

**Howard University's challenging Q1 2018:
A case study in managing natural and man-made crises**

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ABSTRACT

In the first three months of 2018, Howard University was faced with a series of three crises that sorely tested the administration's strategic communication abilities. In rapid succession, a winter storm postponed the spring semester; on-campus housing issues went viral, sparking negative media coverage; and revelations of an old financial aid scandal led to students occupying the administration building for eight days.

Each situation presented the university with critical public relations challenges related to restoring normalcy, keeping the public informed, and protecting its brand from damage. Howard employed various strategies and techniques with mixed results in meeting those goals, but the lessons should leave it better prepared for future crises.

INTRODUCTION

Howard University, located in Washington, D.C., proudly celebrated its sesquicentennial in 2017, marking 150 years in which the institution had grown to become arguably the nation's most prestigious HBCU (Historically Black Colleges & Universities). The year-long observance served to "recognize the historic milestones, achievements, and the positive impact the University has had since its founding in 1867", rising to be the only HBCU on U.S. News & World Reports' annual "Best Colleges" ranking of "National Universities" in 2017 (About 150 Years of Excellence in Truth & Service, n.d.).

However, not long after the ball dropped in Times Square and calendars were flipped worldwide, the anniversary's glow vanished in abrupt fashion. Howard was forced to handle a series of public relations crises – two man-made and one due to natural causes – within the new year's first quarter.

There was, in order: a winter freeze and subsequent damaged infrastructure in the first week of January, causing a delay to the spring semester; an apparent shortage of on-campus housing in early March, leading to widespread dissent after a student's email exchange with the school president went viral; and, later in March, a sit-in by hundreds of students who occupied the administration building for a week, following the disclosure of a financial aid scandal that led to six employees' dismissal – allegedly for taking funds intended for needy students.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the strategies that Howard employed, and the messages that were created and delivered, in response to the back-to-back-to-back crises during the first quarter of 2018. In the course of considering the school's performance in strategic communication, this case study will include:

HOWARD UNIVERSITY'S CHALLENGING Q1 2018

- The historical and contemporary background of Howard University, to provide context for the crises and responses;
- The identification and examination of Howard's major specific messages in response to each crisis;
- The use of image restoration theory (Benoit), rhetorical situation (Bitzer), situational crisis communication theory (Coombs), and agenda setting theory (McCombs and Shaw) in analyzing the strategic messages.

Due to its location in the nation's capital, its prominence among institutions of higher learning, and its status as a driving force of African-American culture, Howard University is squarely fixed in the spotlight of local and national media.

Federal legislators are among the stakeholders that leadership must consider when reacting to negative situations; about \$200 million of the school's annual operating budget comes via a special congressional appropriation (Hunter-Gault, 2014). Additionally, the school administration answers to scores of celebrities, politicians, professionals, and executives who are H.U. alumni and remain passionate about their alma mater. Also, with students/parents hailing from nearly every state and nearly 70 countries (Home, n.d.), the university draws outsized attention from coast to coast and around the world.

Although the rapid succession of critical situations in Q1 2018 was atypical, Howard has regularly dealt with varying degrees of flare-ups that required public relations management. Given the nature of higher education, in general, and HBCUs, in particular, future cases are virtually certain to arise. Studying the reaction to these three events should prove useful for individuals who are interested in H.U. or the field of strategic communication.

BODY

Two years after the Civil War ended, Howard University was established through an act of Congress, with the school named after founder and Civil War hero General Oliver O. Howard, who at the time served as commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau. Envisioned as an institution focused on educating African Americans – those who were newly freed and those who were never enslaved – H.U. has grown from one single-frame building to a 256-acre campus with 13 schools and colleges. Since its founding in 1867, Howard has awarded “more than 100,000 degrees in the professions, arts, sciences and humanities,” ranking the school “among the highest producers of the nation’s Black professionals in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, engineering, nursing, architecture, religion, law, music, social and education” (History, n.d.).

The school has long had a place at the forefront of African Americans’ struggle in the United States, with students at the center of external and internal protests. A group of Howard co-eds demonstrated alongside the NAACP in 1934 at the Attorney General’s Conference on Crime; upset with the government’s continued refusal to address lynching, the students stood outside the meeting site with ropes looped around their neck (Svrluga, 2018).



The image was captured on film and remains an iconic photograph to this day, serving as inspiration in December 2018 for a protest by University of North Carolina students. In 1968, the Black Power

movement and the nationwide struggle for students’ rights merged when about 1,000 Howard co-eds took over the administration building, leading to a five-day shutdown of the school.

