Tragic Accident or Wrongful Death?

Assessing the Effectiveness of MIT's Responses in a High-Profile Student Suicide Crisis

Tara D. Hudson

Department of Leadership, Policy, and Adult and Higher Education,

North Carolina State University

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When Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) sophomore Elizabeth Shin died on April 14, 2000 after sustaining third degree burns on over 65% of her body several days earlier (Abel, 2000; Shin & Shin, 2002), the communities of MIT and the surrounding cities of Boston and Cambridge mourned the "tragedy" of her death (Daniel, 2000). Six weeks later her death was ruled a suicide (Abel), launching MIT into a social legitimacy crisis (Hearit, 1995). The local and national news media alleged a "culture of suicide" at the school, Elizabeth Shin's parents publicly attacked the school's failure to prevent their daughter's suicide, and MIT was forced to make extensive and costly changes to their Mental Health Service. The crisis peaked when the Shins filed a $27 million lawsuit against MIT and its staff for wrongful death and negligence in failing to prevent Elizabeth's death. After six years of media scrutiny and legal wrangling, the crisis ended when MIT and the Shins settled out of court in April 2006.

Suicide and suicidal ideation are not uncommon among U.S. college students. Recent data from the American College Health Association (2009) indicated that 1.3% of college students had attempted suicide in the prior twelve months; the number who have ever considered suicide is one in ten (The Jed Foundation, 2009b; Rodolfa, 2008). An estimated 1,088 suicides take place on college campuses every year (Kadison & DiGeronimo, n.d.). Given these statistics, it is likely that many colleges will face a student suicide on campus at some point.

The number of students with mental health issues on college campuses has increased significantly since the 1980s, as the availability and effectiveness of psychiatric medications allow students with mild to significant mental illnesses to attend college (McGinn & Depasquale, 2004; Rawe & Kingsbury, 2006; Shea, 2002). Many colleges have been unable to handle the increased demand on their counseling services, resulting in insufficient quality and duration of care as well as an inability to implement universal screening programs to identify students at

high risk of depression and suicide (Pavela, 2006; Shea). Yet a 2007 survey found that over 50% of parents of college students or upper-level high school students intending to go to college expect college staff to help with the child's mental health problems (Locke & Eichorn, 2008), creating an expectation that many schools cannot fulfill. Further complicating the situation are recent court decisions holding that colleges who try to help students with mental health problems, particularly suicidal behavior, may be held liable should a student succeed in taking his or her life, pitting colleges' desire to help their students against the legal risk they incur by doing so (Brown University et al., 2006; Dyer, 2007; Hoover, 2005, 2006; Pavela; "The doctors are 'in'," 2002).

The potential financial and reputational damage to schools facing such legal action is huge. The messages colleges send in the aftermath of a student suicide crisis have the potential to placate or exacerbate the outrage that stakeholders—particularly the deceased student's parents—feel (Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Courtright & Hearit, 2002; Greenberg & Elliott, 2009; Heath, 2006; Seeger, 2006; Tyler, 1997). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the effectiveness of specific crisis communication strategies in reducing the impact of a high-profile student suicide crisis. Using the case of Elizabeth Shin's suicide, I examine MIT's response strategies using the frameworks of Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Benoit and Brinson's (1994) typology of image restoration strategies to determine which strategies MIT employed and assess how effective they were in resolving the crisis and in minimizing reputational and financial damage. I also examine how their response strategies were received by key stakeholders, including Elizabeth Shin's parents, the news media, students, and administrators at other U.S. colleges and universities. I conclude this paper with a discussion of

the practical applications of this research, highlighting what U.S. higher education institutions can learn from MIT's handling of the Shin suicide crisis.

Theoretical Framework

Defining Crisis

There are several key elements that define a crisis. First, it must be an unpredictable event (Fishman, 1999). "Unpredictable" does not necessarily mean that the organization could not have anticipated its occurrence; rather, the unpredictability stems from the impact it has on the organization (Coombs, 2007). The high level of uncertainty that characterizes crises creates an information vacuum: stakeholders and other observers demand to know the extent of the crisis, why it happened, and what steps an organization is taking to prevent it from happening again (Coombs). An organization that fails to quickly fill the information vacuum risks having its message unheard or constructed by others, which can prolong and worsen the crisis (Coombs; Stephens & Malone, 2009). The second defining element of a crisis is its time-sensitive nature. Crises demand immediate response and action from the affected organization; an organization's failure to respond in a timely way can make it look uncaring or incompetent (Coombs; Williams & Olaniran, 1994). The third criterion for a crisis is the threat the event poses to an organization's values; a crisis generates negative outcomes for the organization in terms of financial, physical, or reputational damage (Coombs; Fishman).

The containment, or management, of the crisis involves actions to reduce damage to the organization's financial and reputational assets (Benoit & Brinson, 1994). Moving the crisis out of the media is a key part of crisis management: when the information vacuum has been filled with facts about the crisis and the organization's actions to abate it, it loses its newsworthiness and the organization can move toward the post-crisis stage (Coombs, 2007). However, "crisis

management errors, such as instigating conflict, prolong media coverage by sustaining the newsworthiness of a crisis" (Coombs, p. 159), thus extending the acute phase of the crisis. Once the crisis has been contained, the organization continues to rebuild and repair reputational damage, and it uses learning from the crisis to improve future crisis prevention and response.

