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Reflections from Crisis: A Phenomenological Study of the Texas A&M Bonfire Collapse

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The 1999 Texas A&M University Bonfire collapse killed 12 students and injured dozens. Response to this event involved a number of campus administrators, lasted for many years, and led to the emergence of new risk management standards. Nearly 20 years later, researchers explored how campus leaders experienced the tragedy and reflected on their role over time. The study analyzed personal experiences and lessons learned from 15 leaders who led the crisis response and recovery.

Much has changed over the past 20 years in the ways colleges and universities prepare for and respond to campus crises. Prior to this time, campus crisis plans, when they existed, tended to be procedural documents for emergency responders and focused primarily on natural disasters, fires, and hazardous material spills (Treadwell, 2016). These plans often failed to account for the effect of crisis on individuals. That is, they lacked a structured response to the emotional and psychological effects of a crisis on students and their families (Paterson, 2006), as well as the administrators who responded to them.

Resources have been created to help institutions better respond to crisis (Harper, Paterson, & Zdziarski, 2006; Hemphill & LaBanc, 2010; Studenberg, 2017; Zdziarski, Dunkel, & Rollo, 2007), and many senior student affairs officers perceive their institutions to be more prepared as a result (Catullo, Walker, & Floyd, 2009). We suggest there can be differences between preparedness to respond to the immediacy of crisis and navigating the long-term effects of it (Grace, 2019; Jordan, 2019; Treadwell, 2016). Rarely are reflections of administrators revisited in the years that follow in order to understand what it meant to be a part of a crisis response (Grace, 2019). Yet, many of these individuals continue to serve our colleges and universities. This study explored the reflections of university administrators who responded to the collapse of the 1999 Texas A&M University Bonfire, which resulted in the death of 12 students and injured 27 others. Understanding the experiences of administrators who have responded to campus crisis may help us to better support the needs of those who respond to campus crisis and leverage their knowledge for future crisis planning.

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Campus Crisis

College and university campus crises share a number of common characteristics, including a “negative event or outcome, threat to people and property, surprise or sudden event, and disruption to operations” (Harper et al., 2006, p. 4). They are also characterized by their broad impact on “personnel, property, financial resources, and/or reputation of the institution” (Zdziarski, 2006, p. 5). Whereas critical incidents may affect part of a campus community or a small number of individuals, a crisis can affect the entire institution and community (Shaw & Roper, 2016). This may present unique leadership challenges for an already complex institutional environment (Treadwell, 2016; Zdziarski, 2006). The 2007 Virginia Tech shootings served as a turning-point for campus emergency management and led to the formalization of complex and coordinated crisis preparation and response procedures (Studenberg, 2017). As a result, campus crisis response plans have become highly collaborative and sophisticated approaches designed to address a host of critical incidents and crises on a campus.

University administrators expend an abundance of emotional energy to support the growth, development, and overall academic success of the students they serve. Leaders charged with campus crisis response must frame their approach through hospitality, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, charity (also referred to as the principle of fairness), and comfortability with dynamic tension (Shaw & Roper, 2016). Such leadership responses require a deeply personal investment from the administrators involved. As is often the case for professionals in any helping field, these administrators sometimes fail to achieve a healthy work–life balance (Askers & Heiselt, 2010; Gores & Kwai, 2010). When disaster strikes, these administrators may not receive the support they need to cope with the tragedy that shakes their community, erring instead on the side of suspending their own needs to care for students and other individuals (Van Brunt, Raleigh, & Johnson, 2009).

There has been little written about the reflections and meaning-making of administrators in the years that follow a crisis response. Much of the existing literature on campus crisis focuses primarily on how to respond to it (Harper et al., 2006; Hemphill & LaBanc, 2010; Zdziarski, 2006). The immediate crisis response is important for institutions, but we must also acknowledge the impact on the personal and professional lives of these administrators, particularly since the institutional response to crisis and its effects can be long term (Harper et al., 2006). Treadwell (2016) found that if campus administrators charged with crisis response intentionally reflected on their experiences, many did not begin to do so upon their experience and the personal impact on their lives until they considered the crisis to be over—which typically began at the first anniversary of the crisis, but in some cases was delayed until the final lawsuits concluded (anywhere from 5 to 15 years following the crisis). The collapse of the 1999 Texas A&M University Bonfire provides a unique opportunity to explore the long-term reflections of administrators based on an event that is often seen as a seminal case study of how institutions respond to campus crisis.

