

NAVIGATING THE RETURN

CULTURE

By Karen Doss Bowman

WAVE

AND OTHER

OF THE RE S CRISES

Austin Peay State University (Tenn.) president Alisa White was at an official dinner event in April 2016 when her phone started blowing up with texts. A staffer was sending pictures of six rainbow-colored yarn nooses—decorated with flowers and ribbons—hanging from a tree just outside the building that housed the Art Department.

University police, concerned about hate symbolism, had already begun removing the nooses as an investigation started to find out who put up the nooses and why. Even the FBI was involved to determine whether it was an act of hate. Many on campus were angered by the racial implications of the nooses, while others speculated the display was a gesture lamenting the high suicide rate within the LGBTQ community.

By the next day, university officials had learned the display was a freshman's project for an introductory course focused on using yarn as a medium for creating art. It was part of a series the student created on the theme of death and rebirth. She displayed it in the tree, despite her professor's caution about its potentially negative connotations. She also neither included an artist's statement to provide context nor received permission from campus officials to put it up, which violated university policy.

"It's incredibly unfortunate that the student artist did not understand the significance and the implication of a symbol that represents so much negative for so many people," White said in a statement at the time. "While we support the freedom of expression on our campus, we also have to keep in mind that there are symbols that have very specific and negative meanings to everyone, especially if context is not provided. Therefore, the artwork was inappropriate and had to be removed for the safety of our campus."

Planning for and dealing with crisis is an important part of the job for higher education administrators. Most have detailed threat assessment plans already prepared to manage a wide range of potential calamities—from natural disasters and violent incidents to student protests, disease outbreaks and sudden leadership changes.

"If presidents are thoughtful about their roles, they're going to think about the potential crises ahead of time—there are so many happening on campuses all over the country right now," says Patty Cormier, whose crises during her 14 years as president of Longwood University (Va.) included a fire that destroyed four campus buildings and caused \$30 million in damages.

Communication is critical, she says: "It's about constant communication, and the key is not to hide, but to tell the truth. You need to be forthright; you need to come forward; you need to say it; and you need to be in charge."

The day after the nooses were discovered and removed, White and the university's chief diversity officer led a campus-wide open forum, during which they discussed the event and offered attendees the opportunity to ask questions or share concerns. More than 300 people attended the event, which lasted almost three hours. Many were angry and called for the student to be expelled and the faculty member to be fired.

"I could feel the grief in the room—it was almost palpable," says White, noting that hundreds of media outlets covered the incident. "You could feel the heaviness and the hurt. [People understood the circumstances by this time,] but that didn't mean that members of our community weren't traumatized by it. ... We pride ourselves on having an open, welcoming, diverse community, and this was so different from anything that we would recognize as being part of our culture."

In the wake of the incident, White sought support and insight from the local NAACP branch president, who has since been appointed to the university's diversity committee and helps lead campus diversity initiatives. The Department of Art and Design also revised policies related to the process of displaying student artwork, including a checklist of permissions to secure and a requirement for context to be given.

"We certainly would not support hate speech, but other types of speech are protected by the First Amendment," White says. "So we went through the process of making sure that artistic expression was protected, but that these kinds of instances did not happen again to roil a community. ... If that kind of installation [of the nooses] had been given with context and an artist's statement as part of a gallery, there would have been a very different response."

THE RETURN OF THE CULTURE WARS

Given today's polarized citizenry and volatile political environment, administrators should prepare for the likelihood that "culture wars"—particularly those centered on free speech issues—will affect their campuses. Numerous incidents related to the First Amendment have happened around the country in recent years: A visit from former *Breitbart News* editor Milo Yiannopoulos to the University of California at Berkeley led to impassioned protests that turned to riots; students at universities across the country marched as a show of support with the Black Lives Matter movement; and a white supremacist march at the University of Virginia turned deadly when a counter-protestor was run down by a vehicle driven by an "alt-right" supporter.

"I think many university and college presidents most likely will face free speech issues in the future, if they haven't already," says John Anderson, who recently retired as president of Millersville University (Pa.) in late June 2018. "Leaders in higher education have to respect the passion and the emotion that goes along with these issues, whether they be racially motivated or sexual harassment concerns or something else. There will be outspoken contingencies on both sides of any issue. As president, you

have to balance the protection of constitutional rights with listening to the concerns of either side."

Millersville University is still dealing with the repercussions of an incident from March 2017: Two white female students posted a Snapchat photo of themselves in blackface with a Black History Month filter that read, "Young, Black & Proud." The incident sparked outrage and prompted accusations of racism on campus.

The university is now working to transform the campus culture beyond diversity to incorporate principles of inclusivity. These efforts include training for faculty and staff, as well as programming for students. Anderson has also tried to create new informal communication networks with students by getting out of the office and chatting with students in their gathering places around campus, including tweeting invitations for them to join him for lunch in the campus dining hall.

"You have to get out and sense the pulse on campus for yourself," Anderson says. "It's one thing to have a diverse faculty, a diverse student population and diverse programming, but inclusivity addresses the respect of cultures [among the] different constituencies on campus. It's a subtle action when you change a culture—basic assumptions become automatic and subconsciously addressed. That's the deep-root work that will take years. We will slowly change policies and practices over time until inclusivity becomes a part of the basic assumptions within our culture."

