Twenty Years of Crisis Response: Reflections on the 1999 Texas A&M University Bonfire Collapse

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In 1999, the Texas A&M University Bonfire collapse killed 12 students and injured dozens. This Advance U Webinar builds upon a recent research study that analyzed personal experiences and lessons learned from 15 leaders who led the crisis response and recovery. As campus leaders who experienced the tragedy, we will share reflections on the crisis and insights for a new generation of student affairs professionals.
Multifaceted Environment

- Organization professionals and campus professionals
- Our environments vary and as such can inform our experiences
- What you may experience as a crisis can vary
- “Crisis” can mean a myriad of things for each of us
Framework For Understanding

Dr. Kevin P. Jackson
A Framework for Understanding

Routine Emergency

Crisis

Trauma
Generalized situation outside the norm but with predictability, permitting advanced preparation; processes and protocols in place to handle; once contained typically return to normal operations.

Sources: https://www.ifsecglobal.com/security/when-is-an-incident-a-crisis/
Crisis

Abnormal and unstable situation with strategic implications; dynamic, widespread, and unpredictable; limited training from which to respond; exposes latent weaknesses that must be addressed.

Sources: https://www.ifsecglobal.com/security/when-is-an-incident-a-crisis/
Our Work

“In our business, every day presents at least one career ending opportunity.”

Dr. Larry Roper
Lessons Learned: Texas Aggie Bonfire

Dr. Brent Paterson
Bonfire Collapse

- Texas A&M University
- Cherished university tradition (90 years)
- Student-led and staff-advised
- November 18, 1999 tragedy struck
- Multiple student fatalities and injuries
- Widespread, devastating and ongoing impact
- Multiyear litigation
Reflections from Crisis: A Phenomenological Study of the Texas A&M Bonfire Collapse
Katie L. Treadwell, Forrest C. Lane & Brent G. Paterson

How do university administrators experience tragic events of a substantial nature that occur on their campuses and make meaning from the multitude of emotions felt after the crisis subsides?
Method, Data Collection & Analysis

- The study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology
- Interviewed 15 Texas A&M University administrators involved in the tradition’s management and the response following the collapse
- Two (2) in-depth interviews were used to collect data.
- Transcripts of interviews resulted in a matrix of 683 initial codes and 21 broader categories
- Refined to 170 refined codes and 4 core concepts
Findings: Core Concepts

- Institutional Context
- Institutional Response
- Personal Crisis Experience
- Outcomes of the Crisis
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<th>Sub-Themes</th>
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Personal Impact

Dr. Kevin P. Jackson
A Framework for Understanding

Routine Emergency

Crisis

Trauma
Traumatic Stress

Your nervous system becomes overwhelmed by stress, triggering a wide range of intense emotions and physical reactions. These reactions to traumatic stress often come and go in waves. There may be times when you feel jumpy and anxious, and other times when you feel disconnected and numb.

Source: https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/traumatic-stress.htm
It is common for people to experience stress in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy, but within a few months most people are able to resume functioning as they did prior to the experience. It is important to remember that resilience and recovery are the norm, not prolonged distress.

Source: https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/traumatic-stress.htm
A Framework for Understanding

Continuum of Potential Negative Impact Due to a Tragic Event

Impact of Tragic Event

Duration of Time and Degree of Exposure

To You  Through You  Because of You

Greater  Lesser

Tragic event is perceived or associated as having happened...
Staying Strong During a Traumatic Event

• Give yourself time to adjust
• Seek support from people who care about you
• Communicate your experience
• Seek professional assistance
• Engage in healthy behaviors
• Establish or reestablish routines
• Avoid major life decisions

Source: https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/recovering-disasters
Strengthening Ourselves in Advance of Traumatic Events

• The Personal Pre-Work is important (being physically, emotionally, spiritually whole)
• The Relational Pre-Work is important (strong networks of support at work and home)
• The Organizational Pre-Work is important (risk management strategies, routine emergency training, crisis response planning, etc.)
Key Lessons

Dr. Brent Patterson
**Preparation for Responding to a Crisis**

- Review institution emergency management plans and unit policies, procedures, protocols
- Discuss expectations with supervisor
- Identify common emergencies that happen in your area and identify your role and steps you would take in responding. Discuss with supervisor, peers, and staff.
- Develop positive relationships with those with whom you will interact in emergency/crisis response
- Formalize faculty and staff support mechanisms into emergency response plans
Response to Emergency/Crisis

- Nature of incident dictates response
- Communication
  - Who needs to know?
  - What do they need to know?
  - How soon do they need to know?
  - Do confidentiality laws (FERPA, HIPAA, state mental health codes) apply?
  - Who is authorized to tell others?
- Understand your role. Do not interfere with emergency responders’ roles.
- Do the right thing – “responsible people will make responsible decisions”
Recovery

• Be prepared to support long-term needs of responders

• Attend to on-going needs of those directly impacted by incident and those in campus community that need continued support

• Understand role physical memorials, artifacts, and formal remembrance ceremonies play in institutional and personal recovery

• Learn from the experience and implement positive changes to mitigate future incidents, to provide a more efficient and effective response, and create positive change.
Career Informing Lessons

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Questions & Answers
This AdvanceU is dedicated to the twelve students that lost their lives and those that were injured.

https://bonfire.tamu.edu/
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