The Role of Stakeholders

During a crisis, it is critical for an organization to meet stakeholders' needs for information and support. Typically, organizations have multiple stakeholders; for a private, research-intensive institution of higher education such as MIT, key stakeholders might include students, parents, staff and faculty, alumni, corporations and foundations funding research, the community surrounding the institution, local and national news media, accrediting bodies, and the U.S. Department of Education, among many others. Stakeholders want to know what action an organization is taking to correct the crisis situation, how the crisis will affect the organization and stakeholders, and when operations will return to normal (Coombs, 2007). Organizations must be open and honest in responding to stakeholder demands for information during a crisis; if stakeholders feel an organization is not meeting their information needs or being fully honest, they may become suspicious and distrustful of the organization (Coombs; Seeger, 2006), which can damage the organization's reputation and invoke media hostility (Kauffman, 2005; Martin & Boynton, 2005). Media hostility, in turn, can negatively impact other stakeholders' perceptions of the organization in crisis (Coombs). However, organizations that have established strong, caring stakeholder relationships based on mutual trust *before* a crisis occurs will be able to draw upon those relationships to provide support during a crisis, which may shorten its duration and help the organization emerge with minimal reputational damage (Seeger; Ulmer, 2001).

Stakeholders may also require emotional support and empathy from the organization, especially when the crisis involves injuries or deaths (Stephens & Malone, 2009; Ulmer, 2001). Exhibiting compassion and empathy may help defuse a crisis by assuaging stakeholder anger and arousing their sympathy (Ulmer). In addition, when an organization provides emotional support, it can restore stakeholders' trust and confidence in the organization (Greenberg & Elliott, 2009; Seeger, 2006). Heath (2006) notes that publics respond to the tone in which a message is delivered more than the content of the message, suggesting that an organization in crisis may reap more benefit from providing emotional support to stakeholders than from any other communication strategy. However, organizations in crisis may be unable or unwilling to give stakeholders the information they need or to treat them with compassion for fear of invoking legal liability for the crisis (Tyler, 1997).

Crisis Response Strategies: Two Models

To provide the deepest understanding of MIT's response to the Elizabeth Shin suicide crisis, I have chosen to blend both two models of crisis response strategies: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) and Benoit and Brinson's (1994) typology of image restoration strategies. Blending these two theoretical frameworks allows for a more comprehensive understanding of MIT's response strategies and their reception by various stakeholders (Fishman, 1999).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a functional "map" that guides organizations in assessing the reputational threat posed by a crisis (Coombs, 2007). SCCT delineates a range of crisis response strategies from which organizations can select when facing a crisis. Strategies are organized into four "postures":

1. Denial (attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoating): These strategies aim to decouple the organization from the crisis—"it didn't happen" or "someone else is to blame."
2. Diminishment (excusing, justification): These strategies minimize the control an organization has over a crisis—"there's little we can do" or "it's out of our hands."
3. Rebuilding (compensation, apology): Organizations use these strategies to win back public favor; these strategies require an organization to assume some degree of responsibility for the crisis, though they do not necessitate an admission of liability—"we feel terrible that this happened" or "we want to make amends."
4. Bolstering (reminding, ingratiation, victimage): The goal behind these strategies is to build sympathy or goodwill for the organization in crisis. Bolstering strategies are meant to complement and enhance the other strategies rather than to stand alone.

Crisis type determines the appropriate response strategy, because certain types involve stronger attributions of responsibility to the organization embroiled in the crisis; for example, an organizational transgression or misdeed will attract a greater share of responsibility than a natural disaster (Coombs, 2007). Additional considerations in assessing the reputational threat of a crisis are the organization's prior crisis history and reputation; if the organization has a negative crisis history and prior reputation, they will need to select a stronger response strategy.

Benoit and Brinson's typology of image restoration strategies.

Benoit and Brinson (1994) pose a typology of image restoration strategies that is similar to, and pre-dates, SCCT. Their typology consists of five image restoration strategies:

1. Denial (outright denial, blame-shifting/scapegoating): Similar to SCCT's denial posture.

2. Avoiding responsibility: Similar to SCCT's diminishment posture. However, while SCCT conceives of an accident as a type of crisis (Coombs, 2007), Benoit and Brinson's typology states that calling a crisis an accident is a form of responsibility avoidance, recognizing the discursive power organizations have to define a crisis. Calling a crisis event an accident reduces the responsibility stakeholders will attribute to the organization (Coombs; Tyler, 1997), if stakeholders accept the organization's account.
3. Minimization (attacking the accuser, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, bolstering): Overall similar to SCCT's diminishment posture, although SCCT places attacking the accuser in the denial posture and considers bolstering a separate posture. Benoit and Brinson's conceptualization of bolstering differs slightly from that of SCCT; they note that "bolstering strengthens the audience's positive affect toward the accused, counteracting negative feelings" (p. 77). They add that bolstering is most effective when it is sincere, not perceived as a public relations ploy.
4. Mortification: Parallels SCCT's rebuilding posture.
5. Correction/corrective action: Aligns with either rebuilding or bolstering in the SCCT model, depending on the specific action taken by the organization. Correction describes the steps an organization has taken to prevent a similar crisis from happening again (Coombs, 2007). It provides evidence to stakeholders that an organization has "learned its lesson" from the crisis, repairing damage to an organization's social legitimacy by restoring stakeholder trust (Hearit, 1995). An organization in crisis can use corrective action as a bolstering strategy, to show

they are competent and responsive, and to add weight to an apology (Benoit & Brinson; Courtright & Hearit, 2002). An organization does not need to admit fault in order employ corrective action (Benoit & Brinson).

Apology: An additional crisis response strategy.

