overall crisis response strategy groups based upon public perception of the organization accepting responsibility: denial, diminish and rebuild (Coombs, 1998, 2006). SCCT response strategies range from defensive to accommodative. The strategies on the defensive end focus on protecting the organization’s image. When a reputation is threatened, individuals and organizations are motivated to present an image defense: attack the accuser, denial, excuse and justifications (Brinson & Benoit, 1996). However, the strategies on the accommodative side of the spectrum address concerns for the

victim and/or stakeholders. Accommodative strategies include: ingratiation, corrective action, full apology and/or mortification. SCCT suggests that as the reputational threat increases, crisis managers should use more accommodative response strategies.

The third core element of SCCT is connecting the crisis type to the crisis response strategy. Coombs (2006) said the goal of SCCT is to match the organization's crisis type with the appropriate crisis response strategy depending on the reputational damage and crisis responsibility as directed by the crisis. According to Heath and Palenchar (2009) "SCCT organizes crisis response strategies by determining if the intent of the strategy is to change perceptions of the crisis or of the organization in crisis" (p. 321).

It is important to note that an organization's reputation, scholars suggest, will significantly be impacted by the action or inaction in regard to its crisis responses (Barton, 2001; Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1999, 2006). How and when an organization provides information to the public is crucial to minimizing reputational damage in the wake of the crisis. "The consensus in crisis management literature is that organizations should provide accurate information as quickly as possible to all stakeholders" (Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, p. 426). Fink (1986) said, "The inability to communicate your message skillfully during a crisis can prove fatal" (p. 92). Research has shown the importance of communication during a crisis to protect the organization's reputation (Benoit, 1995; Hearit, 1996).

Whereas, the silent response from an organization during a crisis makes the public perceive the organization may be uncertain about the situation; thus, others will try to take control and define the crisis for the organization (Hearit, 1994; Brummett, 1980; Coombs, 1999).

Cooley and Cooley tested the SCCT in the General Motors (GM) bankruptcy crisis. The researchers conducted a content analysis to understand and suggest future crisis communication

strategy selections. The study revealed General Motors followed the SCCT model's guidelines and were successful in negotiating reputational management through a financial crisis (Cooley and Cooley, 2011).

## **LITIGATION PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Any crisis communication strategy must consider the limitations imposed by legal and financial concerns, according to Coombs and Holladay (2002). Public relations practitioners, along with attorneys, play a critical role in developing messages to share with the news media and can potentially influence their coverage of the crisis. While attorneys may advocate “no comment” messages, public relations practitioners may push for a more “open door” policy with the public and media. Is the crisis outcome affected by the type of response (legal or public relations) an organization gives the public? Martinelli and Briggs' (1998) and Fitzpatrick and Rubin's (1995) research reports indicate organizations respond to a crisis using four different strategies: traditional public relations strategy, traditional legal strategy, mixed strategy, and diversionary strategy.

Fitzpatrick and Rubin (1995) performed a content analysis on various sexual harassment cases. The researchers categorized responses by the four types of crisis response messages. They found traditional legal strategies dominated news coverage. The study also highlighted a need for organizations to take collaborative approaches to crisis communication, involving counsel from public relations and legal professionals.

Odwalla, Inc.'s juice contamination crisis also demonstrated a collaborative approach to crisis management in terms of legal versus public relations. Martinelli and Briggs (1998), found that Odwalla representatives showed that public relations responses dominated legal responses.

The traditional public relations strategy helps a company obtain forgiveness and rebuild its credibility. The company's messages involve 1) stating company policy on the issue (if appropriate), 2) investigating the allegations, 3) acting candid, 4) voluntarily admitting that a problem exists (if true) and 5) announcing and implementing corrective measures as quickly as possible (Fitzpatrick and Rubin, 1995).

The traditional legal strategy is applied when attorneys believe there is significant negative potential for the organization to admit guilt before fighting the legal battle in court. Therefore, this strategy instructs organizations to

1) say nothing, 2) say little as possible and release it quietly as possible; 3) say as little as possible, citing privacy laws, company policy or sensitivity 4) deny guilt and/or act indignant that such charges could possibly have been made; or 5) shift or, if necessary, share the blame with the plaintiff (Fitzpatrick and Rubin, 1995, p. 22).