Texas A&M University Bonfire and 1999 Collapse

The Texas A&M University Bonfire, commonly referred to as “Bonfire,” was a university tradition that involved thousands of students every fall. Bonfire, always a student project, became a school-sanctioned event in 1936 (Bernstein, 1999). As responsibility for the project shifted to students, Bonfire became a student organization advised by an administrator in student affairs. Initially, the advising of Bonfire, like other student organizations at most colleges and universities, assumed an in loco parentis approach that evolved into what Bickel and Lake (1999) characterized as a “hands off” or bystander approach with no legal duty to protect students. The concept of shared responsibility and a balancing of university authority and student freedom or facilitator role
was adopted in the 1990s (Bickel & Lake, 1999). At the time of the Bonfire collapse, Texas A&M University and student affairs administrators nationally were very much in a transition period working to fully understand the implications of what it meant to operate under a facilitator model.

At 2:42 a.m. on November 18, 1999, the Texas A&M University Bonfire collapsed, killing 12 students and injuring 27 others. Approximately 58 people were working on the Bonfire stack when it collapsed (Texas A&M University, 2000). The collapse resulted in the dispatch of emergency personnel, including police, fire fighters, the university's Critical Incident Response Team, and the State's Urban Search and Rescue Team. There were also numerous volunteers from the local community and around the state. “The exact number of people involved in the bonfire collapse incident is unknown, but is estimated that approximately 3,200 people from at least fifty different agencies were involved in some capacity during the incident” (U.S. Fire Administration, 1999, p. 13). Following the collapse, university administrators assumed responsibility for maintaining emergency information phone lines, notifying family members of the deceased students, serving as case managers for injured students and families of the deceased students, coordinating trips to individual funeral services, and providing ongoing support for the broader university community. Some university administrators were also involved in the long-term investigation, legal processes, and efforts to determine the future of Bonfire.

The landscape of higher education and student affairs has changed considerably since the collapse of the Texas A&M University Bonfire. The way in which colleges and universities identify risk and respond to campus crisis is more complex. When called to respond to crisis, the reality is that this response will likely last well beyond the initial days of the event, as was the case at Texas A&M University. It is important as a community of higher educational professionals that we explore and understand what it means to respond to a crisis, so that we can educate and support those who may find themselves on the front-lines of these tragic events.

**Purpose of the Research**

The current research study examined the lived experiences of 15 Texas A&M University administrators who were deeply involved in the tradition's management, response, and recovery following the collapse. Few studies have explored what it means to have been a responder to campus crisis in the years that follow such an event. This study employed a phenomenological methodology to understand the experience of serving as a university administrator in the wake of the 1999 Texas A&M University Bonfire collapse. The following question guided this study: How do university administrators experience campus crisis on their campuses and make meaning of it in the years following the crisis?

**Method**

The researchers employed a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. Hermeneutic phenomenology provides an avenue for documenting and interpreting a unique lived experience shared by a small number of participants in hopes of establishing an essential structure or essence of that experience (Creswell, 2007; Graham, 2008; McKoy, 2010; Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology at its core allows individuals' lived experience to drive the research process, rather than relying upon existing literature to do so (Creswell, 2007).
Context

Texas A&M University is a 4-year public university that enrolled 36,077 in the fall of 1999. Of these students, 44.8% were women, 81.3% White, 9.4% Hispanic, 3.3% Asian or Pacific Islander, 2.7% Black/African American, and 0.4% Native American. The institution is a residential campus with 64.0% of first-time, first-year students living in college-owned, operated, or affiliated housing. A university-sanctioned Bonfire has not occurred on campus since the 1999 collapse, in part as a result of state and federal lawsuits that were brought forward following this crisis. However, an unsanctioned off-campus bonfire has continued since 2002. The last lawsuit related to the Bonfire collapse was settled in April of 2014. The university continues to hold a remembrance ceremony annually.