The purpose of an apology as a crisis response strategy is to "acknowledge guilt and seek reconciliation" (Courtright & Hearit, 2002, p. 349). Organizational apologies are most effective—that is, accepted by stakeholders—when they are honest, sincere, not accompanied by excuses or other forms of denial, and issued quickly after the crisis event occurs (Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Courtright & Hearit; Greenberg & Elliott, 2009; Hearit, 1995; Tyler, 1997). SCCT recommends rebuilding strategies, which include apology, for preventable crises, as well as for accident crises when there is a history of such crises or when the prior reputation is unfavorable (Coombs, 2007). However, because "an apology implies guilt" (Tyler, p. 57), apologizing may not be an option for organizations that wish to avoid legal liability.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Research Questions

My analysis of MIT's crisis response to Elizabeth Shin's suicide is guided by three research questions:

1. Which strategies did MIT employ in their response to the Shin suicide crisis?
2. How were the response strategies employed by MIT received by stakeholders?
3. How effective were MIT's response strategies in bringing an end to the Shin suicide crisis?

Methodology

Case study methodology is useful for addressing "how" and "why" questions because it allows the researcher to examine how a wide range of influences and processes contained within the larger context may have affected the outcome of the case (Yin, 2009). Case studies rely on a variety of data sources and collection strategies to provide a rich picture of the case (Yin). The primary data for this case study were drawn from three sources: (1) press releases from the MIT News Office obtained via their website (http://web.mit.edu/newsoffice), (2) articles in other MIT internal publications (e.g., the faculty newsletter) obtained via a Google search (n=13), and (3) news media accounts (n=24) obtained through the LexisNexis Academic Database, Google News, and news media websites, notably that of *The Boston Globe,* which heavily covered the Shin suicide and its aftermath. To improve construct validity, case study data was triangulated, or drawn from a variety of sources, and examined for convergence (Yin). To ensure representation of multiple perspectives, additional data were drawn from legal documents in *Shin v. MIT* (2005), trade media (e.g., *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *University Business*), and peer-reviewed academic and legal journals.

The present case study utilized pattern matching (Yin, 2009) to analyze the data. The investigator operationalized crisis response strategies of apology and from SCCT (Coombs, 2007) and Benoit and Brinson's (1994) typology to develop deductive codes, and then coded MIT's crisis responses. Statements from stakeholders appearing in news media accounts provided evidence of the degree of reception to or contention with MIT's crisis responses and were coded for tone (expressing blame/accusation, anger, or sadness) and content (rejection or acceptance of MIT's strategies). To improve reliability, the investigator used a code sheet and maintained a case study database and chain of evidence (Yin). A limitation of this case study's

methodology is the single-researcher design, so to improve intracoder reliability, data were coded in three iterations and any discrepancies resolved to adhere as closely as possible to operationalized response strategies.

Key Events in the Shin Suicide Crisis

The trigger event (Coombs, 2007) of MIT's six-year crisis was the death of 19-year-old sophomore Elizabeth Shin in April 2000. Her death was predated by a history of depression, suicidal ideation, and other indicators of her volatile mental state, beginning prior to her matriculation at MIT (Healey, 2002c; Sontag, 2002). During her first year at MIT, Shin overdosed on Tylenol with codeine and spent a week in a psychiatric hospital (Shin & Shin, 2002); she told her parents the overdose was accidental (Abel & Khan, 2000; Sharpe, 2002). After her hospitalization, she received outpatient treatment from MIT Mental Health Service (Shin & Shin). At the beginning of her sophomore year, Elizabeth made multiple direct and indirect references to committing suicide in conversations with friends, MIT mental health staff, and one of her professors (Sharpe, 2002; Shin & Shin). She continued to see MIT mental health professionals, who were aware of her continuing depression, self-mutilation, and suicidal thoughts yet did not feel they were of immediate concern (Shin & Shin).

In the weeks immediately preceding her April 14, 2000 death, the severity of Elizabeth's behavior escalated sharply; it was so alarming to her friends and to the housemaster of her residence hall that they alerted MIT police or medical staff on three different occasions. On one of these occasions, she was admitted to the MIT infirmary for observation but was released the next day; MIT informed her parents that she had been in the infirmary but did not specify why (Shin & Shin, 2002; Sontag, 2002). A March 31 MIT Mental Health Service memo indicated that "many people have been concerned that [Shin] might harm herself" (quoted in Healey, 2002a, p.

2). On April 8, Elizabeth told a friend she wanted to stick a knife in her chest. The friend called MIT police, who took Elizabeth to Mental Health Service; an MIT psychiatrist she spoke to by phone cleared her to return to her dorm room (Shin & Shin; Sontag). The next night, Elizabeth told two friends she was planning to kill herself. The friends alerted the housemaster, who contacted the psychiatrist with whom she had spoken the night before; he did not believe Elizabeth's behavior necessitated hospitalizing her. The next night, April 10, first responders found Elizabeth engulfed in flames on the floor of her dorm room in Random Hall (Shin & Shin); she survived for four days before dying of her injuries. On May 30, Cambridge fire officials ruled her death a suicide (Abel, 2000).

Shin's suicide was the fifth at MIT since 1998 (Abel & Khan, 2000). Her parents, Cho Hyun and Kisuk Shin, as well as reporters at *The Boston Globe*, seized on this statistic as evidence of MIT's systemic problems in helping students with mental health issues and evidence of a culture of suicide at the school (Abel & Khan; Healey, 2001a, 2001b), while MIT claimed that their suicide rate was no higher than the national average (Abel & Khan; "MIT committee," 2001). Shin's suicide, along with two other student suicides during the 1999-2000 school year, prompted MIT's Chancellor, Lawrence Bacow, to create a task force to improve the school's Mental Health Service (Healey, 2001a).

On January 28, 2002, nearly two years after Elizabeth's death, her parents filed a lawsuit seeking $27 million in damages against the administrators, staff, and mental health professionals who had worked with Elizabeth prior to her death, among others (Shin & Shin, 2002). On June 27, 2005, Judge Christine McEvoy dismissed some claims yet allowed those against the staff members and clinicians who were most closely involved with Elizabeth's care to proceed on the basis that their "special relationship" with Elizabeth should have made her suicide foreseeable

(Bombardieri, 2005). On April 3, 2006, MIT and the Shins settled out of court for an undisclosed amount. The Shins explained their decision to settle by citing new evidence that emerged during the fact-finding portion of the lawsuit, showing that Elizabeth was incapacitated by an overdose of an over-the-counter medication, which prevented her from responding to the fire that originated from lit candles in her dorm room (Bombardieri, 2006). With the settlement, the Shins accepted what MIT had contended all along: Elizabeth's death was an accident.

