

When it Rains it Pours: Crises at Oakmont University SACSA Case Study

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Setting

Oakmont University is a large public research institution located in the Southeastern United States. This Carnegie Doctoral/Research I institution enrolls more than 35,000, 75% undergraduate and 25% graduate students. Located in somewhat of a rural setting, Oakmont is still considered predominantly urban due to its proximity to a large city of 300,000 people within minutes of campus. The demographic breakdown of Oakmont includes approximately 45% White, 20% African-American, 15% Asian, 10% Latino/a, 7% who self-identify as multiple cultures, and 3% international students.

At present, Oakmont is preparing for a week of events kicking off the U.S. Presidential Debate season. The end of the week will highlight the Presidential Debate to be held on campus. Thousands of people are attending the debate from across the nation. This is an honor for Oakmont University as this is the first time an event of this caliber has been held at the institution. The surrounding community is excited for an opportunity to be in the national spotlight and is proud of their institution and its positive reputation.

Characters

Hamid El-Andu, a junior political science major of Egyptian decent, from Boston, Massachusetts. Current president of the College Democrats, Hamid is American born and an advocate of the U.S. political system. For the last month, Hamid has been receiving threats and recently reported vandalism of his vehicle.

Bill Freeman, Director of Housing and Residential Life at Oakmont University. Bill has worked at Oakmont for the last seven years as the Associate Director of Housing, but was only hired as the Director last month.

Dr. Regina Fuller, Doctor and Assistant Director of the Student Health Center. Dr. Fuller has a close working relationship with Dr. Hill.

Eric Kwan, Oakmont's Inter Fraternity Council (IFC) Advisor for the last three years.

Dr. Sandra Hill, Vice-President for Student Affairs at Oakmont University. For the last twenty years, she has worked in the Oakmont University Student Affairs Division in a variety of capacities. Dr. Hill is known as a devoted advocate for students and a gifted colleague.

Fran Mason, Dr. Hill's Administrative Assistant. Fran has worked with Dr. Hill for five years and continues to enjoy her job at Oakmont University.

Dr. Roger Thompson, President of Oakmont University for the last four years, Dr. Thompson has focused on moving Oakmont toward gaining a national reputation as a research institution.

Misty Watkins, undergraduate student, member of Chi Iota Delta sorority.

Case

On a brisk Monday morning, Dr. Sandra Hill, Vice President for Student Affairs at Oakmont University, finds herself reflecting as she walks to yet another 8:30 am meeting regarding the last minute details of Oakmont's hosting of the upcoming presidential debate next week. This event will highlight the political agenda and strategy of both candidates, one of which, if elected, would be the first African American to win the U.S. presidency. While all presidential debates are of great historical significance, this is the first time a presidential debate is to be held on the campus. As such, President Thompson wanted reports of all campus incidents going through Dr. Hill as opposed to going only to the Dean of Students Office.

On her way to the meeting, Dr. Hill decides to stroll through the Student Union to observe her students in action. As she walks by several student organization displays and then through the food court, she thinks about the thousands of students that she has worked with through the years. Throughout her time at Oakmont, Dr. Hill has worked with seven institutional presidents and has seen the University become a well-respected global research institution with more than 35,000 students. Yet, today, Dr. Hill is worried.

Dr. Hill's concerns stem from Oakmont's being in the global spotlight of the presidential debate. She is also apprehensive about the emotional climate on the campus as relationships with a variety of stakeholders are anything but peaceful. The overwhelming federal security presence has long since undermined the learning environment. Students have had limited access to certain academic and administrative facilities, while others have had to shuffle study hours in certain buildings to accommodate national security interests. Due to these changes, conflict between academic and student affairs departments has caused some ripple effects which have not gone unnoticed. Further, while not being able to address one cause, Dr. Hill recognizes the growing contempt, distrust, and fear that have seemingly permeated campus.

Added to this tense environment are recent events that have triggered fear throughout the campus community and have impeded the overall sense of campus safety. Within the last month, Hamid El-Andu received three anonymous, typed letters that threatened his life. Though campus police and student affairs practitioners worked tirelessly in the investigation, no leads were established. Hamid is a very vocal supporter of the Democratic nominee for President and for over a year has been working across campus in political capacities to promote social justice, increase voter registration, and to assist the institution's hosting of the debate. Dr. Hill has worked with Hamid quite often and recognizes his leadership potential and passion for the political arena.

Before heading to her 8:30 am meeting, Dr. Hill read the University Police reports. She discovered that around 12:15 am Monday morning after a late night study session with fellow students, Hamid stopped by his car (parked at his residence hall) to pick up some campaign placards to place throughout campus. According to the University Police report, Hamid discovered all four car tires slashed, several dents to the car body, two windows broken, and on the steering wheel of the car a typed note which read "BOOM!," as well as several deliberately inscribed messages on the outside of the vehicle. One phrase read, "Back off. *Semper instans*. You're next. Leave now." The University Police were checking for fingerprints but did not give Hamid much hope for finding the suspects.