HOWARD UNIVERSITY'S CHALLENGING Q1 2018

Howard was called “the black Harvard” by then, producing half of America’s black doctors and a quarter of its black lawyers, but students were chafing at the university’s Eurocentric curriculum and onerous disciplinary system (Massimo, 2018).

Similar to other universities, Howard can put its student body atop the list of major stakeholders. H.U. students historically are among the school’s most devoted fans and, simultaneously, among its most ardent critics. Activists encouraged them to protest as early as the 1920s, and thousands have demonstrated on campus ever since, including the 1989 student outcry that forced prominent Republican strategist Lee Atwater to resign from the school’s board of trustees (Svrluga, 2018).

In each of the aforementioned crises in Q1 2018, students formed the stakeholders who suffered the most direct impact. But their parents/families followed closely behind. Many of them – especially those who live far from D.C. – were forced to change travel plans when Howard announced that the Spring 2018 semester would not start on time. Also, many parents/families were as angry and anxious as their students when housing arrangements presumably in place for Fall 2019 appeared to fall through. Likewise, some parents/families were infuriated over the possibility that their students received less financial aid due to university employees’ perhaps criminal behavior.

Besides the school’s current students, Howard’s alumni are another group of important stakeholders. Actor Chadwick Boseman, writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, music mogul Sean Combs, U.S. Senator Kamala Harris, and actress Taraji Henson are among many celebrities and public figures who attended the school and can sway opinion in either direction regarding Howard’s image and reputation. Crises that damage alumni’s faith in the administration can have a

negative effect on their monetary gifts as well as their word of mouth recommendations. The repercussions can reach all the way to Capitol Hill, where lawmakers supply a significant portion of Howard's annual budget. The funding is dependent not only on factors such as current events – sequestration in 2017 reduced Howard's appropriation by more than 5 percent to \$222 million (Douglas-Gabriel, 2017) – but also by the proclivities of political leaders who might look for excuses to cut the school's budget.

It was against this backdrop of a long, rich, glorious history – filled with success, strife and administrators' never-ending quest to protect and burnish the university's reputation – that the school faced a series of crises in the first quarter of 2018.

Crisis No. 1: Damage from winter weather delays start of spring semester

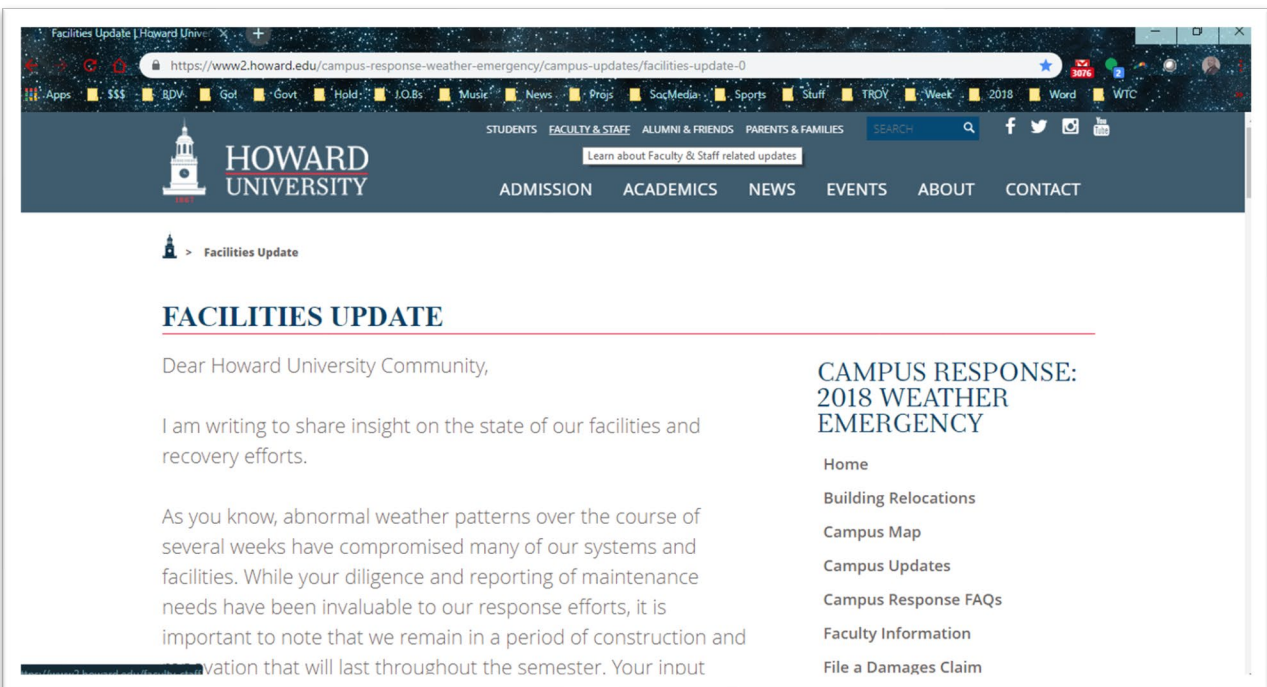
Howard typically uses several vehicles and strategies to communicate with its various stakeholders, and such was the case throughout the trio of Q1 2018 crises. When a “bomb cyclone” hit the Northeast in the first week of January – bringing bone-chilling temperatures and wind gusts approaching 50 miles per hour to D.C. (Samenow, 2018) – Howard sent an update to its 75,000-plus followers on Twitter. Unfortunately for the university, its initial communication fueled sharp levels of anger, frustration and disappointment that followed shortly thereafter. On Friday, January 5, at 5:25 p.m., Howard tweeted: “@HowardU Our spring semester opening will remain on schedule for Mon., 01/08” (Howard University, 2018).

