Higher Education Leadership Case Study: Virginia Tech Crisis

Santino Scibelli

State University of New York at Stony Brook

Abstract

The detrimental aftermath of the events that took place on April 16, 2007 in the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia left the nation in a vulnerable state, particularly the scars left not only on the families of victims – but higher education communities across America. This incident spiraled an escapade into the various challenges faced by Virginia Tech during this crisis situation which led a reformation into uncovering inconsistencies amongst the federal and state government policy, lack of resources for the mentally ill across college campuses, and necessity for more effective crisis management planning in higher education institutions.

Higher Education Leadership Case Study: Virginia Tech Crisis

Leadership positions within higher education communities instill more than academic, developmental, and nurturing support to foster student success. These prominent positions are influential in creating significant policies, procedures, and communication in place to ensure the safety of each member that is part of their college community. Though, particular incidents have occurred throughout recent decades which have resulted in disheartening, tragic, and difficult transitions for leaders within higher education communities to revitalize their key guidance in implementing effective methodologies in correlation with the drastic needs of their communities within these parlous moments. An incident in particular stands out as one of the most heinous acts committed in American and higher education history.

On April 16, 2007, the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia, United States, a senior attending the Virginia Tech Polytechnic Institute, Seung-Hui Cho, enacted a campus-wide shooting which resulted in the death of 32 individuals and left 17 hospitalized in an unbridled massacre. The aftermath of this incident shaped the beginning of widespread criticism, reformation, and development on leadership practices and an overhaul of crisis management systems for the institute. In order to understand the implications of this incident and its connection to leadership policies in practice during the time of the shooting, an analytical assessment and review of the incident is essential for establishing contextual insight on administrative leadership development as a key anecdote for preserving the safety of our college campuses on a national scale.

The Virginia Tech crisis foremost had inspired explorative research and assessment into multiple areas of leadership practice and policies that presented substantial oversights, which

have been concluded to be the contribution of Virginia Tech's heinous incident. During the

timeframe in which the incident occurred, there were significant gaps between state and federal

government policies in 2007. The gaps in government policy ignited controversial discussion

over the deregulation of gun control laws, particularly in which the gun acquisition laws of 2007

provided easy accessibility to guns and work-around within the system to individuals regardless

of mental capacity, primarily due to the lack of mental health policies and initiatives in

development for Virginia's state.

The Federal Control Act of 1968 specifically prohibits gun purchases by anyone who has

been adjudicated as a mental defective [i.e., a person determined to be a "danger to himself or to

others"] or who has been committed to a mental institution." Davies (2008) analyzed the

ambiguity of Virginia Law in regards to this federal policy – which subsequently gave Cho

accessibility to a lethal weapon due to his name not being entered into the federal system for a

firearms background check (Davies, 2008). The disconnect between federal and state law during

this time period provided only a piece of the overarching systematic deficiencies within the

Virginia Tech Institute. Leadership at Virginia Tech leading up to this incident were inattentive to

the development of gun control policy or clear crisis management regulations for the campus

community – despite interactions with Cho and unrelated false alarm incidents on campus in

prior weeks leading up to the massacre becoming increasingly present.

Administration and campus residents communicated with Cho at various points in time,

specifically in correlation with isolated incidents or reports that were addressed by fellow

students who were alarmed by red flags in his behavior. Deisinger and Scalora (2016) discovered

through internal reviews conducted of Virginia Tech's practices and policies that there were

significant points of contact with the perpetrator (prior to the incident) in which other faculty, staff, or students had concerns about his behavior or his welfare. In addition, it was noted that many faculties at the time misunderstood the laws and policies regarding sharing of information that had contributed to misreports or oversights on the concerns (Deisigner & Scalora, 2016). Deisigner and Scalora (2016) is one of many supplemental case studies and reviews which scrutinized the interaction between administration who communicated with Cho leading up to the incident, while showing signs of mentally instability, did not escalate their concerns accordingly.

