

**A Case Study Examining Image Repair Strategies Employed by Universities in  
Responses to the College Admissions Scandal**

Katie McMillan

Department of Communication, Wayne State University

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Dr. Donyale Griffin Padgett

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## **Introduction**

Higher education in America has long been a source of scrutiny, and recent controversies and criticisms have caused many to question the value of a college degree and the industry as a whole. Critics have called out issues of affordability and the student loan debt crisis, as well as concerns about equity and access. While critiques of higher education are nothing new (Eells, 1934), the impact of such sustained concerns has significant potential implications as the National Student Clearinghouse (2020) reports ongoing declines in enrollment, shifts in the demographics of college-bound students, and lingering uncertainty related to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. In many ways, colleges and universities are structured and governed like businesses, and long-term reputational hits have the potential to impact an institution's financial wellbeing and perceptions of the industry (Downes, 2017). As such, they often employ crisis communications tactics to share information, navigate a situation, and minimize reputational damage and subsequent fallout (Downes, 2017).

## **Issue**

The 2019 college admissions scandal, in which wealthy parents paid an independent consultant to illegally bribe officials, fraudulently inflate test scores, and falsify athletic talent to gain unethical admission for their children at prestigious universities across the country, has brought to light a systemic culture within higher education that perpetuates privilege for the affluent. Academic policy scholar John Thelin (2019) notes the “embarrassing American dilemma” that no institution is entirely academic in its selection process, and that the scandal merely exposed the existence of long-standing, well-known side doors to admission that wealthy and influential parents exploit with ease. While there are stark differences for low- and high-

income applicants when navigating the college admissions experience, most share the optimistic ideal that higher education is a universal tool for social and economic mobility (Bodovski, 2020).

The college admissions scandal has played out for over a year on a national stage, transforming this issue into a situation that meets the widely accepted definition of a crisis: “an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders that can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2007, p. 2-3).

### **Significance**

The college admissions scandal has painted a stark picture for the non-affluent: higher education, it would seem, is a rigged game where the average American does not belong and does not have a chance. While this culture of elitism has direct implications for the eight institutions involved in the scandal, it also presents a broader, industry-wide reputational crisis for all of higher education. In their investigation of the scandal, *Wall Street Journal* reporters Melissa Korn and Jennifer Levitz (2020) assert that while the involved institutions are not likely to suffer significant ramifications from the scandal due to their existing prestige, the widespread issue of rampant, abused privilege has confirmed some of the worst assumptions and fears held by lower- and middle-class families. As an industry built on an altruistic foundation of teaching, research, and service, higher education relies on maintaining a positive reputation among perspective students, and in many cases, their parents (Mainardes et al., 2010). This reputational crisis has brought the entire industry into question and presents a threat to the future of higher education.

### **Purpose**

This brief case study will explore and compare the crisis communications strategies employed by four of the eight institutions involved in the scandal to understand how they are

attempting to salvage and rebuild their tarnished reputations, while assuring that their admissions processes are fair. This study will be informed by a content analysis of institutionally issued communications related to the scandal, which will provide insight about what similarities and differences exist among the approaches of these organizations in responding to the same crisis.

### **Theoretical Lens**

This case study will analyze institutional responses to the college admissions scandal through the lens of image repair theory. Image repair theory, also known as image restoration theory, was introduced in 1995 by William Benoit (2015) to suggest specific strategies that can be used by individuals, companies, or organizations to restore an image following reputational damage. The theory is based on the fundamental ideas that communication is a goal-directed activity, and that maintaining a favorable reputation is a key goal (Benoit, 2015). In acknowledging that response strategies can be used in a variety of combinations, the theory recognizes that individuals are active participants in the communication process and that there is no single, one-size-fits-all response (Benoit, 2015, 1997).