ACTIVE SHOOTER AND OTHER ACTS OF VIOLENCE

While First Amendment challenges are becoming more and more common at universities, higher education leaders must also be prepared to deal with violence on campus, including sexual assaults and shootings. Before Brian Hemphill was appointed to his current post as president of Radford University (Va.), he faced one of the most difficult challenges of his professional life while serving as vice president of student affairs and enrollment management at Northern Illinois University (NIU).

On Feb. 14, 2008, Hemphill recalls, 21 people were injured and five killed when a lone gunman entered a lecture hall filled with 155 students. At the end of the six-minute incident, the shooter—a former student—took his own life.

"When responding to the scene, I was hoping it was a false report, but it was not," Hemphill says. "Injured people poured from the building. Even though you develop emergency plans and engage in mock drills, you are never truly ready for the shock and pain of an incident like this."

Like many other higher education administrators, Hemphill recalled lessons learned from the 2007 tragedy at Virginia Tech, when a student killed 32 people and wounded 17 others on campus.

"The tragedy at Virginia Tech was a defining moment in higher education and our country," he says. "Based on that tragedy, which we all experienced from afar, we put into place many operational

procedures, which were possible through detailed pre-planning efforts and collaboration with on-campus and off-campus entities. Some best practices included pre-arranged memorandums of understanding with various agencies, including law enforcement agencies and counseling services.”

In the aftermath of the 2008 shooting, NIU officials set up counseling centers across campus at trauma points. They also established a crisis hotline, which was operational within 90 minutes of the shooting. More than 19,000 calls came through the hotline in the days following the incident. Every family affected by the tragedy was assigned a university liaison.

“There are many considerations and details during a time of crisis—my fundamental philosophy is to act in the best interest of the campus and the community, specifically the victims and their families, as well as students, faculty, staff and alumni,” Hemphill says. “The most important step is to lead not only with your head, but also with your heart. . . . There is always the context of policy and legal issues, but the guiding principle should always be to do the right thing. Leaders should ask themselves, first and foremost, how can we help our community?”

DEALING WITH MOTHER NATURE

On March 19, 2018, an EF-3 tornado tore through the campus of Jacksonville State University (JSU) in Alabama, damaging 50 buildings, including completely destroying the building that houses the School of Business. More than 2,000 trees were destroyed, as well. Fortunately, it was spring break, so the campus was empty.

“It was a blessing that it happened during spring break because our students, faculty and staff were off campus,” says President John Beehler. “We had no casualties, but if we had been in session at the time, it wouldn’t have been pretty.”

Beehler immediately set up an incident response team comprising key players from across campus, including faculty from the university’s Department of Emergency Management. They formed six task forces focused on communications, security, facilities, accountability, academics and housing. Each day, the team shared updates, discussed challenges and made decisions.

Students were back on campus three weeks after the tornado, and Beehler gives credit to more than 6,000 volunteers “from all over the place” who helped clean up debris and make repairs. The School of Business, for example, was relocated to an old elementary school building the university already owned. Volunteers cleaned, renovated, painted and lugged furniture to have the building ready. Students were offered several options for completing the semester, and commencement took place as scheduled.

“It’s important to remain positive and look at the good that comes out of a tragedy like we experienced,” Beehler says. “What I learned is the human spirit is great, and people are good. We had so many things to get done, and we could not have done it without volunteers.”

PREPARING FOR THE INEVITABLE

For colleges and universities looking for ways to enhance their crisis planning, Anderson suggests drafting responses to potential catastrophes before they occur. Look ahead to new technologies on the horizon and think about ways they can be used for crisis communication. Additionally, make sure your students, faculty and staff know where they can go to find information in the event of a crisis.

“All of your constituents, from alumni to students to trustees, expect you to respond immediately,” Anderson says. “Prior to social media, we could have thoughtful discussions [after a disaster occurred] to help us develop a response. You no longer have that luxury. You really have to prepare for this in advance and respond immediately—within 12 hours or less.”

Crisis preparation should involve every member of the campus community, Hemphill says. Develop a comprehensive emergency management plan and make sure everyone knows their role and is properly trained to respond. Threat assessment and behavior intervention teams need to be in place before, during and after any crisis.

“The response begins at the top of the organization and works its way down through every area of the institution,” Hemphill says. “Practice the plans in place with regular training exercises. The middle of a crisis is not the time for the team to first learn their assignments. An important part of practicing is also challenging the assumptions on which the plans are based. Consider what would happen if key responders are unavailable or unreachable. Also, consider what would happen if a primary communication capability was inoperable. Finally, for any and all plans, build in redundancy and provide cross-training to support less than ideal conditions.”

White emphasizes the importance of developing good working relationships with both internal and external stakeholders before a crisis occurs. She was able to leverage an already established connection with the local NAACP branch president when the nooses were put up on the Austin Peay State University campus. This enabled her to work closely with him and others within the African-American community to bridge gaps in the understanding of racial issues.

“The message to our students was, ‘This was a big deal,’” White says. “The incident revealed some pain and hurt and divisions that were already there that we didn’t recognize. [We wanted to convey] that we were not ignoring it or sweeping it under the rug, but we were going to have as many conversations as possible to educate our community. We wanted to understand where we failed and how we can do things better.” **P**

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