Participants

The researchers invited 21 university leaders who were directly involved in the crisis response to the Bonfire collapse to participate in this study by phone and e-mail. These individuals included vice presidents, student life leaders, residence hall directors, health and wellness professionals, university relations professionals, facilities and operations managers, and other critical campus figures. Of those invited to participate, 15 accepted our invitation. Only a handful of them remained employed at Texas A&M University at the time of this study. The remaining participants were employed by other postsecondary institutions, had retired, or were no longer working in higher education at the time of the study. Each of their stories included unique elements based upon their perspective on the crisis and assigned responsibilities at the time. These individuals served on the university’s Critical Incident Response Team, staffed area hospitals, acted as liaisons to families of deceased students, managed the physical site, coordinated international media attention, and led a variety of other efforts in their quest to navigate a highly publicized campus tragedy. A description of participants is provided in Table 1, although only general position titles were provided to maintain confidentiality of participants.

Data Collection

The study utilized a series of two in-depth interviews to collect data about the lived experiences of university administrators in the years following the crisis. The interviews occurred two to four days apart, depending on scheduling availability of the participants. The phenomenological interview structure was modified from Seidman’s approach (2006), who relied heavily on Van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutic tradition to develop the qualitative interview guidelines. This approach is appropriate for a wide range of topics, particularly since “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9).

The interview protocol was modeled after Treadwell’s (2016) research on student affairs leadership through high-profile crises. Participants were provided with the protocol in advance of each interview, which included questions such as: How would you describe the experience of a university administrator during and following a campus tragedy? What did you reply upon the most to guide your leadership through the event? How would you describe your learning as a result of campus tragedy? Interviews were primarily conducted through a web-based video conferencing system, although some were conducted in person. Each interview ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in length. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and provided back to participants for checking. In total, the interview transcripts resulted in more than 200 pages of reflections from participants.
Analysis

The researchers utilized Smith and Firth’s (2011) framework approach for qualitative data analysis. This framework emphasizes research transparency across all stages of the analysis. Transcripts were coded by at least two members of the research team, with the initial coding conducted by a team member who did not conduct the interview. Collectively, these transcripts resulted in a matrix of 683 initial codes and 21 broader categories. Each of these initial codes and categories were then compared to identify which categories were unique or commonly shared across participants. During this stage, the research team reviewed and revised the developing framework. This process resulted in 170 refined codes and four core concepts that defined how university administrators made meaning of their involvement with the crisis response to the Bonfire collapse (Table 2).

Positionality

Each member of the research team has experienced crisis personally or professionally. Two team members were employed by Texas A&M University at the time of the collapse and held significant leadership responsibilities in response to this event. The third researcher was deeply connected to the Oklahoma City bombing—an event Texas A&M University leaders looked to in fostering recovery after the Bonfire collapse. Two researchers identified as male and one researcher identified as female. To help bracket for potential bias, the interview protocol was simulated with team members. These interviews were not included as part of the analysis but helped the research team to experience the process, document their experiences prior to engaging in data collection, and reflect on their own perceptions.

Table 1
Participants’ Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Response Role</th>
<th>Alumni</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior administration</td>
<td>Responding to media, long-term response</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Residence Life</td>
<td>Supported on-campus residents</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student Life</td>
<td>Advisory board member</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student Life</td>
<td>CIRT(^a)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Corps of Cadets</td>
<td>Recovery and future planning</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior Administration</td>
<td>Coordination of staff response</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Facilities and Operations</td>
<td>Institutional response</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Residence Life</td>
<td>Supported on-campus residents</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior Administration</td>
<td>Notifying families, responding to media, long-term response</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>University Relations</td>
<td>Crisis communications</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior Administration</td>
<td>Institutional response</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior Administration</td>
<td>Long-term response</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Health and Safety</td>
<td>Institutional response</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Student Life</td>
<td>CIRT(^a)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student Life</td>
<td>CIRT(^a)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Critical Incident Response Team.
Table 2