After reading the police report, Dr. Hill immediately placed a phone call to Hamid but had not been able to reach him before her meeting. She also asked Fran Mason to see what she could find out about the phrase, “*Semper instans*.” Dr. Hill turned her cell phone on vibrate mode in hopes that Hamid would try to call her during her meeting. She had also put in a call to Hamid’s parents, both of whom she remembers from conversations with them during Parent Orientation and in recent weeks regarding the previous threats to Hamid’s safety.

Also in the report, it seems that seven fraternity members of Gamma Rho Alpha were arrested at their fraternity house on charges stemming from what appears to be a race-related assault on an African-American male and his Latina female companion. This fraternity has been disciplined in the past for a series of racially insensitive behaviors including deliberate denial of membership to members of certain racial and ethnic groups. However, after suspension and a series of sensitivity workshops, the chapter had been incident free for two years.

The conflict at the fraternity house was on Dr. Hill’s mind and she texted Eric Kwan, to see if he had contacted the Gamma Rho Alpha Chapter Advisor or their National Headquarters. As she approached the University Administration Building, she had not yet received a text from Eric. She took a moment to catch her breath before entering what was sure to be another tense meeting regarding the presidential debate. Minutes after sitting down, the University Police Chief began reviewing security procedures. As he began, Dr. Hill felt her cell phone vibrate and thought it might be Hamid. It was not; instead it was a text from Bill Freeman, Director of Housing and Residential Life. He indicated that his office was notified just moments ago that anonymous threatening language had been written on several bathroom walls in Founders and Tryst residence halls. The phrase, “Oakmont, you ain’t seen nothing. *Semper instans*. 41607,” was reported by some undergraduate residents. Tryst Hall is adjacent to Oakmont’s football stadium, which this weekend will host over 92,000 fans for a key conference football game with Oakmont’s rival. Dr. Hill leaned over to one of her colleagues and said she would have to leave the meeting. She asked her colleague to email her with the meeting details and Dr. Hill left the room.

Dr. Hill began to call Bill Freeman, but before she could contact him, she received a phone call from Dr. Regina Fuller. Regina informed Dr. Hill that a member of Chi Iota Delta sorority, Misty Watkins, is claiming that while on a late-night walk last night, she was abducted at knifepoint and transported to an unknown location where she was sexually assaulted and left stranded by two unidentified males. Though tests have not confirmed the reports and she does not have much memory of the incident, Misty said that she had not been drinking or under the influence of any illegal substances at the time of the attack. Regina informed Dr. Hill that it had been hours since the incident. Misty did not report it earlier as she was embarrassed and afraid of what might happen to her. Some of Misty's friends encouraged her to go to the Health Center and report the incident; otherwise, she said she never would have come at all. Dr. Hill hung up with Dr. Fuller and said she would be in touch momentarily.

After hanging up with Dr. Fuller, a text came through from Fran Mason. It was in response to Dr. Hill's request for information. Fran informed Dr. Hill that the phrase "*Semper instans*" is Latin for "Always threatening," and that the only thing she could find relating to the numbers 41607 was that they were the same date of the Virginia Tech tragedies. Fran also mentioned that one of the student workers in the office indicated that there was a YouTube video on the internet of several men dressed in dark clothes vandalizing a vehicle on the Oakmont campus. The student worker knew it was Oakmont as he recognized the residence hall in the background. Additionally, Fran said there were two representatives from the media waiting to speak with Dr. Hill.

Before Dr. Hill can respond to Fran, another phone call comes in. This time it is from President Thompson. He informs Dr. Hill that the FBI had contacted him and mentioned that they had been monitoring police reports in the surrounding area. The FBI determined from some of these initial reports that the campus may not be a safe place for the presidential candidates. Accordingly, they are considering pulling the event from Oakmont University and changing to a new location. The President wants to know what would give the FBI that idea and what Dr. Hill might know about it.

You are Dr. Sandra Hill. What course of action do you take?

While making your case study presentation, please make sure to address the following seven questions:

1. What issues need to be addressed first in the case? What can wait? Why can it wait?

Ideally, we would like to see the students' analytical skills and how they support their opinions when providing direction for this response. Here's why. While we think the President needs to be addressed first, one could reasonably and correctly argue another perspective. You cannot separate each of these incidents from an immediate response perspective by putting one issue on the backburner and coming back to it later due to the potential firestorms that will erupt. Again, we believe it is all about the logic and reasoning behind their arguments and their support for them. This question could have multiple correct answers and it could also have correct answers that are not supported as well as others.