A mixed strategy encourages an organization to deny any fault while expressing remorse that the issue happened.

Finally, a diversionary strategy advice includes:

1) attempting to divert media and public attention away from the accusations, 2) telling the media that the organization is outraged at the situation, while taking little or no substantive actions, and/or 3) announcing that the problem is solved or that the alleged offender is leaving the organization for unrelated (i.e. personal) reasons... (Fitzpatrick and Rubin, 1995, p. 23).

The study examined media coverage of Penn State's sex abuse crisis to determine what type of response strategy messages the university relied on during the crisis period.

The study examined Penn State's sex abuse crisis that occurred between November 2011 and January 2012 from Grand jury indictments to the appointment of new trustee chair. The purpose of this study was to determine what (if any) type of crisis response strategy Penn State implemented and what type of response strategy message(s) did Penn State's spokespeople

deliver (public relations, legal, mixed, or diversionary).

For this research, the research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What crisis response strategies did Penn State demonstrate as evidenced in newspaper coverage regarding Jerry Sandusky's November 5, 2011 indictment until January 22, 2012?

RQ2: Were Penn State's public statements legal, traditionally public relations, mixed or diversionary responses?

## **CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY**

This study investigated news coverage of the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) sex abuse crisis involving former Penn State assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky. A content analysis of articles from the national *New York Times* paper and the local *Centre Daily Times* newspaper were collected and analyzed.

### **CRISIS EVENT**

This content analysis is appropriate because it allowed the researcher to examine media stories thoroughly and critically. A content analysis is “a systematic, objective, and quantitative method for research messages” (Berelson, 1952). Zhang and Wildermuth (2009) said the goal of a content analysis is to go beyond “merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes and patterns” (p. 1). Stacks and Michaelson (2010) noted how a properly used content analysis “can be critical in evaluating overall communication effectiveness and function to plan more effective public relations and media relation strategies” (p. 83). According to Krippendorff (1980), six questions must be addressed in every content analysis: Which data are analyzed; How are they defined; what is the population from which they are drawn; what is the context relative to which the data are analyzed; what are the boundaries of the analysis; and, what is the target of the inferences?

Through careful data research, coding, and analysis, the results of a qualitative content analysis can validate existing theories and maintain the development of new theories and/or models. The purpose of this content analysis was to interpret Penn State’s crisis response strategies during the Sandusky sex abuse crisis.

## NEWS COVERAGE

In order to collect data, the researcher conducted a Lexis-Nexis search for newspaper articles published in *The Centre Daily Times* and *The New York Times* from November 5, 2011 to January 22, 2012. This time period covered Jerry Sandusky's arrest on November 5, 2011 until Penn State appointed Karen Peetz as the new Board of Trustees Chair on January 22, 2012. The researcher decided to limit the review of articles to January 22, 2012 due to the key leadership change that signified a change in direction for Penn State. Parry (1998) said,

Leadership is closely associated with the notion of change... Because leadership involves a transformation in the views, beliefs, attitudes and motivations of followers, it is about change. ... (p. 192).

Leadership is “the process of inducing others to take action toward a common goal” (Locke, 1991, p. 3). Since leadership is associated with changing views and attitudes, according to Parry (1998), the study focused on the time period leading up to a leadership change that influenced the crisis response strategy.

Information gathered during this time period was comprehensively and systematically stored in an Excel document. Table headings included: publication date, title, and source. Entries were organized chronologically beginning from November 5, 2011, through January 22, 2011. Research was conducted using a LexisNexis search and *Centre Daily Times* archive search to locate articles including specified search terms. Articles from blogs were not included in the data collection. Search terms included “Penn State”, “Sandusky”, “Penn State President”, “Penn State Board of Trustees”, “Erickson”, and “Penn State Scandal”.

## CODING CATEGORIES AND MEASURES

The units of analysis were quotes or paraphrased statements from Penn State

administrators (Appendix B) found in articles from the two newspapers. For the purpose of this content analysis, an official response included direct quotes and paraphrased statements attributed to Penn State spokespersons, including statements from Graham Spanier, Rodney Erickson, Steve Garban, John Surma, David Joyner, any Board of Trustee member, or any Penn State designated spokesperson.