Overview of Core Concepts and Related Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Concept</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Examples of Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Context</td>
<td>• Tradition and Culture of Bonfire</td>
<td>• Bonfire as a Fraternity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Institutional Bias</td>
<td>• Bonfire as an Institutional Symbol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Indicators of Crisis Potential</td>
<td>• Negative Aspects of Bonfire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sexism in Bonfire Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of Understanding by Outsiders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Crisis Response</td>
<td>• Crisis Awareness</td>
<td>• Roles During Crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• On-Site Emergency Response</td>
<td>• Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Institutional Response</td>
<td>• Victim/Survivor Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Leadership During Crisis</td>
<td>• Commitment to Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Concern for Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Crisis Experience</td>
<td>• Personal Landscape</td>
<td>• Relationship to Bonfire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Uncertainty about the Situation</td>
<td>• Initial Confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reliance on Prior Experience</td>
<td>• Trusting Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Experiencing Trauma</td>
<td>• Caring for Personal Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Managing Emotions</td>
<td>• Impact on Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Effect on Job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes of Crisis</td>
<td>• Community Created in Crisis</td>
<td>• Need for Peer Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Changes to Practice</td>
<td>• Awareness of Legal and Risk Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Changes to Perspective</td>
<td>• Sharing Lessons Learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Personal Growth</td>
<td>• Perspective Changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Pride and Appreciation of Response</td>
<td>• Increased Institutional Commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collection of Artifacts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Trustworthiness

The research team took numerous steps to support the study’s validity and trustworthiness throughout the research process. All interviews were recorded and transcribed immediately following the conversation. Participants received copies of their interview transcripts and were given the opportunity to make clarifications as desired. Throughout the data analysis phase, the three-person research team regularly engaged in peer-review processes to verify individual team members’ coding decisions and initial findings. Following data analysis, the research team shared the study’s core concepts, findings, and initial manuscript with all participants and sought feedback on the findings.

Limitations

Because some members of the research team were previously employed by Texas A&M University, some participants may have more been familiar than others with certain team members. As a result, the information shared by participants may have been affected by these prior relationships. The research team was careful to match participants with a team member who would lead to the most open and honest dialogue. In some instances, participants commented about the
importance these prior relationships played in facilitating trust, particularly given the sensitivity of the subject. However, it is possible that some participants did not feel comfortable fully sharing their perspectives. It is also acknowledged that there were unheard voices from responders to the Bonfire collapse. Some of these individuals were contacted but declined to participate, citing that the emotions associated with this crisis were still too strong to support their participation in this project. Other individuals (emergency responders, students, volunteers, among other stakeholders) were not contacted, to maintain the study’s focus. Such perspectives may be different from those heard in this study.

Findings

In the wake of campus tragedy, administrators at Texas A&M University experienced deeply personal reactions to the crisis and the events that followed. Beyond their leadership roles, policy discussions, and specific actions, these individuals encountered a wholly unfamiliar phenomenon. They navigated unprecedented challenges, but also built an inimitable sense of teamwork while responding to the tragedy. As one participant recalled, “it was the worst time of my professional career, and yet it was the very best time of my professional career.” Extensive analysis of the participants’ individual experiences resulted in four core concepts of the lived experience of serving as a Texas A&M University administrator at the time of the 1999 Bonfire collapse. The experience may be best understood as: existing within a unique institutional context, influenced by a strong institutional crisis response, resulting in a deeply personal crisis experience, and leading to significant outcomes of the crisis.

Discussion of Core Concepts

Participants’ responses highlighted the importance of considering the crisis in context of a long and complicated relationship between Bonfire and the university. Some participants viewed Bonfire as a treasured tradition, while others expressed concern regarding the power Bonfire held in the campus culture. Their experiences indicated that Bonfire both defined and was defined by Texas A&M University. The complexity of the role of Bonfire in the institutional culture influenced participants’ personal and institutional crisis response experiences, which in turn led to specific outcomes of the crisis response.