2. What institutional policies need to be considered when making decisions in this case?

Students could address the following: Student Code of Conduct, Greek Life, Residential Life (specifically what it states in Housing contracts), Office of Diversity and Equity Policies, etc. We should also consider duty and negligence and our responsibility as an institution to students, the community, etc.

3. What federal policies/acts/amendments need to be examined when working with students involved in the case? FERPA, HIPAA, Compliance with "Timely Warning" Doctrine, Constitution, Bill of Rights, (among others).

4. How do the media play a role in your work as a Student Affairs professional? Identify the role of the media in a crisis situation. Discuss how Dr. Hill should meet the needs of the media while meeting the needs of the institution and situation.

Media can be an ally by assisting in reporting factual information, preventing rumors, and limiting panic. This mutually beneficial relationship

must be cultivated prior to crises and critical incidents and can only be built upon a strong foundation of honesty and trust. Media have information dissemination needs and we address those needs by providing appropriate information through a variety of communication channels (i.e., interviews, television, radio, websites, emails, etc.).

Media can also be a challenge as they may be apt to report something erroneous in order to find a story. Dr. Hill would be wise in working with them. She should never rush to provide information to the media. She needs to make sure she takes her time and finds the appropriate person to talk to the media. Sometimes this is the University President, other times it is not. Dr. Hill will need to remain calm, assess the situation, and determine who the appropriate person would be to speak with the media, and how to address the media when they ask her for a comment.

5. What other stakeholders would be intricately involved in this case and what are their needs? How will you attempt to meet the needs of those stakeholders?

Other major stakeholder groups are students, parents, faculty/staff, the surrounding community, and alumni. Below is a listing of some of the major stakeholder groups and their associated needs as well as strategies that we implement to assist these groups during times of campus crises and critical events.

Other Major Stakeholders	Associated Needs	Strategies Implemented to Address Needs
A.) Students	1.) Information Dissemination 2.) Safety and Security Reassurance 3.) Physical, Psychological, Spiritual, and Academic	1.) Updates via Communication Mediums 2.) Campus Police Presence, Educational Programming, and Facilitation of Response Protocol Comprehension 3.) Provide Basic Needs, Immediate and Sustained Counseling, Campus Ministries, Liaisons with Academic Affairs
B.) Parents	1.) Information Dissemination 2.) Safety and Security Reassurance 3.) Psychological and Bereavement Needs	1.) Updates via Communication Mediums 2.) Campus Police Presence, Educational Programming, and Facilitation of Response Protocol Comprehension 3.) Counseling, Physical Assistance, Limitation of Irrelevant Communication
C.) Faculty/Staff	1.) Information Dissemination 2.) Safety and Security Reassurance 3.) Student Behavior and Education Awareness 4.) Rest and Support	1.) Updates via Communication Mediums 2.) Campus Police Presence, Educational Programming, and Facilitation of Response Protocol Comprehension 3.) Workshops, Seminars, and Training 4.) Additional Staff, Recognition, Counseling
D.) Surrounding Community	1.) Information Dissemination 2.) Physical and Psychological	1.) Updates via Communication Mediums 2.) Shelter and Occasional Counseling
E.) Alumni	1.) Information Dissemination	1.) Updates via Communication Mediums

6. What sensitive issues are at play within the case study? How do you, as Dr. Hill address those sensitive issues?

Although not an exhaustive list, there are a variety of major incidents at play in this case and several are specifically linked to:

- Institutional Image (Investigation of Cases; Careful Deliberation with Colleagues; Media Reports)
- Campus Safety and Security of Individuals and Facilities (Investigation of Cases, Prevention, Preparation, Response, and Recovery from a Proactive AND Reactive Perspective)
- Race Relations and Intimidation (Investigation of Cases, Campus Judicial Processes, City Legal Processes, Appropriate Use of Student Development Theory)
- Overall Campus Tension and Threats to Sense of Community (Assessment of Needs, Services Based on Assessment Results, Proactive and Reactive Strategies, Appropriate Use of Student Development Theory)
- Stakeholder Needs and Critical Communication (Assessment of Needs, Services Based on Assessment Results, Proactive and Reactive Strategies, Communication and Collaboration)
- The Compromised Learning Environment (Assessment of Needs, Services Based on Assessment Results, Proactive and Reactive Strategies, Communication and Collaboration, Reaffirmed Commitment to Protection of Learning Environment)
- Confidentiality versus Obligation to Protect (Comprehension and Initiation of Legal Protocols and Services)

7. How might student development theory assist you in gaining insight about how Dr. Hill should work with the students in the case? (i.e., Hamid, the members of Gamma Alpha Rho, Misty Watkins, the members of Chi Iota Delta).

Chickering and Reisser's Seven Vectors, Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, Perry's Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development, Loevinger's Theory of Ego Development, or relevant Identity Development Theories like Cross' Model of Black Identity Formation could be among the theories discussed here.