Former Penn State head football coach Joe Paterno was not considered a spokesperson for Penn State in study because he was not considered a senior administrator “responsible for administering University policies and procedures; managing the endowment, [and] handling legal matters,” according to Freeh Sporkin & Sullivan (2012, p. 32-33). Key leadership positions according to Freeh Sporkin & Sullivan (2012) included the university president, executive vice president and provost, senior vice president – finance and business and general counsel at Penn State. Therefore, only quotes or paraphrases made by Penn State administrators were selected to show a comprehensive representation of Penn State’s crisis response.

The two newspapers (*The Centre Daily Times* and *The New York Times*) were selected to provide clear reference points, one publication located near Penn State and one publication with national coverage. The researcher selected print media because it is more in-depth than televised media coverage.

*The Centre Daily Times* has a readership of 61,000 daily. It is published in six Pennsylvania counties along with copies reaching several more counties, especially during college football season (The McCarthy Company, 2013, para. 7). This newspaper was selected since it provided considerable coverage of Penn State’s responses before, during, and after the Jerry Sandusky trial.

The national newspaper, *The New York Times*, has an average circulation of 1.5 million as of March 2012 (Audited Media, 2013, para. 12). The company had revenues of \$2 billion in 2012 (Zebian, 2013, para. 6). This newspaper was selected because it is recognized for distributing reliable news information, having an impartial reputation with considerable influence, and one of the most popular newspaper websites.

The coding instrument consisted of the name of the newspaper, Penn State spokesperson's quotes, crisis type, and crisis response strategy implemented and crisis response strategy message(s). (See Appendix B: Coding Sheet; Appendix D: Crisis Response Strategy Classifications)

According to Coombs (2006), the primary SCCT crisis response strategies form three groups: (1) denial, (2) diminish and (3) rebuild. The strategies demonstrated in each group are as follows (see Appendix C):

- Denial: attack the accuser and deny.
- Diminish: excuse and justification.
- Rebuild: ingratiation, corrective action, full apology and mortification.

The coders examined which strategies were demonstrated by reviewing quotes from Penn State's spokespersons that were published in news article from *Centre Daily Times* and *The New York Times*.

## **CODING PROCEDURES**

Two well-trained coders analyzed 34 articles and coded each article independently. Each coder independently coded the articles (See Appendix A: Instructions for Coders). Two coders are practical considering the number of articles found with quotes or paraphrased statements to analyze from the *New York Times* and the *Centre Daily Times*.

The Holsti Inter-coder Reliability formula was used to measure the reliability (or agreement) between coders. Reliability refers to "the amount of error coders make when placing content into

categories” (Stacks, 2010, p. 116). The researcher used Holsti’s formula that takes the number of judgments (R) that are the same and divides that by the total of judgments made by each coder (C).

$$\text{Holsti} = 2R \div (C_1 - C_2)$$

By establishing intra-coder reliability, the research reduced the number of errors that often occur unintentionally when using content analysis research. The units of analysis were quotes and/or paraphrases by Penn State administration, Penn State spokespersons and/or any Penn State Board of Trustees member. Holsti’s intercoder reliability levels are “good” (.7), “great” (.8), or “excellent” (.9 or higher).

Before the data-coding process, the researcher trained coders and evaluated intercoder reliability on approximately 10% of data items (n=34) with representation from both newspapers analyzed in two trials (Neuendorf, 2002). This process was used not only to evaluate coders’ accuracy but also identify vague categories or discrepancies between coders. Adjustments were made to corrective action, justification and ingratiation during the training period to clarify strategies and message tone definitions. Once an agreement of 80 percent was reached, a coder analyzed all quotes/paraphrases from both newspapers.

Coding on the actual final sample of articles began at the conclusion of the training period. The study coded 91 crisis response strategy variables and 101 message tone variables.

## **Chapter 4**

### **FINDINGS**

This section outlines the findings of the content analysis, which investigated Pennsylvania State University's (Penn State) crisis response strategy and overall tone between November 5, 2011, and January 22, 2012.