But that information proved to be inaccurate by Saturday night, approximately 28 hours after the initial message, when Howard tweeted an update: “A thread: Due to weather complications, the start of classes in the Undergraduate Schools & Colleges, (COAS, Business,

HOWARD UNIVERSITY'S CHALLENGING Q1 2018

COMM, Education, Engineering & Architecture, Nursing & Allied Health Sciences) Social Work, & the Grad School will be postponed until Tues 1/16/18" (Howard University, 2018). About an hour later, the university posted to its Facebook page, which has more than 160,000 followers. The Facebook post urged students, alumni and staff to follow Howard on Twitter and check the school's website for complete updates on closures and scheduling. On January 9, school president Wayne A.I. Frederick, released a video statement on the crisis (Frederick, 2018).

Within days, the university established a dedicated, "Facilities Update" web page, with several sections under "Campus Response: 2018 Weather Emergency." Visitors could click on links for Building Relocations, Campus Response FAQs, Faculty Information, File a Damage Claim, and Revised Shuttle Info.



The Facilities Update home page included a lengthy letter from Dr. Tashni-Ann Dubroy, Howard's executive vice president and chief operating officer, in which she laid out detailed,

building-by-building information on pipe bursts, heat/hot water loss, and planned repairs. "The challenges we face are not unique to businesses and facilities in the area which are comparable to our campus in age and design," she wrote. "We remain optimistic and genuinely appreciative of your patience and understanding" (Dubroy, 2018, para. 8).

Analysis of strategic messages in Crisis No. 1

The university's messages after delaying the spring semester featured a heavy concentration of image restoration theory's corrective action, in which an organization goes about "restoring the state of affairs existing before the offensive act, and/or promising to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act" (Benoit, 1997, p. 181). Other components of IRT had some value as well. Howard implicitly relied on elements within denial and evasion of responsibility, specifically shifting blame to the weather and attributing the infrastructure problems to an act of nature. The school also employed bolstering in an attempt to reduce the offensiveness, issuing at least one update – and sometimes multiple updates – on 21 of the 25 days after initially announcing that the semester would begin on time (Campus Updates, n.d.). The steady stream of information painted the administration as swift and competent in dealing with a natural crisis.

To that end, Howard was dealing with a situation, or exigence, that could not be modified in Bitzer's rhetorical situation. The bomb cyclone's freezing temperatures and dangerous winds were hardly rhetorical, and therefore incapable of being modified by the administration's discourse. But everything else – Howard's response to damaged buildings, a revised academic calendar, the relocation of classes, and the demand for answers – created a

rhetorical exigence “capable of positive modification”, a situation that “requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse” (Bitzer, 1992, p. 6). Addresses by Frederick and Dubroy were designed to assure audiences that Howard was on top of the situation, changing negative impressions to positive ones, or reinforcing previously established positive impressions. Audiences were constrained by either suffering through the crisis in real time or recalling past occasions when Howard’s action/inaction was called into question or deemed indefensible. The administrators delivered fitting responses overall in this instance, detailing the cause (winter), impact (severe damage) and next steps (delay and repairs).