Institutional Context. The Texas A&M Bonfire was inseparable from the university’s culture and most treasured experiences. Many campus leaders recalled the glory and symbolism shepherded by Bonfire, while others recounted unsuccessful attempts to change a troubling culture. As one said, “the Bonfire had been such a sacred thing. It had taken on this power, this life of its own.” Serving as an administrator prior to the Texas A&M Bonfire collapse was defined by a longstanding, pervasive, and problematic culture that surrounded the Bonfire tradition. Yet, Bonfire was also undeniably a celebrated institutional symbol. One participant recalled that: “I loved Bonfire…what it symbolized to me was this place where students were given the opportunity to dream huge dreams.” Another participant echoed the sentiment—“That’s why I wanted to work at A&M…because of that Bonfire. I just thought it was the coolest thing in the world.”

Other study participants described an aversion to Bonfire and distrust of the deeply engrained culture. For many, Bonfire was also built upon a culture of sexism, risk, and defiance of institutional policies. Campus administrators described Bonfire as an untouchable fraternity with a powerful alumni base and holds on nearly every aspect of student life. Many of the study’s participants shared the pain of failed attempts to change problematic aspects of this culture or address known risks—“There were signs all along that really weren’t heeded…why didn’t we
know?” While none of the study’s participants anticipated the scope of the 1999 tragedy, many described previous accidents surrounding Bonfire and a belief that the tradition was a risky, unsafe endeavor for the university with the potential for a campus crisis.

**Institutional Crisis Response.** After the Bonfire stack collapsed, the study’s participants engaged in a highly coordinated community response to the tragedy. They experienced the crisis first-hand—some had just left the build site, and others arrived minutes after the collapse. None were prepared to encounter the death and destruction they discovered. They expressed significant uncertainty about their initial role in the response, noting as one did that “This was so big and so massive. There were moving parts to this going on everywhere. And nobody really knew everything that was happening.” Many campus administrators relied on prior experience responding to more isolated student crises, but they recognized the unprecedented scope of encountering the Bonfire collapse—as one participant described, “We didn’t have all the answers. There was no script for this.” Instead, they relied upon their limited prior experiences, strong institutional values, and their own sense of humanity to do the right thing.

As time progressed, campus administrators represented the university at memorials, evaluated the potential for Bonfire’s return, engaged in extensive legal conversations, and struggled to demonstrate institutional leadership in the face of significant uncertainty. One participant shared that “Most people think about…the immediacy of the event. For the first responders, the crisis kind of ends when the recovery and rescue stuff is over…for us, well, I guess it’s still going on.” Decades later, campus responders recalled an astonishing bond built through tragedy: “There was such a sense of unity, a sense of coming together and supporting each other, that I don’t think I’ve felt since in any kind of team.”

**Personal Crisis Experience.** Participants experienced significant personal trauma and uncertainty about how to navigate the unprecedented magnitude of their responsibilities. They relied instead upon prior experiences with smaller-scale crisis response. These administrators postponed attending to their own trauma in order to care for the families of deceased students, injured students, and devastated community. One participant remembered thinking, “No, you can’t fall apart right now. You just need to be taking care of people.”

In the wake of tragedy, the study’s participants began to experience emotions they did not have the capacity to process. One participant reflected, “It changed me emotionally. I learned to compartmentalize emotions to get the job done.” Another admitted, “I had guilt. I’ve never said that to anybody else.” A third recalled, years later, realizing the impact of Bonfire and lingering fear—“Somehow there was a recognition that life is going to happen, and you can’t live in fear that the Bonfire is going to collapse…but in my personal life, I was terrified all the time.” Many campus administrators struggled to move forward or return to previous responsibilities, noting that “It’s clearly the most difficult and the darkest day I ever spent in my student affairs career.” One participant worried about the impact of Bonfire on future campus crisis response encounters, admitting that “There’s a part of me that wonders, have I become a little more calloused to tragedy?” Nearly all the participants described the effect responding to the Bonfire collapse had on their future professional endeavors and indicated that responding to the collapse was, as one said, “in my job every single day until I left A&M.”