Results and Discussion

Which Strategies Did MIT Employ in their Response to the Shin Suicide Crisis?

MIT's first and last response: Sympathy and concern.

MIT's initial response to the suicide centered on the emotions experienced by members of the campus community and expressions of sympathy for those affected by her death. The day of her death, April 14, 2000, MIT released an official statement from President Charles Vest:

> We are heartsick about Elizabeth Shin's death. She was a bright, promising young woman, and the tragedy of her death is felt throughout MIT…. The housemasters, deans, and others have been meeting with her friends and family to offer comfort where they can, but only time can ease the grief that we feel. We are in mourning. (MIT News Office, 2000).

However, once Shin's parents and the media began accusing MIT of liability in Elizabeth's death, the school abandoned expressions of sympathy and went on the defensive. The one exception was President Vest's February 6, 2002 letter to MIT community members, in which he noted, "We grieve for Elizabeth Shin and try to understand the depths of her family's anguish" (MIT News Office, 2002b). MIT's legal counsel may have feared that any additional expressions of sympathy would constitute an admission of guilt (Tyler, 1997). Aside from Vest's

brief statement in his letter, MIT refrained from expressions of sympathy until they reached a settlement with the Shins in April 2006. Then, in an official statement, Chancellor Phillip Clay remarked that Shin's death "was a tragedy for her family, her friends, and all those at MIT who tried to help her. This settlement will spare all of them the further emotional distress of a trial" (MIT News Office, 2006b).

MIT's primary response strategy: Excusing/avoiding responsibility.

By May 21, 2000, the tone of media accounts had turned critical of MIT, putting MIT on the defensive. *The Boston Globe* accused MIT of "bureaucratic deafness" (Abel & Khan, 2000, p. 1) and devoted the majority of a lengthy article to the account given by Shin's parents, Cho Hyun and Kisuk, describing them as "bristling with anger" and portraying Kisuk as a grieving mother with "tears welling in her eyes" (p. 1). MIT responded with a strategy of excusing/avoiding responsibility. MIT's excusing strategy had two elements. First, they emphasized their responsibility to treat college students "like the adults that they are" (Abel & Khan, p. 2) in terms of respecting their wishes for and legal right to privacy guaranteed under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which applies to all U.S. colleges and universities, and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which covers medical and counseling services in the U.S., including those at colleges. FERPA protects the privacy of college students as legal adults, but its protections are not absolute: it allows colleges to contact parents (or others who have a need to know) when students present a clear and immediate danger to themselves or others (Angelo, 2004; Baker, 2004; Lipka, 2005; Pavela, 2006). HIPAA, by contrast, has much stricter prohibitions on disclosure of medical information (Angelo; Baker). The second component of MIT's excusing strategy was to reject the attributions of responsibility that the media and Shin's parents were placing upon them: MIT spokesman Kenneth Campbell

was quoted as saying, "You can try to save kids… but you can't save them all" (Abel & Khan, p. 3) and Housemaster Nina Davis-Millis noted, "I feel I did everything I could" (p. 2).

MIT maintained their strategy of excusing/avoiding responsibility after the Shins filed their lawsuit in January 2002. In an official statement responding to the lawsuit, repeated in multiple media accounts, MIT's legal counsel Jeffrey Swope asserted that Shin's suicide was "not the fault of MIT or anyone who works at MIT" (MIT News Office, 2002a, p. 1). In a February 6, 2002 letter to the MIT community, President Vest explained the school's rationale for not issuing a more in-depth response to the lawsuit: "The place for MIT to respond to these unfair and inaccurate allegations is in court and not in the media" (MIT News Office, 2002b, p. 1), indicating an unwillingness to engage in further public defense of the school's actions. MIT continued to draw on the excusing/avoiding responsibility strategy in their legal defense. Their legal counsel noted that under existing Massachusetts law and legal precedent, MIT's administrators had no duty to prevent Shin's suicide (*Shin v. MIT*, 2005). MIT reiterated this argument in their 2006 petition for relief for Davis-Millis and Dean Arnold Henderson, whose liability Judge McEvoy determined was a matter for a jury to decide (MIT, 2006).

MIT's secondary response strategy: Scapegoating/blame-shifting.

After filing their response to the Shins' complaint in the lawsuit, MIT went public with a new strategy of scapegoating or shifting the blame to Elizabeth's parents. An official news release asserted that the Shins knew of their daughter's serious mental health problems prior to her suicide (Healey, 2002d; MIT News Office, 2002c; Sontag, 2002) and that MIT staff "fear[ed] that involving Shin's parents would only deepen her emotional distress" (Healey, 2002c, p. 1). By going on the offensive and scapegoating the parents, MIT shifted from a diminishment posture (excusing) to a denial posture (scapegoating). The change in strategy may have been

motivated by recognition that a defense of inaction—i.e., "we did all we could and there was nothing else we could do"—would not succeed in court. While scapegoating can, in some circumstances, reduce stakeholders' anger (Tyler, 1997), stakeholders can also perceive it to be what it is: a way to deflect blame and avoid responsibility.

Supplemental strategies: Corrective action and bolstering.