The researcher reviewed descriptive statistics from the data to answer two research questions. To analyze the crisis response strategies, Coombs's (2000) defined eight crisis strategies were applied. For research questions one, Penn State administrator, spokespersons, and/or Board of Trustee members were quoted or paraphrased 162 times from selected newspapers from November 5, 2011 to January 22, 2012.

*RQ<sub>1</sub>: What crisis response strategies did Penn State demonstrate as evidenced in newspaper coverage regarding Jerry Sandusky's November 5, 2011 indictment until January 22, 2012?*

Within those 162 quotes/paraphrases, 91 crisis response strategies were coded. Table 1 details the number of times each strategy was coded during the time frame of November 5, 2011 through January 22, 2012. The coders were unable to code 71 statements because the statements did not have correlating crisis response strategy according to Coombs (2000) SCCT crisis response strategy definitions.

**Coded Crisis Response Strategies Table 1**

<b>RESPONSE STRATEGIES</b>	<b>TOTAL <i>n</i></b>
Attack the Accuser	4
Denial	8
Excuse	3
Justification	17
Ingratiation	15
Corrective Action	25
Full Apology	0
Mortification	19

The response strategy messages included corrective action (n=25, 15.4%), mortification (n=19, 11.7%), justification (n=17, 10.5%), ingratiation (n=15, 9.3%), denial (n=8, 4.9%), attack the accuser (n=4, 2.5%), and excuse (n=3, 1.9%). Findings indicated that corrective action was the strategy most often cited during the crisis situation involving top administrators from Penn State.

Of the 91 articles coded, the researcher found that Penn State spokespersons utilized every strategy during the crisis except for offering a full apology. However, on July 12, 2012 when the Freeh Report was released, Penn State publically apologized for its management of the crisis. This apology came almost six months after the time frame of this study.

While the results for each strategy revealed the university's overall use of corrective action to manage the Sandusky crisis, it is interesting to note that Penn State's interim president Rodney Erickson issued the most corrective action statements. For example, Erickson said he wanted to "lower the football program's profile" in January, 2012. This demonstrates the

corrective action strategy because Erickson is offering a solution to the problems that were caused.

In another example, on November 19, 2011, *The Centre Daily* as Erickson saying, “It will be important for Penn State to cooperate fully and provide any assistance possible to the NCAA. The university’s and NCAA’s interest are perfectly aligned in identifying what went wrong and how to prevent anything similar from happening again”. This example fits SCCT’s corrective action crisis strategy response definition because Erickson was trying to reassure the public and stakeholders to feel safe and he wanted to take steps to prevent this situation from happening again.

*RQ<sub>2</sub>: Were Penn State’s public statements legal, traditionally public relations, mixed or diversionary responses?*

The same quotes/paraphrases were also examined for the type of tone their message demonstrated. Of the 162 quotes/paraphrases, 101 crisis response message tones were coded. Figure 2 indicates the message tones used by Penn State during November 5, 2011 through January 22, 2012. The remaining 61 quotes/paraphrases did not have a correlating message tone.

**Coded Message Tones Table 2**

<b>Message Tone</b>	<b>Total <i>n</i></b>
Public relations	64
Legal	9
Mixed	25
Diversiory	3

The coded message tones in quotes/paraphrases included public relations (n=64, 39.5%), legal (n=9, 5.6%), mixed (n=25, 15.4%), and diversionary (n=3, 1.9%). Messages with a public relations strategy offered to investigate the allegations voluntarily admitted that problems exist and implemented corrective actions as quickly as possible. An example of the public relations strategy used in the Penn State crisis involves Erickson striving for openness and making the decision to create a committee specifically to investigate the Sandusky situation and the internal workings of Penn State's administration. On November 18, 2011, Erickson promised a "new era of transparency" and he promised, "to appoint an ethics officer who will report directly to him" (Berube, 2011, para. 9). These two examples demonstrated the public relations strategy because Erickson was trying to remain open and transparent while implementing corrective actions to prevent this situation from repeating itself in the future.