**Outcomes of Crisis.** As the university moved forward, individuals involved in the Bonfire collapse response contributed significantly to positive outcomes that emerged from the campus crisis. They desired to share their learning with higher education leaders across the country and redefined concepts of risk management as they relate to student activities. Bonfire was, according to one participant, “a wake-up call for all of us, that very few of us were practicing anything that even
approached proactive risk management.” Administrators directly involved in the Bonfire response recalled a deep sense of duty to shape the campus culture in proactive ways—one participant shared: “We need to remember that we have an obligation to be involved, and we can’t forget why we did what we did.” Another recalled a realization of the true scope of the work:

We recognized that not only are we expected to be educators and administrators of whatever process it is that we’re responsible for, but we’re also expected now to be all purpose first responders, grief counselors, troubleshooters…we’re responsible for risk mitigation, whether it’s in our job description or not.

These individuals engaged in nationwide efforts to establish safer learning environments for college students. In particular, campus administrators helped to shift the profession toward prevention efforts: one believes that “We have a role in response, but our bigger role is in the pre-crisis things. There’s a lot more that we can do to prevent and mitigate.” Nevertheless, they described wrestling with the fact that Bonfire still exists as an unsanctioned, off-campus activity. Nearly 20 years after the 1999 tragedy, the study’s participants shared that they are still wrestling with how Bonfire impacted their personal and professional lives, noting that their perspective on the experience continues to shift with time.

### Discussion

Prior investigations of the Bonfire emergency focused primarily on technical details of why the collapse occurred, but failed to account for the vast personal and professional impact of serving as a campus administrator during the crisis. As one participant reflected, “The way to remember people is to make sure that we don’t put people in that same kind of situation again.” This study underscored the importance of prior training and learning from crisis response experiences, even when those prior experiences did not mirror the magnitude of the current campus crisis. The Texas A&M Bonfire collapse occurred at a time when many institutions did not have comprehensive campus crisis prevention, preparation, response, and recovery plans in place. Though emergency response plans are more developed today, the study’s participants pointed to training as a critical factor in their ability to respond to unanticipated challenges. Nearly two decades later, emergency response plans are engrained in institutional processes, but we should not assume that all student affairs professionals are adequately trained to respond to such widespread campus crises. Student affairs leaders must begin to implement comprehensive, ongoing, and multilevel training and experiential learning programs to better prepare campus leaders at all levels.

In addition to preparing student affairs professionals at all levels to encounter campus crisis, campuses should formalize faculty and staff support mechanisms into their emergency response plans. Often, campus emergency response processes and procedures include explicit strategies to provide students with counseling and emotional support following a campus crisis. When a campus experiences an isolated student death or a major tragedy, student affairs professionals and community-based mental health providers provide grief counseling, spiritual guidance, and academic support to the campus community. Unfortunately, the staff responsible for providing such care following a campus crisis may likely be traumatized themselves or navigating their own grief or guilt related to the event. As this study’s participants shared, administrators charged with responding to campus crises often postpone their own healing to care for students, victims, and families of victims.

Administrators who responded to the Texas A&M University Bonfire collapse continue to navigate emotions associated with this crisis. Almost 20 years later, many administrators shared continued feelings of responsibility, anger, and grief associated with the Bonfire collapse. Administrators may continue to be employed by an institution for years, if not decades, following
crisis. Institutions must be prepared to support the long-term needs of responders, as well as leverage those experiences to build capacity for responding to future crises.