In July 2001, in response to continued criticism from the media and other stakeholders, MIT augmented their excusing/avoiding responsibility strategy with promises of corrective action contained within a draft report issued by the task force Chancellor Clay convened to examine MIT's mental health services (Healey, 2001c; "MIT committee," 2001). In April 2002, MIT announced a commitment to spend $838,000 on improving their Mental Health Service, including restructuring the Service, hiring additional staff and a new chief of mental health, and developing an outreach campaign to publicize their services to students (Healy, 2002e). By widely publicizing their corrective actions and commitment to student mental health care, MIT used the bolstering strategy in the hopes of regaining stakeholder trust and repairing their image.

MIT continued to use bolstering throughout the duration of the lawsuit. In late 2004, the school's News Office touted that the Mental Health Service's "nationally recognized suicide prevention program" had been featured on the October 19 episode of NBC's "Today" show (Jones, 2004, p. 1). The News Office also used the occasion to announce two new intervention strategies MIT was planning to implement. MIT clearly hoped that the third-party endorsement of the "Today" show would gain the school some favorable news media coverage; however, a Google News archive search failed to yield any news media coverage of the event.

When MIT and the Shins reached a settlement on April 3, 2006, MIT marked the occasion with two simultaneous press releases: one announcing the settlement, the second

announcing, “MIT makes mental health a priority” and detailing service improvements (MIT News Office, 2006c). MIT may have chosen to release the two announcements concurrently as a bolstering strategy because they feared the settlement, as an indirect admission of fault, might negatively impact their reputation.

A year after the settlement, in the wake of the April 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech, MIT again used bolstering. In an article written for the MIT faculty newsletter, Chaplain Robert Randolph (2007) stated that “privacy concerns are honored, but the bias is in favor of intervention when safety issues are raised” (p. 9), reflecting a clear policy change from the position MIT had taken during the Shin crisis. In addition, the chief of the MIT Mental Health Service highlighted the range of resources available to counter depression and suicide in the MIT community (Siegel, 2007). Because these statements appeared in an internal publication, it is clear that his intent was to bolster the image of Mental Health Service’s among internal stakeholders who may have been fearful of a Virginia Tech-style tragedy occurring at MIT.

How Were the Response Strategies Employed by MIT Received by Stakeholders?

Stakeholder response: Elizabeth Shin’s parents.

Elizabeth Shin’s parents began to publicly accuse MIT of negligence and liability in their daughter’s suicide a little over a month after her death. A May 21, 2000 *Boston Globe* article captured the anger of Elizabeth’s mother, Kisuk: “Elizabeth could have been saved, and that’s what makes us so angry” (Abel & Khan, 2001, p. 1). The same account noted their rejection of MIT’s primary response strategy of citing the constraints of privacy laws to excuse their failure to involve Elizabeth’s parents.

In late 2001, the Shins’ lawyer, David DeLuca, began to speak publicly for and with the Shins, a clear message to MIT that a lawsuit was brewing. Both the Shins and DeLuca were open

with reporters about their complaints against the school, directly refuting MIT's response strategies and unequivocally blaming the school for Elizabeth's death. In a January 24, 2002 *USA Today* article announcing their lawsuit against MIT, Cho Hyun Shin declared, "If [MIT administrators are] not going to inform parents of a student's serious mental condition, then they should be 100% responsible for dealing with it" (Sharpe, 2002, p. 2). Kisuk Shin challenged MIT's statement that they had done all they could to help Elizabeth: "We trusted these doctors [at MIT]. [Elizabeth] trusted them. And I think they neglected her" (Sharpe, p. 1). The Shins' legal complaint summarized their argument: "MIT's failure to properly treat Elizabeth Shin… directly and proximately resulted in her death by suicide" (Shin & Shin, 2002, p. 3). Cho Hyun Shin rejected the mental health improvements recommended by MIT's task force report as "a public relations ploy" (Healey, 2002a, p. 1) and insisted that the school must "correct their behavior so a family never has to face our situation again" (p. 2). The Shins accused MIT of treating them "not like bereaved parents but like potential litigants" (Sontag, 2002, p. 6).

After filing the lawsuit, DeLuca used the news media to launch a series of invectives at MIT. He blamed the school for making "wrong decision after wrong decision for 14 months" prior to Elizabeth's suicide (Healey, 2002a, p. 1) and noted that the Shins "still haven't gotten one single apology from school officials" (p. 2). He strategically chose to portray the Shins as victims of a cold, uncaring institution with administrators who could not be bothered to care enough about a student to prevent or accept responsibility for her death. The Shins' rejection of MIT's attempt to scapegoat them was, not surprisingly, vehement, and DeLuca lambasted MIT, calling their "strategy of blame the victim" a "further tragedy" (quoted in Healey, 2002c, p. 2).

With their statements to the media and in their legal complaint, the Shins directly challenged MIT's account of Elizabeth's death. They held the school and its administrators and

staff fully responsible for failing to prevent her death, whereas MIT felt they had acted appropriately and done all they could for Elizabeth. The back-and-forth accusations put both parties on the defensive, escalating the crisis and fueling media attention. Therefore, the April 3, 2006 announcement by MIT of their settlement with the Shins, ending a six-year-long crisis, surprised many because the Shins abruptly changed their position. In an official news release by MIT, Cho Hyun Shin stated, "We…have come to understand that our daughter's death was likely a tragic accident" (MIT News Office, 2006b, p. 1). News media accounts of the settlement reported that "DeLuca said he was no longer interested in talking about blame" and that he "praised changes that [MIT] made to its mental health services" (Bombardieri, 2006, p. 1).

News media responses.

The news media were initially neutral, reporting the facts and reiterating MIT's characterization of Elizabeth Shin's suicide as a "tragedy". However, once Elizabeth's parents began to speak out, their tone changed to favor the Shins' account of the event. Reporters uncritically recounted the Shins' accusations of MIT's "bureaucratic deafness" (Abel & Khan, 2000, p. 1) and relied on extensive, emotion-laden descriptions of the Shins as angry, sad, and grieving, as well as wronged and victimized by MIT.