The administration’s task should have been fairly simple under situational crisis communication theory, which would place Howard in the victim cluster of crises, with the school bearing no responsibility for the weather event and facing only a mild threat to its reputation. That would have been the case clearly if Howard initially announced a delay to the spring semester, instead of shortsightedly announcing that the semester would begin on time. The sudden reversal one day later – after the discovery of extensive damage from ruptured pipes and electrical outages – shifted Howard into SCCT’s cluster of preventable crises. “In these types crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation” (Coombs, 2007, p. 168). As a result, Howard’s communication efforts were intended to assuage stakeholders who were angry more than they were sympathetic. To an extent, that anger would subside only with the passage of time, but Howard helped by providing and frequently updating a website dedicated to the emergency. The school also demonstrated concern by hosting a “Town Hall” on Jan. 11, where the public could hear from Fredrick, Dubroy, provost Anthony K. Wutoh, and vice president for student

affairs Kenneth Holmes; community members who could not attend in person were invited to send questions directly to the student affairs department. When the semester finally started, Howard placed staffers in bright vests throughout the campus to help students find their way.

As for agenda setting theory, Howard faced an uphill battle even before announcing the delay. Media organizations reported on Jan. 3, that some residence halls were without heat and hot water, and the university would be closed Jan.4-5. Holmes sent a letter “asking all students to delay their arrival to campus until noon or later, Sun. Jan. 7”, although “we understand that many of you may already be en route to campus or are unable to make alternative arrangements for arrival times to campus” (Roussey, 2018, para. 12). When the media followed with reports of the delayed semester and extensive damage, Howard was put in a defensive position and struggled to control the narrative. Frederick’s address was delivered on Jan. 9, by which point the university’s saga had gone national. Coverage in Education Dive, Diverse Issues in Higher Education and Black America Web put Howard in a negative light.

Local news coverage continued through the month and Howard managed to earn some sympathy by inviting journalists on campus in late January to examine the damage – which turned out to be much worse than imagined (Broom, 2018). One student who was interviewed said the administration was doing the best it could under challenging circumstances, including the relocation of at least 500 classes and closing three buildings that were completely uninhabitable.

Crisis No. 2: Apparent housing shortage and student's exchange with school president

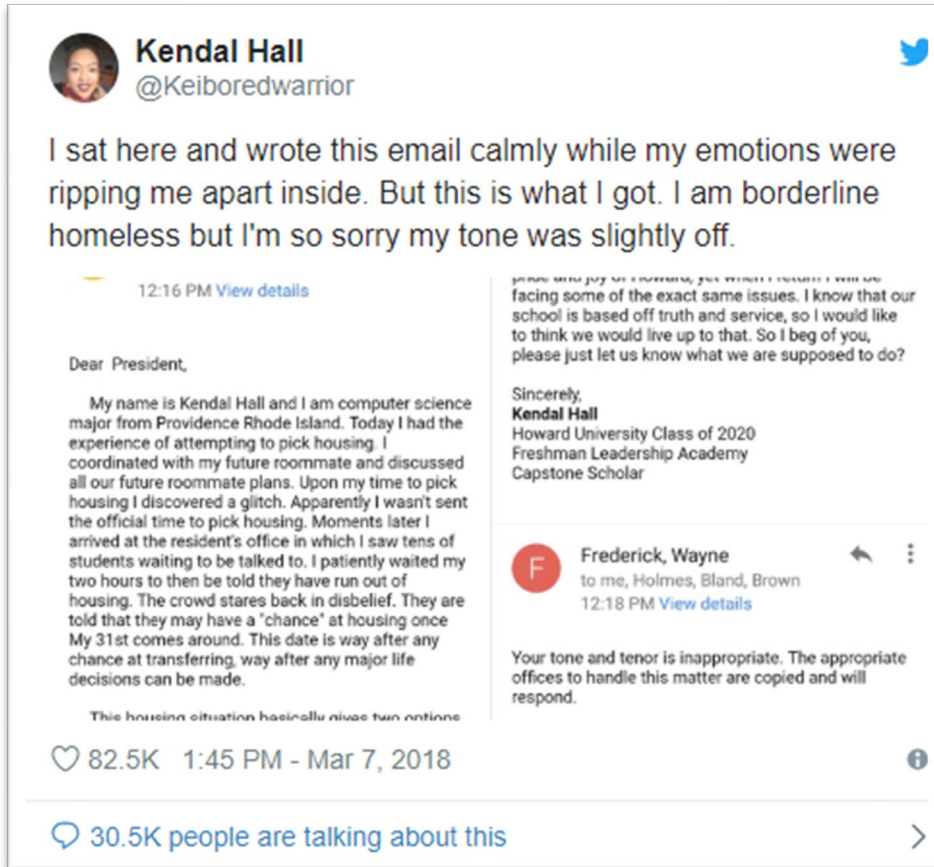
Throughout February, Howard continued to send updates on facilities and other matters related to the weather event, including the process for reporting and filing claims for damaged personal property. But the next critical situation was bubbling and reared its head at 1:03 a.m. on Friday, March 2, in a nascent hashtag. A tweet from @heykaye read: "The #HowardHousingCrisis is one of many reasons why I'm transferring. I'm definitely getting the hell out of here before everything comes crashing down" (Sonder, 2018). Before the day ended, #HowardHousingCrisis appeared in 12 tweets, generating a combined 94 retweets and 121 likes.