In the wake of campus crisis, physical memorials, artifacts, and formal remembrance ceremonies play an important role in institutional and personal recovery. While many student affairs professionals are too young to remember the Bonfire collapse, the study’s participants expressed worry that the pivotal lessons from the crisis response will be lost as a new generation enters the profession. Many participants shared stories of artifacts they kept for decades following the tragedy or recalled the emotion they felt upon visiting the campus memorial site for the first time. The university continues to hold an annual remembrance ceremony to honor the students who died in the collapse. Administrators most closely connected to the Bonfire response and recovery shared that these memorials and ceremonies may serve as reminders of the reasoning behind risk management procedures, the importance of remaining diligent for warning signs of students in trouble, and the necessity of being an active bystander to strengthen the campus community.

Lastly, the Bonfire crisis changed the perspective of university administrators in the years that followed. Many administrators commented on the role of crisis in re-evaluating individual and professional priorities. Some shared that responding to a campus crisis led to an increased level of hope and reliance on faith. Colleges and universities must be prepared to accept that these experiences will have lasting effects that may come to define the institution itself and those who experience the campus crisis.

Implications for Student Affairs Practitioners

As higher education professionals—particularly those working in student affairs roles—navigate increasingly complex national and institutional landscapes, they must be prepared to respond to crises. This study’s participants offered deeply personal accounts of their efforts to navigate complex and unfamiliar professional responsibilities in the wake of campus crisis. Analysis of the context within which the Texas A&M Bonfire collapse occurred, the institutional and personal crisis leadership experiences of campus administrators, and the long-term outcomes of the response and recovery offers relevant insights for current higher education administrators charged with campus crisis response and recovery.

Campus Crisis Response Training

As this study’s participants demonstrated, previous experiences managing student accidents, responding to campus-based injuries, or making student death notifications provided a context from which to work when they were faced with a campus crisis of unprecedented magnitude. Campus crisis prevention and response training requires student affairs professionals to prepare individuals at all levels for situations that are unknown in terms of date, location, type, and scope (Russell O’Grady & Treadwell, 2019). Many campuses conduct regular tabletop drill exercises with a small group of key campus leaders, typically at a senior administration level. As the 1999 Texas A&M Bonfire collapse demonstrated, response to a major campus crisis involved the entire campus community. If and when disaster strikes, residence hall directors, program coordinators, student affairs graduate assistants, and other new professionals will become critical to a campus’s response and recovery efforts. Campus crisis training should include all levels of staff in ongoing opportunities to prepare for and consider one’s personal and professional response to a major campus incident (Jordan, 2019; Russell O’Grady & Treadwell, 2019; Treadwell, 2016).

In particular, campus crisis training should extend to student affairs and higher education graduate preparation programs (Trahan, 2012; Treadwell, 2016). This study’s participants
recalled relying upon student affairs graduate assistants to support the bonfire collapse response and recovery. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 18,200 individuals will enter the profession by 2026 and indicates that that Postsecondary Education Administrator job opportunities will increase by 10% in the coming decade, faster than the average of all other occupations (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Many new professionals will enter graduate preparation programs directly from their undergraduate experience. These new professionals are likely to have little or no context for campus crises like the Bonfire collapse, but they must be prepared to respond to the routine student emergencies entry-level staff often encounter, as well as large-scale campus crises.

While many programs utilize campus crisis case studies, this inclusion is often arbitrary and at the discretion of individual faculty members, rather than a standard component of student affairs preparation curriculum. Graduate preparation programs should consider how to strengthen students’ preparation for individual and campus-wide crisis response. This should include a reconsideration of counseling training for student affairs professionals. While many programs have moved away from counseling-based courses in favor of more administrative skills, counseling skills may be critical for guiding their students and colleagues through a campus crisis (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2015).

**Emergency Response Plans**

Campuses could expand their capacity for recovery by proactively considering opportunities to support the staff and faculty who are instrumental in rebuilding a sense of community following campus crisis. This might include planning to rotate staff schedules in the event of a major campus crisis, arranging for counseling services beyond the institution’s standard employee assistance program, providing additional leave time, arranging for the delivery of healthy foods, and so on (Grace, 2019; Jordan, 2019). Additionally, the institution’s or division’s emergency response plans should include opportunities for staff and faculty to contribute to the response and recovery efforts, even if not directly connected to the event (Jordan, 2019). Contributing to response efforts or supporting staff more directly connected to the event may provide space for faculty and staff to process their emotions and re-establish a sense of meaning following a campus crisis (Treadwell, 2016).