Less than a year after Shin's suicide, *The Boston Globe* published a sharply critical exposé of the school's "extraordinary" suicide rate, noting that the school's eleven suicides in eleven years were evidence of a culture of suicide at the school (Healey, 2001a). The article quoted Peter Reich, head of MIT's Mental Health Service, who stated there was no "evidence of a crisis, or contagion of suicide or depression" (p. 3). However, the *Globe* rejected MIT's attempts to deny a suicide problem and evade responsibility, continuing to cite their reporter Healey's research throughout their coverage of the Shin suicide crisis (Healey, 2001b).

The Shins' January 24, 2002 announcement that they were planning to sue MIT reinvigorated the newsworthiness of the crisis. The tone of the *USA Today* article in which the Shins announced their lawsuit was sympathetic to the Shins, noting they "remain furious" with MIT and reporting the Shins' contention that the school's "irresponsible" staff "neglected" Elizabeth and violated the trust Elizabeth and her parents had placed in them (Sharpe, 2002, p. 1-2). An account in *The Boston Globe* the following day had a similar tone, condemning "the secretive mental health systems of universities" such as MIT (Healey, 2002a, p. 1).

The news media seized on the opportunity to pit MIT and the Shins against each other, stoking the controversy (and thus the newsworthiness of the crisis) by publishing incendiary statements by both parties. Throughout the duration of the crisis, many news media accounts portrayed the Shins as the sympathetic victims and MIT and its administrators as cold and heartless. Some media accounts sought to balance the perspectives of MIT and the Shins, devoting equal time to the Shins' accusations and MIT's responses. A lengthy *New York Times* article, for example, noted that MIT's privacy policies are "like [those of] many universities" (Sontag, 2002, p. 9). The number of balanced accounts increased as the lawsuit progressed, as the media came to rely more heavily upon the facts contained in legal filings and court decisions in the lawsuit. After MIT and the Shins settled out of court, media interest quickly waned.

Other stakeholder responses.

Many news media accounts contained statements by other stakeholders, including students, alumni, and administrators at other U.S. institutions of higher education. While media accounts are an incomplete and often inaccurate gauge of actual stakeholder response and opinion during a crisis (Coombs, 2007), it is nonetheless useful to examine stakeholders'

comments to the media, as they provide at least some indication of how MIT's crisis responses were received by various audiences.

The first of these responses appeared in *The Boston Globe*'s 2001 exposé of MIT's high student suicide rate. Eric Plosky, a recent graduate of MIT who would later participate in the task force charged with recommending improvements to the school's Mental Health Service, commented that "people [at MIT] have been killing themselves at what I consider an alarming rate" (Healey, 2001a, p. 1) and added that "there's been little or no response from the administration [about student suicides] until now" (p. 3). Though his remarks were critical of MIT, he refrained from blaming them for the problem. In the same article, the president of the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention indicated that MIT would need to take action to interrupt the suicide pattern, but again, did not directly blame MIT for any of the student deaths.

Comments from MIT students reported in news media accounts were similarly critical of MIT's handling of student suicides in general but did not blame MIT for the death of any particular student, including Elizabeth Shin. Students seemed to accept MIT's strategy of excusing and avoiding responsibility but also made it known that they expected the school to take corrective action to reduce the suicide rate. In November 2004, students joined the administration in taking corrective action by launching a student-led effort to promote mental health services at MIT (Wyne, 2004).

Representatives from other U.S. colleges and universities generally accepted MIT's attempts to avoid responsibility. Overall, these stakeholders seemed to accept MIT's privacy law excuse, expressing concern that students would not seek help if institutions could not guarantee their privacy (Angelo, 2005; "Changing parent demands," 2005; Sontag, 2002). However, a University of California-Davis administrator rejected the privacy excuse as "the tail wagging the

dog" (Farrell, 2002, p. 8). Some university administrators supported MIT in their effort to shift blame to the Shins. The general counsel of Brown University commented, "I don't think you can put unlimited responsibility on the institution…. a jury also wants to know what the parents knew, too" (Healey, 2002b, p. 1). Further evidence of the higher education community's support of MIT's actions came when 23 colleges and universities and eight national higher education associations filed *amicus* briefs in support of MIT's appeal after Judge McEvoy's June 2005 decision to allow some of the Shins' claims to proceed to trial (MIT News Office, 2006a).

How Effective Were MIT's Response Strategies in Bringing an End to the Shin Suicide Crisis?

MIT viewed Elizabeth Shin's death as an accident and therefore felt that minimal responsibility should be attributed to the school and its staff. The Shins, on the other hand, thought MIT should have done much more to prevent their daughter's death and accordingly sued the school for negligence and wrongful death. This conflict in perspectives created a social legitimacy crisis for MIT: key stakeholders expected MIT to hold congruent values concerning the safety of its students, but MIT's failure to prevent her suicide or to notify Shin's parents of her precarious mental state and prior suicide ideation and attempts violated the trust stakeholders had placed in the school. MIT administrators' initial response to the crisis, of excusing/avoiding responsibility, was appropriate from their perspective, as they felt they had done all they could to help Elizabeth. Indeed, SCCT recommends the use of diminishment strategies, which include excusing, to respond to accident-type crises (Coombs, 2007).

However, in choosing a response strategy, MIT should have considered two factors. First, they did not consider their prior crisis history. Elizabeth Shin's death was the third suicide in academic year 1999-2000 and the eleventh in as many years; it therefore carried a greater reputational threat (Coombs, 2007). The news media were quick to seize on MIT's high suicide

rate and purported "culture of suicide," and the Shins cited it in their legal complaint to add weight to their allegations of negligence. When an organization has a history of similar crises, SCCT recommends rebuilding strategies, including apology and compensation, for accident crises (Coombs).