Through various studies, Benoit (2015, 2000, 1997) developed an image repair typology consisting of five categories (some with subcategories), including denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, taking corrective action, and mortification. Denial strategies encompass: (a) simple denial, in which the accused directly denies that the act; and (b) shifting the blame, in which the accused attempts to direct blame elsewhere (Benoit, 2015). Evading responsibility strategies encompass (c) provocation/scapegoating, in which the accused cites the offensive act was a response to another wrongful or offensive act; (d) defeasibility, in which the accused pleads a lack of knowledge or control; (e) excuse/accident, in which the accused blames the offensive act on an accident or factors beyond their control; and (f)

justification, in which the accused claims good intentions (Benoit, 2015). Reducing offensiveness strategies include (g) bolstering, in which the accused cites previous good behaviors or existing goodwill; (h) minimization, in which the accused attempts to convince the public that the offensive act is less serious than it appears; (i) differentiation, in which the accused distinguishes the offensive act from a larger offensive act to lessen negative perceptions by comparison; (j) transcendence, in which the accused positions the offensive act in a larger context to place it in a different and less offensive light; (k) attacking the accuser, in which the accused questions the credibility of the accusers; and (l) compensation, in which the accused offers compensations to the victims of their offensive act (Benoit, 2015). The final response strategies are more direct, and include (m) corrective action, in which the accused claims they will correct an offensive act by restoring the situation to its prior state and preventing reoccurrence of the offensive act; and (n) mortification, in which the accused admits responsibility and asks for forgiveness (Benoit, 2015).

Recent scholars have furthered image repair theory and proposed additional strategies. In their investigation of British Petroleum's response to the Deepwater Horizon explosion and subsequent oil spill, Smithson and Venette (2013) posited the additional image repair strategy of stonewalling, in which the accused redirects attention to insignificant details and is generally uncooperative. In a study of the image repair strategies employed by the University of Louisville following their basketball team's involvement in a federal bribery investigation, Frederick and Pegoraro (2018) posited the additional strategy of rallying, in which the accused attempts to unify constituents via camaraderie to move on from a scandal. The additional strategy of reducing expectations was introduced following a study of the strategies employed by President Barack Obama following the problematic launch of the Healthcare.gov website (Benoit, 2014).

Image repair theory has been critiqued as being too linear and internally focused (Gilpin, 2010), and scholars have proposed the development of additional theories more focused on an organization's ability to learn from a crisis (Seeger & Padgett, 2010) and facilitate healing (Padgett & Allison, 2010).

## **Literature Review**

Much of the research around image repair theory falls into two broad categories: case studies related to the effectiveness of image repair strategies used by either organizations or individuals (often public figures such as politicians, athletes, or celebrities). While there are differences in the repair efforts for individuals and organizations — namely that organizations may have greater resources available to address reputational damage — the basic strategies remain the same (Benoit, 1997). In studies related to collegiate scandals, scholars have found that social media platforms can be used to employ image repair strategies with mixed efficacy (Frederick et al., 2019; Frederick & Pegoraro, 2018; Brown et al., 2015). Scholars have concluded that interactive and unpredictable nature of social media has made image repair an increasingly complex process (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Liu & Fraustino, 2014).

While scholarship related directly to the recent college admissions scandal is so far limited to critical summaries (Thelin, 2019) and a sociological ethnography (Bodovski, 2020), previous scholarship related to collegiate crises is relevant in understanding the case. In an analysis of crises from the last decade, common categories were identified, including violence on campus, sex scandals, administrative malfeasance, cheating and admissions-related issues, hazing, and athletics issues (Downes, 2017). In a survey of university personnel about their perceptions of ethical transgressions, Grobler and Horne (2017) found that bribery, fraud, and favoritisms were universally perceived as negative, and concluded that a transgression at an

institutional or employee-level presented a reputational risk. Downes (2017) found that the involvement of university personnel in a scandal increased public perception of that university's responsibility for the scandal, and concluded that admissions-related scandals at the University of Illinois, West Virginia University, and Edison State College resulted in decreased academic reputation, a sub-par student population, and unfair limitations to opportunities for qualified perspective students.