Institutional emergency response plans should also allow for impromptu and formal memorial ceremonies, collection of artifacts, and, as appropriate, the construction of permanent physical memorials that honor victims, the community response, and the affirmation of institutional values (Bird, 2019). As these seminal campus crises become more distant, physical memorials and remembrance ceremonies provide important context for newer professionals and the institutions’ students. Although physical memorials and remembrance ceremonies exist primarily to honor those most deeply affected by the tragedy, they may also play a secondary role as educational tools to reinforce changes in the institution’s or profession’s practices and values. Administrators should consider how to leverage the artifacts, memorials, electronic tributes, and annual events as critical lessons in crisis prevention, preparation, and response.

**Conclusion**

Nearly 20 years after the 1999 Texas A&M Bonfire collapse, individuals involved with the response and recovery efforts offered insights that transformed the profession and continue to shape their daily practices. Details surrounding the Bonfire, its collapse, and the campus crisis response are certainly unique to Texas A&M University. However, the campus crisis transformed
risk management policies across the country and led to reformed emergency response best practices. A second Bonfire collapse of such magnitude is unlikely, but the lessons learned remain applicable. Student affairs professionals may look to the experiences of administrators who were most deeply connected to the campus crisis response to gather insights on responding to current campus crises. One participant shared that:

Even some of...what’s going on in the world right now with the racial climate and the protests and stuff on campus and the divisions I’ve seen in polarizing people. My own staff. This has been a really difficult time for me. There’s a part of me that doesn’t want to say that it’s like Bonfire, because Bonfire was just so significant and dealt with loss of life. But the tension and turmoil and ripping apart of people right now in some ways has been emotionally more difficult. I haven’t been able to fully apply some of the same response mechanisms to this that we did with Bonfire. Bonfire, you got people to rally around and come together. This is just constantly pulling people apart.

Whether a campus faces a horrific accident that results in student deaths, intentional violence that alters a campus community, or an ongoing campus protest of racial discrimination, student affairs leaders face deeply challenging and emotional work for which they are often unprepared.

To document the unique experience of serving as a key campus administrator through the response to the Texas A&M University Bonfire collapse, this study employed a phenomenological methodology to investigate the question: How do university administrators experience campus crisis on their campuses and make meaning in the years following the crisis? Extensive interviews with 15 individuals involved in the campus crisis response and recovery revealed that the unique culture of both Texas A&M University and the Bonfire tradition itself significantly influenced the environment in which the emergency response occurred. The phenomenological study revealed four key components of the leadership response to the 1999 Bonfire collapse—that it was deeply influenced by the pre-existing institutional context within which Bonfire existed and the beloved role Bonfire held in the university’s culture; that it was heavily dictated by a strong institutional response and the university’s desire to serve victims to the best of its ability; that it was a highly emotional and personal event that was both shaped by and shaped the individual participants for years to come; and that it led to numerous positive outcomes designed to improve nationwide campus safety and prevent similar tragedies from occurring in the future. As one participant recalled:

If we forget why we did everything we did after that Bonfire fell, and it becomes an exercise in box checking, and we don’t remember that the reason we shifted our philosophy of working with students...then it will happen again. It won’t happen at A&M as a Bonfire...but it will happen again. I’ve learned that that’s why we have to keep talking, not about the Bonfire specifically but about the lessons learned from it, because it’s really easy to acquiesce.

Though the Bonfire collapse was a tragic event that forever changed the Texas A&M University community and the lives of victims and family members, it also deeply impacted the personal and professional lives of campus administrators charged with managing the crisis response and recovery. This is perhaps no more apparent than in the study’s participants desire that the lessons be remembered—a longing ultimately rooted in their fervent wish that no university experience the level of heartbreak that they encountered on a cold November night nearly 20 years ago.

References