Second, MIT seemingly did not consider the importance of stakeholders' perspectives in defining a crisis. If an organization's definition of a crisis differs from the stakeholders' definition, it behooves the organization to adopt the stakeholders' perspective. Organizations that fail to do so risk having their response messages and account of the crisis rejected by stakeholders, which can lead to substantial and even irreparable reputational and financial damage (Coombs, 2007). Indeed, this is exactly what happened to MIT. The Shins blamed the school for their daughter's death. They perceived Elizabeth's death as an organizational transgression or misdeed, defined by Coombs (2007) as "when management takes actions it knows may place stakeholders at risk or knowingly violates the law" (p. 65). In Coombs' typology of crisis types, organizational misdeeds carry the greatest attribution of responsibility and necessitate the strongest crisis response strategies. SCCT recommends rebuilding strategies for preventable crises such as organizational misdeeds (Coombs). MIT should have employed rebuilding strategies (apology and/or compensation) rather than the diminishment/excusing strategies upon which they initially relied.

MIT's responses, including their refusal to apologize to the Shins, were likely motivated by a desire to avoid incurring liability for Elizabeth's death. Ironically, their refusal to apologize may have been a direct cause of the lawsuit. It is, of course, speculation to say that the crisis may have been shortened, or that MIT would not have been sued, had they chosen a more appropriate response strategy such as apology. Yet the Shins' lawyer commented to the *New York Times*

shortly after filing the lawsuit, "M.I.T. had two years to extend an olive branch and open a dialogue with the Shins…and they never did that" (Sontag, 2002, p. 6). Apologies, coupled with sympathy, go a long way toward defusing stakeholder and victim anger (Courtright & Hearit, 2002; Tyler, 1997). An apology, bolstered by the corrective action MIT took, may have been sufficient to quickly end the crisis. Instead, MIT's unwavering commitment to defending their reputation and avoiding liability backfired and caused considerable reputational damage. MIT certainly suffered financial damage as well, though the extent of that damage is known only to MIT due to the confidentiality of the settlement.

MIT's attempts to scapegoat the Shins failed because scapegoating is a denial strategy within SCCT's framework; it is not recommended for either accident crises (MIT's perspective) or preventable crises (the Shins' perspective) (Coombs, 2007). Blaming the Shins inflamed the crisis by making MIT appear even more unsympathetic to Elizabeth's death and her parents' grief. In addition, by blaming the Shins, MIT increased the newsworthiness of the crisis, which kept it alive and in the news until the lawsuit was settled.

MIT's one success was in employing the strategy of corrective action, making substantial changes to their Mental Health Service and publicizing these actions to bolster their image. Though Cho Hyun Shin publicly dismissed the changes, other stakeholders commended MIT for taking action to improve mental health care for their students and change the "culture of suicide." In terms of ending the Shin crisis, however, the corrective action and bolstering had little effect. MIT was unable to rely upon it as a legal defense, since the changes were enacted in response to Shin's suicide; it also kept the issue of MIT's suicide rate in the news. Yet in terms of repairing the school's image and restoring social legitimacy, MIT's corrective action likely helped regain

the trust of key stakeholders such as students, alumni, and parents by reassuring them that student suicides will be less likely in the future (Courtright & Hearit, 2002; Hearit, 1995).

Implications for Practice and Research

Suicide is the number two cause of death among college students (The Jed Foundation, 2009a). All U.S. colleges and universities, therefore, risk facing a crisis akin to that experienced by MIT after Elizabeth Shin's suicide. The "specter of potential liability" (Hoover, 2006, p. 3) has caused college administrators to make substantial changes to their policies regarding students with mental health concerns and parental notification for suicidal students (Brown University et al., 2006; Hoover, 2005, 2006; "The doctors are 'in'," 2002). Some schools now require students with mental health problems to leave college temporarily or permanently, which may put these students at greater risk of harm and decrease their access to care (Feirman, 2005; Prescott, 2008); such policies may also violate the Americans with Disabilities Act (Pavela, 2006; Rawe & Kingsbury, 2006).

FERPA does not restrict college administrators from notifying the parents of a student who is in danger of self-harm (Angelo, 2004; Baker, 2004; Francis, 2003; Lipka, 2005; Pavela, 2006). Administrators concerned with student safety—and their own liability—should err on the side of disclosure, as the potential financial and reputational damage of a wrongful death lawsuit is much greater than that of a privacy rights violation (Angelo; Hoover, 2005; Lipka). In recent years, the extensive news media coverage of student suicides have placed U.S. colleges and universities under intense scrutiny regarding their mental health and parental notification policies (Rodolfa, 2008). High-visibility crises often lead to increased attention from regulatory bodies and legislators (Fishman, 1999; Greenberg & Elliott, 2009); therefore, if higher education institutions fail to enact policies regarding parental notification, governments may respond with

regulation (Baker, 2004). In 2005, the Tennessee legislature approved a pilot program requiring parental notification on academic, disciplinary, and well-being matters if student consent is obtained ("Changing parent demands," 2005, p. 1).

The findings of this study suggest two recommendations to help colleges reduce the risk of student suicide-related crisis damage. First, colleges need to proactively communicate and form partnerships with parents (Pavela, 2006). Establishing good relationships based on mutual trust and two-way communication before a crisis occurs is a best practice in risk management because it builds stakeholder support, which can reduce reputational damage when a crisis does occur (Seeger, 2006; Ulmer, 2001). Schools should also make an effort to involve parents when working with a student with mental health problems, to the extent that a student consents.