It is also interesting to note how frequently Penn State administrators used the mixed strategy. The mixed strategy encourages an organization to deny any fault while still expressing remorse that it happened and taking action. In a *New York Times* article from November 9, 2011, Board of Trustees released a statement that said it was "outraged by the horrifying details" of the

Grand jury report but promised it would take “swift, decisive action”. The Board decided to take action by appointing “a special committee to undertake a “full and complete investigation”” (Viera and Thamel, 2011, para. 8). This example shows the university is not denying what happened, but vows to try its best to fix the situation through an investigation to determine who is at fault.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY & SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Several limitations existed within the study. For example, the articles that included a quote/paraphrase from Penn State administrators might not all have been found because of selected search terms. Another limitation for this sampling involved excluding all blog articles from the analysis and other media outlets. Bloggers’ work is not scrutinized by news organizations under the same fact-checking system as journalists’ work. Lastly, certain articles were examined within a specific time frame. The time frame restrained the researcher from a complete understanding of Penn State’s overall crisis response strategy during the entire length of the crisis.

While limitations are troublesome for researchers, limitations can also provide opportunities and ideas for future research. For instances, more research is needed to explore the media framing of the Penn State crisis and research how the university responded directly to the crisis compared to its response to the media’s portrayal of the crisis. This would be interesting to research because “perception determines the outcome of every crisis response,” according to Cohn (2000, p. 32). Media frames stories certain ways to gain readership and tell a story. Although a situation might not have been labeled a crisis initially, after the media frames it as one public opinion can change. Public opinion affects an organization’s reputation (Cohn, 2000, p 33). Exploring the relationship between a university’s responses that are addressing the crisis

and the media framing of the crisis would potential reveal if responding to one over the other might be more significant in managing a crisis and reducing reputational damage.

Future research could also reveal tone(s) that can emerge from the statements about the crisis released directly from the university compared to the tones found in demonstrated by this study.

## **Chapter 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

Sports programs, college athletes, and coaches have become increasingly influential and universities have made large investments into their athletic departments. Pennsylvania State University (Penn State), with more than half a million alumni and an athletic program ranked third in 2011 with a value of \$100 million, is a prestigious university recognized as being a dominant force in college athletics (Forbes, 2011, para. 4). However, Penn State is not exempt from experiencing a crisis. Every university and college should plan and prepare for a crisis. In an effort to learn how Penn State managed the 2011 Sandusky sex abuse scandal, the study researched Penn State's crisis response strategies and message tones.

The first research question addressed what crisis response strategies Penn State demonstrated between November 5, 2011 and January 22, 2012. The content analysis of a national and a local newspapers' coverage found that corrective action was the primary crisis responses strategy. The corrective action strategy response could explain how Penn State's athletic program's value only dropped by a little more than a fourth. A year after the Sandusky crisis the university ranked 13<sup>th</sup> with a value of less than \$80 million. The university's value dropped 21% from the previous year (Smith, 2012b, para. 14).

The second research question focused on determining what type of tone Penn State's messages had. Of the 162 quotes/paraphrases, 101 crisis response messages were coded as demonstrating a traditionally public relations tone. However, the research clearly indicated Penn State also used mixed tone strategy in which the organization denies any fault while expressing remorse that the issue happened and takes corrective action. This tone was used mainly when Penn State's spokespersons were commenting about the special investigative committee or the Freeh Report.

The most surprising finding of this study was that Penn State President Rodney Erickson was coded as having the most comments concerning or relating to the crisis. This comes as a surprise because Erickson replaced Graham Spanier so quickly after the crisis became public. Public relations professionals must recognize how important selecting the right leader and spokesperson is to managing a company's crisis effectively. In the case of Penn State, Erickson changed how Penn State handled the crisis. Before Erickson became president, Spanier had failed to confront Sandusky about the allegations and to share any information with the Board of Trustees about Grand jury proceedings. He also defended the administrators who were charged with Sandusky. Unlike Spanier, Erickson vowed to be transparent and correct the mistakes of Penn State's previous administrators. Erickson ultimately changed the course of Penn State's crisis response strategy and helped repair the university's reputation.