Other tweets related to the subject appeared on March 2 but did not include the hashtag, including one lengthy thread that generated 257 retweets and 270 likes (Copyright Infringement, 2018). The poster accused Howard of actively trying to reduce the number of students in campus housing based on the following because the school struggled to house its freshmen (the largest incoming class in 40 years) during 2017-18, and most those students need housing in 2018-19, too, along with the incoming freshmen. Besides that, the primary dormitory for female freshmen would be closed for renovation in 2018-19, creating more demand and less supply for all students. Finally, the thread accused Howard of intentionally not publicizing important information about a new RSVP reservation system for 2018-19 housing applications and \$200 deposits, sending out a notice just one day before the deadline.

The Twitter account for Howard's student affairs office replied within the thread – "If you are registered for RSVP and make a housing selection, you WILL HAVE HOUSING. If you go to make a selection in RSVP and there is no availability, you WILL BE ACCOMMODATED,

meaning you WILL HAVE A PLACE TO STAY” (HU Student Affairs, 2018). But there was no other communication from the university regarding the alleged housing crisis, and there was no media coverage. That was not the case after a March 7 exchange between Frederick and sophomore Kendal Hall went viral (Hall, 2018).

Hall wrote an email to the president outlining the fear and frustration she and other students



felt regarding their uncertain housing for 2018-19. She said administrators told her that no housing remained, and she asked Frederick what students should do.

According to an image of the email, Frederick responded: “Your tone and tenor is

inappropriate. The appropriate offices to handle this matter are copied and will respond” (Larimer & Svrluga, 2018).

Another student, Kiara Wade, shared a similar story, saying she emailed Frederick and got this response: “Your tone and tenor yesterday was shocking and honestly confusing. I’m not sure what motivates you to address me in that manner” (Wade, 2018). Hall’s tweet – in which

she commented "I am borderline homeless but I'm so sorry my tone was slightly off" – generated more than 29,000 retweets and more than 82,000 likes. The story was picked up by local news organizations, as well as out-of-town media outlets such as the New York Daily News and Providence Journal. Hall and Wade were interviewed by multiple media outlets, drawing attention to other housing issues (such as the absence of heat and the presence of vermin) that students brought to light in a March 8 campus protest (McGee, 2018).

Frederick wrote a letter to campus on March 8, conceding that housing issues caused "stress and anxiety for several Howard students," and admitting that "my team and I fell short" of their goal to deliver a supportive and enjoyable experience for students (Frederick, Response to Housing Concerns, 2018). He also denied claims that a housing shortage existed, instead blaming confusion on the school's new reservation system. Additionally, the letter detailed several university initiatives that demonstrate Howard's investment in campus housing. On the same day, Howard's official Twitter account sent a tweet with the headline, "Housing Update #HowardHousingCrisis", assuring that students' housing needs would be met in 2018-19 and "all impacted students will hear from Residence Life no later than Friday, March 30" (Howard University, 2018)

Analysis of strategic messages in Crisis No. 2

The image restoration attempt was largely unsuccessful, even though Howard provided numbers to support its strategy of flatly denying the existence of a housing shortage (Frederick, Response to Housing Concerns, 2018). The denial was undermined by students' first-hand experience of administrators telling them otherwise. In Hall's email to Frederick, she recounted

spending two hours in line before being told no rooms remained. Blaming the ordeal on a technical glitch did not reduce the negativity that flourished among students and their families, whose severe criticism of the school continued unabated on social media. Frederick and the university also failed to utilize mortification sufficiently. Hall tweeted on March 8 that she received an apology (along with housing) from Frederick, and The Washington Post reported that Holmes sent an email to the campus community on March 7 in which he apologized for any “stress, frustration, or inconvenience this process may have caused” (Larimer & Svrluga, 2018). But Frederick’s letter, which was posted on the university website, should have expressed more mortification than saying “we fell short.” He also should have specifically addressed – and taken personal responsibility – for his own “tone and tenor” in responding to distressed students like Hall and Wade. A full, public apology was in order and he did not deliver one.