A second, and related, recommendation is for college administrators to treat parents of students who have committed suicide not as potential litigants or scapegoats but as people grieving the loss of their child. Reaching out to parents to express sympathy along with "a genuine, heartfelt apology" may reduce the likelihood of a lawsuit (Tyler, 1997, p. 66). In addition, communicating with compassion, concern, and empathy generates goodwill for the organization and builds trust with stakeholders (Heath, 2006; Seeger).

To the extent of the investigator's knowledge, this study is the first to examine the issue of college student suicide from the perspective of institutional crisis response. The case study presented here thus represents a "critical case": one that presents a particularly strong opportunity for learning (Yin, 2009). Nonetheless, the Shin suicide crisis at MIT is one case; additional research needs to explore the effectiveness of crisis response strategies on other campuses, ideally using both quantitative and qualitative methods. When might apology not be effective in preventing crisis damage? Are there certain contextual variables (e.g., student body

characteristics, location, or institutional mission) that may impact the effectiveness of certain response strategies? How might certain response strategies impact campus climate and retention? Can the financial and reputational damage posed by a high-visibility student suicide crisis be measured, and if so, how might different response strategies impact “the bottom line”?

In addition, an institution’s crisis response strategies may affect—positively or negatively—the likelihood of future suicides on campus. Therefore, crisis response strategies need to be part of an institution’s overall plan for responding to a student suicide. Future research might identify “best practices” for comprehensive response planning. For example, the death of six students from apparent suicide from October 2009 to March 2010 led Cornell University to implement a comprehensive outreach program that integrated open communication with outreach strategies to both help the campus heal and minimize the risk of contagion (Lipka, 2010). While stakeholder and crisis response theories seems to support Cornell’s choice of strategy, more empirical research is needed to document the short- and long-term effectiveness of “ideal” strategies on campus financial, reputational, and student outcomes.

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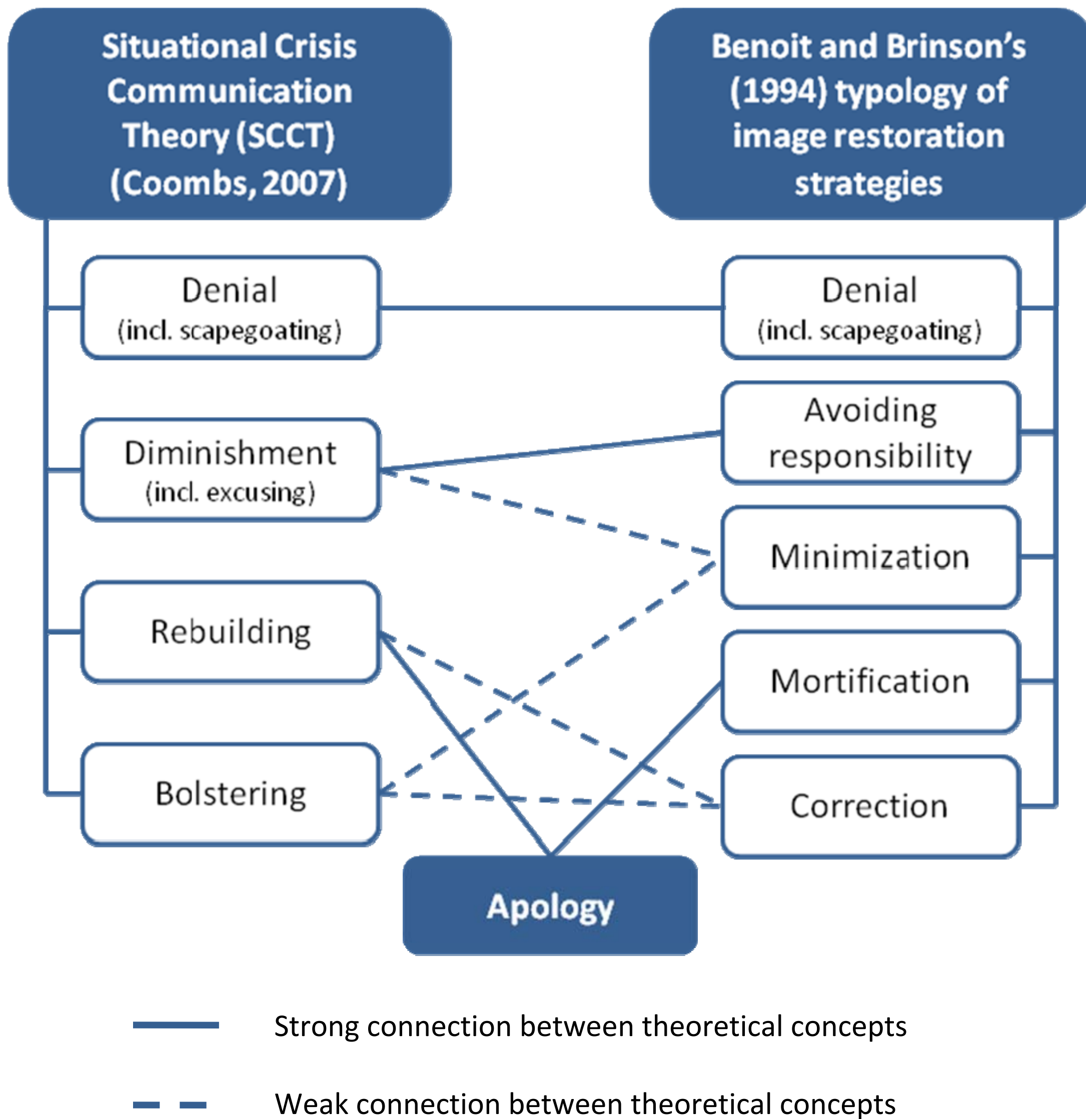

Figure 1. An Integrated Framework of Crisis Response Strategies.