Downes (2017) also found that scandals have the potential to impact an institution's long-term financial wellbeing, and asserted that reputational threat was brought on by the public's awareness, not necessarily by the mere occurrence, of a scandal. Conversely, in their empirical study on the impact of highly publicized scandals on top-ranked universities, Rooney and Smith (2019) found that major scandals resulted in an initial drop in applications, but that the fallout was generally insignificant and short-lived for the nation's most prestigious institutions.

### **Case History**

In March 2019, federal prosecutors announced an investigation and charges related to a criminal conspiracy to influence undergraduate admissions decisions at eight universities, including Georgetown University; Stanford University; the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA); the University of San Diego (USD); the University of Southern California (USC); the University of Texas at Austin (UT); Wake Forest University (WFU); and Yale University (Yale). The conspiracy, labeled by the United States Justice Department as Operation Varsity Blues, involved affluent parents who paid consultant William "Rick" Singer to bribe college officials, fraudulently inflate test scores, and falsify athletic talent (Medina et. al., 2019). Between 2011 and 2018, Singer funneled more than \$25 million to the universities using his

firms Key Worldwide and The Edge College and Career Network, to facilitate the unethical admission of students from more than 750 families (Winter & Burke, 2019).

To date, the ongoing investigation has resulted in a list of charges against 57 people, including Singer, 10 co-conspirators, 11 university personnel, and 40 parents — some of whom are prominent figures in business, law, or television (United States Department of Justice, n.d.). At this time, more than 25 individuals have been sentenced to prison time, and additional trials are scheduled into 2021 (United States Department of Justice, n.d.). The culpability of the students whose parents were involved in the scandal has been widely debated (Golden & Burke, 2019). While most have had their admissions offers revoked or faced expulsion, none of the students whose parents were involved in the scandal have been charged with crimes in the case, as prosecutors argued that most were unaware and of their parents' actions (Taylor, 2020).

Operation Varsity Blues is the Justice Departments' largest-ever college admissions prosecution (Medina et. al., 2019), and it has energized conversations about privilege in higher education within the industry (Jump, 2019; Rosenberg, 2019) and beyond (Neklason, 2019; Prossack, 2019). The conspiracy continues to receive considerable media coverage, and has been dubbed a “scandal” by both liberal and conservative outlets (Yan, 2019; Young, 2020). Some closest to the industry were not shocked by the scandal, including higher education reporter Brian Rosenberg (2019), who argued in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that “the only thing surprising about this news is that anyone would find it surprising,” (para. 2).

## **Method**

This case study includes a comparative content analysis of university-issued messaging, including campus emails and informational websites, related to the college admissions scandal. All analyzed emails were sent from the respective institution's president or chancellor and



archived online. Because an analysis of messaging from all of the eight universities involved in the scandal is too broad and impossible due to ongoing litigation, this case study will focus on messaging from four universities: UT, UCLA, WFU, and Yale. These institutions, which include both public and private universities, were selected because of the breadth and availability of messaging.

To conduct the analysis, content was first gathered, reviewed, and analyzed for phrases and themes that were consistent with various image repair strategies. This method is limited in both its manual execution, and in its emphasis on only the immediately available institutionally issued messages. Future studies could provide insight about responses from the media, as well as students, parents, faculty and staff, peer institutes, and other key stakeholders.

### **Analysis and Findings**

This case study found the most common strategies employed to be the evasion of responsibility through defeasibility; the reduction of offensiveness via bolstering and rallying, transcendence, and compensation; and corrective action, which will serve as themes for analysis.

#### ***Defeasibility***

Defeasibility is an image repair strategy based on the evasion of responsibility, in which an organization pleads either a lack of knowledge or control (Benoit, 2015). In response to the college admissions scandal, all four universities made early use of this strategy by evading responsibility and instead presenting themselves as unaware victims.