Howard’s response was inefficient for the rhetorical situation as well. The school was slow to recognize the emerging crisis, even though the student affairs department engaged with dissenters the first day that #HowardHousingCrisis appeared. The hashtag clearly demonstrated a rhetorical situation that obliged Howard to speak, ideally through proactive, university-wide strategic communication. But that did not occur until several days later, after the crisis had gone viral. Instead, Student Affairs’ Twitter account initially issued the lone response and it was hardly fitting, using uppercase letters that amount to shouting in electronic discourse. Furthermore, Frederick did not provide a fitting response when he communicated with Hall and Wade, which only increased the level of ill will toward Howard.

Frederick’s failure is illustrated further in situational crisis communication, specifically his use of a diminish strategy. Such responses “argue that a crisis is not as bad as people think

or that the organization lacked control over the crisis" (Coombs, 2007, p. 171). He invoked that strategy in the opening line of his letter, referring to "the housing issue that has caused stress and anxiety for several Howard students" (Frederick, Response to Housing Concerns, 2018). As a crisis that had been extensively disseminated online and had gained traction in the media, its framing as a widespread issue was well established. Attempting to downplay the number of affected individuals was never going to reduce the surrounding negativity. Coombs (2007) notes that solid evidence is required to support diminish strategies and they fail when media or social media users reject the organization's frame. Moreover, attributing the crisis to "systems issues yesterday, which created problems with many room reservations" (Frederick, Response to Housing Concerns, 2018) failed to address claims that the new system was not promoted adequately, which was Howard's responsibility.

The university's performance under agenda setting theory was equally poor. By the time Howard's Twitter account and Frederick issued responses to #HowardHousingCrisis, The Washington Post was running an article complete with fearful students being scolded by the president. The story noted that thousands of people retweeted or liked Hall's tweet, and "some used it as a springboard to launch into online complaints about housing, financial aid and the way school officials treat students" (Larimer & Svrluga, para. 6, 2018). It also included background on negative issues in recent years. Howard's attempts to shape the case and encourage positivity did not include an on-air appearance by Frederick or any other school official. The president also was not made available for interview requests by the media, lost opportunities for Howard to impact the narrative. Meanwhile the local ABC affiliate aired a

segment that included footage of students protesting, and Hall reading parts of her email exchange with Frederick.

Crisis No. 3: Financial aid scandal and students' takeover of administration building

Howard had promised that its Residence Life department would contact every student impacted by #HowardHousingCrisis no later than March 30. But a few days before that deadline arrived, the university found itself embroiled in yet another critical situation.

According to an anonymous item posted March 27 to online blogging platform Medium, a

student-employee in Howard's financial aid department allegedly stole more than \$430,000 from the department.

A March 28 tweet from @DMVFollowers referenced the post and generated 2,100 retweets and 2,800 likes (DC Maryland Virginia, 2018). The



Medium article had been deleted, but not before it created a torrent of criticism that forced

Howard into damage-control mode, which led to a shocking revelation about a nine-year scandal.

In a statement released March 28, Frederick announced that he learned of possible improprieties regarding financial aid money in December 2016, prompting an investigation that ended in September 2017. The probe found that university funds were misappropriated by some employees from 2007 to 2016. "As a result," he wrote, "six employees have been fired for gross misconduct and neglect of duties. We will refer this matter for criminal prosecution, as appropriate" (Frederick, Howard University President Statement On University Grants, para. 5, 2018).

On March 29, members of student group HU Resist – still agitated by #HowardHousingCrisis and other grievances – began an occupation of the administration building, taking over three floors. The occupiers had grown in number to 300 by March 30, when leaders held a news briefing and discussed their nine demands, which included Frederick's resignation (Truong, Williams, & Heim, 2018). Frederick issued a lengthy statement addressed to students on March 30, touching every demand in detail except his resignation, which he did not mention at all. "I am listening to you, and I am challenging my team to make the changes you are expressing a dire need to see," he wrote. "In addition to that, I would like to further increase the engagement with a larger and broader portion of our student body" (Frederick, Howard University Responds to Student Demands, para. 2, 2018).