Another surprising finding in this research was the overall type of tone Penn State's messages appeared to demonstrate, especially considering how public opinion of Penn State was that the university was not open and honest, but full of secrecy and corruption. In an interview with Chris Spannos (2011) from the *New York Times*, author Henry Giroux said,

There is a lot of talk about the culture of silence as if it is simply an offshoot of the need to protect the wealth and power of those in control of Penn State's football empire, but the fact of the matter is the real issue is that higher education has been corrupted by big money, big sports, corporate power, and the search for profits for some time... has gotten worse. The issue here is not simply about a morally depraved culture of silence, it is about a university surrendering its mission as a democratic public sphere where students learn to think critically, hold power accountable, and connect knowledge and social relations to the social costs they enact.

Perhaps the traditional public relations tone was coded as being Penn State's primary tone because Erickson (the most quoted spokesperson for Penn State) said he was "committed "to transparency to the fullest extent possible" (Patriot-News, 2011, para. 7). Erickson strengthened

Penn State's public relations communication campaign by speaking honestly and openly with the public at the townhall meetings.

Penn State is not the only university struggling to fight a corruptive culture. Universities are becoming increasingly corporatized, according to Giroux (2007), and are distorting the line between education and business. Giroux said "universities and colleges compound this marriage of commercial and educational values by signing exclusive contracts with Pepsi, Nike, and other contractors, further blurring the distinction between student and consumer" (p. 105-106). Does this explain why Erickson was deemphasizing Penn State's football program because he was demonstrating his commitment to shifting priorities within the university from protecting the brand to protecting students and making moral decisions? Athletic departments across the United States can learn from Penn State's mistakes. College athletic departments across the country must understand that college is more than having high-ranking, profitable sports teams with celebrity coaches and high television ratings on game day. A root cause for the Penn State crisis, according to the Freeh report, was "a culture of reverence for the football program that [was] ingrained at all levels of the campus community" (Freeh Sporkin & Sullivan, 2012, p. 17).

In the best interest of a client, public relations professionals have a responsibility to ask the hard questions and demand detailed information to prevent organizations from hiding under a veil of secrecy, arrogance, and/or fear of bad publicity. This study signifies the importance of confronting a person or situation and responding strategically

With vigilant planning, university administrators can be prepared to manage a crisis and to ensure that it emerges from a crisis with its publics' trust and minimal reputational damage. Overall, understanding SCCT strategies for public relations practitioners is vital to effectively responding to a crisis. Knowing and practicing SCCT strategies ensures a company will be

prepared for a crisis and how to efficiently and effectively present key messages to its stakeholders. Coombs (2007) said, “Crisis managers benefit from understanding how crisis communication can be used to protect reputation assets during a crisis” (p. 163).

The analysis of Penn State’s crisis management adds to the body of knowledge for public relations involved in higher education and athletics. By knowing how Penn State strategically responded to the crisis and understanding the tone of a majority of its messages, public relations professionals and university administrators will be more equipped to prepare and to respond strategically regarding crisis communication. The study is another tool collegiate administrators can examine to decide how to respond and communicate during similar crises. This study is also another step in gaining more understanding about how news coverage, crisis response strategies, and message tones work together to shape the outcome of the crisis.

These findings demonstrated the importance of understanding crisis response strategies and crisis communication.

This study examined the most significant collegiate athletic crisis in history and concentrated on how Penn State University’s crisis management strategy, or lack thereof, and how its message tone affected the public perception of the university and its athletic program. An important concept to understand about crisis communication is no crisis is the same, but studying previous crises is important since they indicate best practices for public relations professionals dealing with a similar crisis.

Athletic programs continue to grow. According to The National Football Foundation & College Hall of Fame (2013), there are approximately 650 collegiate football programs that exist across the United States. The study on Penn State’s crisis response strategies has provided more insight to academic institutions about anticipating a crisis and how to strategically manage

similar crises in the future. This study will help higher education public relations professions understand how destructive hiding the truth can be for an organization.

As sports continue to dominate universities' culture the best policy for managing a crisis is transparency and honesty. This study suggested that Penn State's crisis was an example of how a culture focused on succeeding athletically devastated a community and damaged a university's reputation. The Penn State crisis reinforces how no company, organization, or university is exempt from experiencing a crisis. Public relations professionals must anticipate a crisis, plan for it then respond strategically.