In UCLA's first email to the campus community related to the crisis, Chancellor Gene Block (2019, para. 3) made use of the defeasibility strategy and emphasized that UCLA was not alone in its crisis in his statement that "today's indictment makes clear that UCLA, like the other universities, was the victim of an alleged crime." In UT's first campus email related to the crisis,

President Gregory Fenves aligned the university's reaction to the scandal to that of its stakeholders and emphasized UT's status as a victim by stating that, "like many students and families across the country, we are also outraged that parents, outside actors and university employees have committed fraud" (Fenves, 2019c, para. 1). WFU President Nathan Hatch's (2019a, para. 2) email message to campus regarding the scandal most directly made use of the defeasibility strategy in his statement that, "Wake Forest is considered by the U.S. Department of Justice to be a victim of this fraud. In no way has it been suggested that the university was involved in deceitful practices, nor were any employees other than [charged volleyball coach Bill] Ferguson, accused of wrongdoing." Hatch (2019c, para. 2) furthered WFU's position as a victim in the scandal by employing this strategy in a second campus message in which he stated "the Justice Department's review has found that Wake Forest, and the other schools involved, were targeted by a con man and his clients." When announcing the crisis via email, Yale President Peter Salovey (2019a, para. 1) also presented his university as a victim when he described the "attempts to deceive the admissions offices," and claimed that "these dishonest and criminal actions against the university are an affront to our community's deeply held values of fairness, inclusion, and honesty."

### ***Bolstering and Rallying***

Bolstering is an image repair strategy designed to mitigate reputational damage by reducing the offensiveness of a crisis through the reference of previous good behaviors and an organization's existing prior positive reputation (Benoit, 2015). In urging the campus communities via internal messaging to unite in recognition of their respective institution's previous goodwill, these attempts at bolstering could also be interpreted as instances of the rallying image repair strategy (Frederick & Pegoraro, 2018). While UCLA, UT, and Yale all

emphasized their previous good-standing and prestige as a means of positively uniting their stakeholders in messaging related to the scandal, this strategy was employed differently by each.

At UCLA, Block (2019, para. 5) used bolstering and rallying strategies that were centered around the university's ethical standards and unifying pride in its students with the statement that "honesty, integrity and fairness are core values at UCLA and admission is a notable accomplishment...once here, our students work extraordinarily hard to fulfill the highest standards of academic and athletic excellence." At UT, Fenves (2019b, para. 4) chose to recall the "tens of thousands of students, faculty and staff members, coaches and admissions officers who conduct themselves with honor and distinction every day" before citing "we must continue to strive for the highest ethical standards." At Yale, Salovey's (2019a, para. 6) use of these complimentary strategies focused on the history and benefits of the university's athletics program by stating, "our sports teams engender pride among our whole community, and I have often said that we bask in the reflected glory, bringing the Yale community closer together."

### ***Transcendence***

Transcendence is an image repair strategy intended to reduce the offensiveness of a crisis by painting it in a broader context that attempts to shine a light on a more significant issue (Benoit, 2015). Both WFU and Yale employed this strategy in later messaging related to the scandal, conveying the crisis as an opportunity to learn, grown, and recommit to creating a culture of access and equity. In a message to the WFU campus summarizing the results of an internal investigation into the scandal,, Hatch (2019c, para. 5) claimed he was "committed to responding to the undercurrent of doubt that exists at the heart of the national news stories and emails I have received: doubt about access, equity, and belonging." In a similar message summarizing the findings of Yale's internal investigation, Salovey (2019b, para 4-5) cited that

“our community came together to reaffirm our commitment to admitting remarkable students from all walks of life...and in the years ahead, Yale will continue actively to fortify and look for opportunities to improve our ability to maintain an academic community of excellence and integrity.” In both instances, university leadership employ the transcendence strategy to shift the focus from the scandal to the broader issue of access.