On the same day as the students' news briefing and Frederick's statement (March 30), chairman Stacey J. Mobley released a statement on behalf of the Board of Trustees and addressed to the "Howard University Community." It opened with a vote of confidence: "While

I recognize this has been a difficult week for our entire community, my fellow board members and I fully support President Frederick's continuous progress on the critical issues facing our campus community" (Mobley, 2018). He also discussed the students' demands and the steps being taken to meet them, closing with encouragement: "I want to reassure the Howard Community that we are making positive strides to improve our operations and infrastructure, increase resources and foster a positive environment for our students, despite facing challenges" (Mobley, para. 11, 2018).

The sit-in ended April 6 – eight days after students took over the building – when an agreement that did not include Frederick's resignation was reached with the Board of Trustees. The board issued a "Statement of Commitments" that outlined 11 changes it would institute to address the students' demands. "While the commitments may have been discussed with HUResist and HUSA [Howard University Student Association] leaders, in light of recent events, these commitments are meant to address the needs, and are for the benefit and welfare, of the entire Howard University community" (Board of Trustees, 2018). On April 9, Frederick released a report on the financial aid investigation that resulted in the six employees being fired, determining that they misappropriated \$369,000 from 2011 to 2016. He said the report "also identifies additional steps that the University will be taking to improve our financial aid policies, processes, and procedures to ensure that issues like this do not arise again" (Frederick, Howard University Preliminary Investigation Report, 2018).

Analysis of strategic messages in Crisis No. 3

Through the lens of image restoration theory, Howard was in a difficult position from the outset of Crisis No. 3. The institution essentially was the victim, preyed upon by individuals who misappropriated university funds. But the perception existed that Howard somehow was at fault, and Benoit (1997) contends that perceptions are more important than reality. Relevant audiences' belief that Howard was responsible, was more important than the fact that misbehaving employees/students were responsible. Frederick did attempt to shift the blame to the guilty parties and made some headway in bolstering the university. In his initial revelation, he pointed out that everything started with a proactive review, a review he initiated to "ensure the [Financial Aid] office was providing the best support to our campus community" (Frederick, Howard University President Statement On University Grants, 2018). He added that the findings prompted an internal investigation led by outside auditor, and Howard self-reported the issue to the Department of Education. Frederick and the board of trustees also responded with strong corrective action to address the student sit-in. They presented a clear list of resolutions and invited accountability for implementing the measures. Unfortunately for the university, some credibility was lost and unrecoverable, based on its failure to disclose the financial aid scandal before a whistleblower forced the issue with an anonymous blog post.

Withholding the information was also another example of Howard's failure to recognize the exigence of a rhetorical situation. Six employees were fired at the conclusion of an investigation that concluded in September 2017, yet that did not become public knowledge until six months later – creating an impression that Howard was hiding something. When the information was finally revealed, the crisis only grew. Blitzer (1992) notes that a single situation may involve numerous exigences, and Howard suddenly was faced with several besides the

scandal, including a student sit-in, demands for Frederick's resignation, and complaints about housing conditions and the handling of sexual assault cases. The university deserves some credit for resolving the crisis through discourse that resulted in positive modification of the exigence (Bitzer, 1992). The remedy helped win over stakeholders whose previous beliefs and attitudes served as constraints Howard had to counter.

In situational crisis management theory, Howard had to weigh its crisis history and prior relational reputation when considering its response to the financial aid scandal and subsequent student-sit under. Crisis history and prior relational reputation "both have a direct and indirect effect on the reputational threat posed by the crisis" (Coombs, 2007, p. 167). The university faced greater responsibility for the crisis and more damage to its reputation based on having experienced similar crises in the past, and being perceived as treating stakeholders badly in the past. During the sit-in, a senior student and member of HU Resist said "this is something that's decades in the making, years in the making. It's been brewing up in our university culture" (Truong, Williams, & Heim, para. 3, 2018). The university applied a combination of diminish crisis response strategies and rebuild crisis response strategies. Howard minimized its responsibility for the misappropriation of funds, while simultaneously announcing a range of reforms – in financial aid as well as other areas of concern the students raised. The planned new measures served as a form of compensation.

In agenda setting theory, Howard found itself playing from behind, just as it did in Crisis No.2. This time, instead of a hashtag catching the university off-guard, it was an anonymous blog post that went viral. However, the university countered with a stronger response in this instance. Frederick issued a statement and Howard's Twitter account tweeted it on the first

day. The statement was re-tweeted on the second day, this time not only with a link to Frederick's response, but also an editorial comment in the post's text: "Please refer to the latest statement from President Frederick to students. Please know that we take malfeasance, fraud, and other forms of unethical behavior on campus seriously and address them swiftly" (Howard University, 2018). By Day 3, when the crisis had morphed into a sit-in, Frederick issued a statement responding to student demands, and his remarks received prominent media coverage. On Day 4, Howard tweeted a post in support of its students; on Day 5, Howard tweeted: "Thank you to our faculty, staff, administrators and alumni who have visited the A Bldg. to continue to teach, mentor and love our students through the duration of our continued dialogue. We are one Bison Family. #iLoveHowardU" (Howard University, 2018). On the sixth day after news of the financial aid scandal broke, Howard tweeted a letter of support for Frederick from the university's Council of Deans. The steady stream of content gave Howard a major role in framing the issues for the public.