## **Appendix A**

### **Instructions for Coders**

You have been selected to evaluate newspaper articles about the 2011 Pennsylvania State University crisis involving Jerry Sandusky's sex abuse charges. Please read each article carefully. Evaluate the sentence for what type of crisis response strategy Penn State implemented and the crisis response messages. Crisis response strategies and crisis response strategy messages are defined in the following appendix pages. Reading them before you begin your work is essential.

Procedures:

- Read each sentence carefully. Take your time.
- On the coding sheet, provide the following:
  - Source of story
  - Who was quoted in the article
  - Crisis response strategy
  - Crisis response strategy message tone
- Use provided coding sheet for all newspaper articles
- There are no right or wrong answers. Please code the sentence with the crisis response strategies and tones that closely relates to its characteristics.

## Appendix B Coding Sheet

**1. Indicate the source of the article:**

*New York Times* or *Centre Daily Times*.

**Indicate which sources the author quoted in the story.**

- Penn State President Graham Spanier = 1
- Penn State Interim President Rodney Erickson = 2
- Penn State Board of Trustee Chair Steve Garban = 3
- Penn State Board of Trustee Vice Chair John Surma = 4
- Any Penn State Board of Trustees member = 5
- Penn State Interim Director of Athletics David Joyner = 6
- Anyone designated to speak on behalf of Penn State = 7
- Any Penn State issued statements = 8

**2. What crisis response strategy was demonstrated:**

Attack the accuser	1	Ingratiation	5
Denial	2	Corrective Action	6
Excuse	3	Full Apology	7
Justification	4	Mortification	8

\*\* If the coder does not think any crisis response strategy is demonstrated please code quote/paraphrase as zero, 0.

**3. Indicate the tone of the crisis response strategy message implemented by Penn State:**

Traditional Public Relations	1
Traditional Legal	2
Mixed	3
Diversionsary	4

## **Appendix C**

### **Crisis Response Strategies Defined**

**Attack the accuser** (1)– Crisis manager confronts the accuser and attempts to reduce an attacker's credibility. (EXAMPLE: The accuser is lying. Those so-called sexual interactions were never shared with Penn State administrators.)

**Denial** (2)– There is no crisis. This may include explaining why there is no crisis and refusing to take blame for the crisis. (EXAMPLE: We were never notified of any sexual instances involving Jerry Sandusky.)

**Excuse** (3)– Minimize the organization's responsibility for the crisis; saying the organization had no control over the events that led to the crisis.

**Justifications** (4) – Crisis managers attempt to minimize the perceived damage associated with the crisis. This can include saying there was no serious damage or injuries. (EXAMPLE: Penn State revoked Sandusky's keys to access Penn State facilities so more children couldn't be hurt by him.)

**Ingratiation** (5) – Actions are designed to make stakeholders like the organization. The organization reminds the public of past good deeds.

**Corrective action** (6) – crisis managers seek to repair damage from the crisis, take steps to prevent a repeat of the crisis, or both.

**Full apology** (7) - Apologize for the act. (EXAMPLE: We apologize to the students and families affected by sexual abuse.)

**Mortification** (8) – tries to gain forgiveness for the organization or ease the pain. (EXAMPLE: Penn State administrators are going to donate \$1 million to help sexually abused children.)

(Coombs, 1998, 2004; Benoit, 1995)

**Appendix D**  
**Crisis Response Strategy Classifications**

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Classification/Explanation</b>
Traditional Public Relations	State company policy on the issue (if appropriate); investigate the allegations; act candid, voluntarily admit that a problem exists (if true) and announce and implement corrective measures as quickly as possible
Traditional Legal	Say nothing; say little as possible and release it quietly as possible; say as little as possible, cite privacy laws, company policy or sensitivity; deny guilt and/or act indignant that such charges could possibly have been made; or shift or share the blame with the plaintiff. Other defending statements were made about the organization
Mixed	A mixed strategy encourages an organization to deny any fault while expressing remorse that the issue happened and taking action. Also includes investigating event and determining another party is at fault.
Diversionary	attempts to divert media and public attention away from the accusations; tell the media that the organization is outraged at the situation, while taking little or no substantive actions; and/or announce that the problem is solved or that the alleged offender is leaving the organization for unrelated reasons(i.e. personal)

(Fitzpatrick and Rubin, 1995)

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