### ***Compensation***

Compensation is an image repair strategy in which an organization offers compensation, usually financial, to the victims of an offensive act (Benoit, 2015). Both UT and WFU identified first-generation and low-income students as victims, because although they may have been qualified applicants, the scandal made an already competitive environment unfair to those without affluent parents willing to bribe officials. On its website dedicated to answering common questions about the scandal, UT (2019) touted its enrollment and graduation rates among first-generation and low-income students, and announced the new Texas Advance Commitment program, funded in part by the bribe money involved in the scandal, to provide four years of financial aid for low- and middle-income students. In an email providing a campus update on the internal investigation at WFU, Hatch (2019c) announced that the money received as a bribe in the scandal would be redirected to the Magnolia Scholars program in support of first-generation college students.

### ***Corrective Action***

Perhaps the most direct and common image repair strategy, corrective action entails an organization correcting an offensive act and preventing a reoccurrence (Benoit, 2015). In the first campus email related to the scandal, UCLA, UT, WFU, and Yale all announced that they were cooperating fully with the federal investigation, and would be conducting an additional internal

review of their admissions policies (Block, 2019; Fenves, 2019a; Hatch, 2019a; Salovey, 2019a). Further, each university also announced the termination of all involved personnel, either through campus email or a website dedicated to providing updates about the scandal (UCLA, 2019; UT, 2019; Hatch, 2019b; Yale, 2019). While Yale (2019) and WFU (Hatch, 2019c) cited the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) in their decision to not detail information about involved students, UT (2019) and UCLA (2019), announced that they had rescinded admissions offers related to the scandal and expelled unnamed students who had been unethically admitted.

Most of the corrective action strategies implemented focused on sharing the results of investigations into the scandal, and subsequent policy changes, which included increased scrutiny and an audited joint review of student-athlete admissions by representatives from the athletics, admissions, and an administrative offices at UCLA (2019), UT (Fenves, 2019d; 2019e), WFU (Hatch, 2019c), and Yale (Salovey, 2019c). Yale also announced that beyond its revised student-athlete admissions process, all applicants would be subject to the verification of certain extracurricular accomplishments and an audit at the end of each admissions cycle, and athletic coaches would be required to report any non-university income annually (Salovey, 2019c).

## **Discussion**

While it is too early to assess the efficacy of policy changes or reactions related to the crisis, this study's exploration of employed image repair strategies offers insight into the universities' perception of the crisis and associated risk. The common use of the defeasibility strategy, coupled with the lack of mortification or apology implies that these institutions subscribe to Bodovski's (2020) assessment that the parents are primarily responsibility for the crisis. The universal decision to take a stance as a victim in the crisis suggests that these

institutions acknowledged the reputational threat presented by the scandal (Mainardes et al., 2010), and therefore the need to communicate with their stakeholders about it in a way that distanced them from attributions of responsibility (Grobler & Horne, 2017).

While WFU and Yale made use of the transcendence strategy (Hatch, 2019c; Salovey, 2019b), both instances were generally vague and the related messaging could either succeed in redirecting attention from the crisis, or fail and be interpreted as hollow boilerplate phrases rather than a sincere recognition of systemic issues until the corrective action strategies of each university are further developed (Benoit, 2015). The use of the compensation strategy by UT and WFU is a direct recognition that the scandal impacted an unknown number of qualified students, and aligns with Benoit's (2015) assertion that providing financial support — and publicizing the support — can offset reputational damage.

While all of the examined institutions promised internal investigations and revised admissions policies, only UT and Yale have communicated about the scandal after March 2019, and they remain the only institutions included in this study to have shared the findings of their internal investigation (Salovey, 2019c; Fenves, 2019e). Full transparency, specific details, and continuous updates about corrective actions taken would be more effective in restoring trust and rebuilding reputation for each institution (Benoit, 2015).

Image repair theory provides a cause-and-effect lens from which to view institutional responses to the college admissions scandal. Although it may be too soon to assess the impact of the scandal, the use of image repair strategies suggests that the involved institutions viewed it as a reputational threat and crisis. In the immediate absence of quantifiable changes, the institutions' limited messaging and positions of prestige support Thelin's (2019) claim that the

scandal will likely be recalled as an isolated incident requiring short-term reactions, rather than a systemic failure that presents a necessary opportunity for proactive, long-term changes.

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