CONCLUSION

The first quarter of 2018 presented Howard University with a uncommon trio of public relations crises in unusually rapid succession, demanding a series of strategic communication efforts and messages. This study has served to analyze Howard's performance in creating and delivering responses to the back-to-back-to-back critical situations it faced, beginning on Jan. 6 and ending on April 6.

With its 152-year history and lengthy list of distinguished alumni, Howard is considered perhaps the most esteemed and important HBCU in the country, giving it unique standing in

American and African-American culture. As such, the school is constantly scrutinized, drawing extensive interest from the public in general and a variety of stakeholders. Historically, Howard receives inordinate amounts of praise for its successes and criticism for its failures.

Each of the three crises Howard experienced in Q1 2018 had the potential to damage the school's reputation. The least-damaging incident should have been the winter storm that led Howard to delay its spring semester in January. There is no good defense for a bomb cyclone and the havoc it can wreak on infrastructure, especially in buildings and systems as old as Howard's. The subsequent crises in early and late March – an apparent housing crisis and a financial aid scandal – put Howard at the greatest risk for reputational damage. Both were based on the university's action/inaction, demonstrating failed leadership and oversight.

Howard's responses included aspects of theories on image restoration, rhetorical situation, situational crisis communication, and agenda setting.

Some of the school's best work in image restoration was corrective. The community was well-informed during Crisis No. 1 through Howard's use of a dedicated website and social media presence. Crisis No. 3 resulted in strong two-way engagement and a slew of commitments to improve students' experience. But image restoration attempts in Crisis No. 2 were not very fruitful. Howard created the problem through poor communication and execution, and exacerbated it through a lack of mortification and clear apology.

Howard's performance using rhetorical situation was good in January, but found wanting in March. The school immediately addressed the situation and used discourse successfully to mitigate negativity. The primary issue in the latter crises was the administration's failure to recognize exigences as they formed. There was plenty of time to address the housing

situation and the financial aid scandal before they blew up on social media. Also, Frederick's personal responses to two stressed-out students in the second crisis could not have been more ill-advised. Although the emails were not intended for public consumption, they did not fit the situation in any way.

Howard experienced a mixed bag in situational crisis communication. Its best results were in the third crisis, using a rebuild response to appease hundreds of protesting students who had occupied the administration building. The worst outcome was in Crisis No. 2, when the university tried to downplay the extent of students' frustration and accepted no responsibility for causing it. In the first crisis, Howard got off to a bad start by announcing the semester would start on time, but recovered nicely with a wealth of open, transparent and informative communication.

The school had a similar shaky start with a stronger finish under agenda setting in Crisis No. 1. Aside from the initial announcement on damaged facilities and the delayed start to spring semester, the university was mostly absent from media coverage until late January, when it garnered some sympathetic coverage by granting access. Unfortunately, there was no such rebound during the middle crisis when #HowardHousingCrisis went viral. Media coverage was excessively negative and Howard chose to make Frederick and other officials off-limits. The exact opposite occurred in the final crisis. As the media frenzy got underway, Howard was there at every step, making sure that its framework was incorporated in the coverage.

Howard has experienced more than its share of critical situations since its founding in 1867, rarely escaping notice. The long history of on-campus activism includes a 1968 protest that was covered by Harvard's student newspaper (Hamilton, 1968). It is not unusual for

HOWARD UNIVERSITY'S CHALLENGING Q1 2018

lengthy features to appear in The New York Times (Hunter-Gault, 2014) and The New Yorker (Cobb, 2018), or to receive coverage from other national newsgathering organizations like CNN (Kiely & Brocchetto, 2018). That is not to mention The Washington Post, the world-class newspaper a few miles away that ostensibly is Howard's paper of record and – staffed by typical journalists – seemingly more apt to report bad news than good news (Anderson, 2015).

The odds of three major crises occurring in one-quarter of a given year are rare, and Howard likely will not face such a challenge again. But intense coverage is certain to accompany whatever crises arise in the future.

At that point – or even better, before then – Howard would be wise to study the lessons from Q1 2018.

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