A crucial fallacy uncovered post-incident was the insufficiency and lack of clear procedures in place from the institute's leadership. A primary factor that halted any collaboration or communication regarding Cho's behavioral red-flags were due to the misapprehensions of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Family Educational and Privacy Act (FERPA) from administrative faculty. FERPA is a commonly overlooked policy in its ability to provide flexibility for administrative staff in educational communities to report on certain information if they deem necessary and in correlation to their interaction with a student, as Davies (008) finds that FERPA allows much more freedom to share information than many in the higher-education community assume. Personal observations and conversations with a student, for instance, fall outside of FERPA (Davies, 2008). Additional parallels have been addressed in relation to HIPAA, which Davies (2008) discovers that Cho's admittance to the Carillion St. Albans Behavioral Health Center in December of 2005, under a temporary detention order due to being assessed as a danger to himself or others, went unaddressed or communicated under HIPAA policy. Virginia Tech was not given access to these records due to unclear FERPA policies about institution's sharing records with outside entities (Davies, 2008).

Following his admittance to the Carillion St. Albans Behavioral Health Center, Cho continued to receive treatment as he was transferred to Virginia Tech's Cook Counseling Center following his release. Though, there was no correspondence between the counseling center with the institute or communication with his parents in regards to his mental challenges, further inquiry into any history of Cho's mental history, or urgency to provide additional support for Cho's mental state. Deisigner and Scalora (2016) examined that this led to the fragmented and compartmentalized information regarding the subject, leading to no entity on campus having a full understanding of the nature of his concerns or the impact of his behavior (Deisigner & Scalora, 2016). Essentially, the misconceptions for the transfer of information between different departments on campus secluded discussions or disclosure for Cho's challenges, which also afflicted the Counseling Center's engagement with the academic advising office or campus residences who met with him previously.

The Policy Group for Virginia Tech Institute also suffered from clear disengagement or direction from administrative leadership. Critical management response and procedure was enacted by the Policy Group, a group of key administrators for decision-making on campus, who lead the entire crisis response and emergency efforts for the institution – comprising Virginia Tech's head administrators, including senior public relations officials. A significant criticism of administrative leadership through the incident is the minimization of alarming the college campus during the initial stages of the massacre, which may have been correlated to prior situations which took place closely to the incident. There were reports within the same academic year that concluded as false alarms, with one incident occurring during the fall semester of August 2006 in which a SWAT Team was brought into the college campus in response to a

shooting incident taking place near the institute. The second incident was reported on April 13, 2007, three days before the Virginia Tech massacre, which bomb threats were released that threatened attacks on three residence halls and ended up resulting in another false-alarm case.

Due to the inconsistency in oversight or attention to crisis management control or case-analysis for safety initiatives, Barker and Yoder (2012) theorized that these false alarms may have desensitized the Policy Group to potentially dangerous situations and left scars on its decision-making procedures – in addition, the response time after the first shooting on April 16th was also affected by Virginia's Tech campus police department minimizing the risk after the first shooting in its communication with the Policy Group (Barker & Yoder, 2012). The institute's leadership was heavily scrutinized following the release of several analyses and case-studies that found them negligent and unprepared for an incident of this caliber. The crisis communication plan developed prior to the incident also did not encompass efficient communication, proper incorporation of channels to transmit data, or the utilization of technology on campus to alter the campus community.

Barker and Yoder (2012) discuss that the online communication tactics used were simply not fast enough to handle the nature of the developing crisis (Barker & Yoder, 2012). In correlation, the Virginia Tech staff did not use the campus wide speakers or initiate broadcasts for emergency messages through the local radio or television stations, with only email communication being used as the principal means of alarming the campus community of the shooter incident. This led to one of the largest controversies during the course of action in the incident in which the Policy Group did not enact clear communication measures or tools to broadcast emergency messaging to the campus community. The first message that was released

via email was determined as the best course of action to communicate caution and relieve any distress for students, though it did not initiate crisis response or order an evacuation for the college campus. Barker and Yoder (2012) discovered that ten minutes after the initial mass email was sent to the college community, urging everyone to be cautious, Cho had begun the second killing spree which prompted the emergency alert via email that a gunman was active on the campus (Barker & Yoder, 2012).

Bonnie and Hamilton (2009) discussed Virginia state's challenges at the time of the shooting to create a community-based mental health system, with expenditures much less per capita than other states on community mental health services (ranking eleventh lowest), weak legal structure in policy towards supporting students with mental health issues, unappropriated funds for case management services, gaps in crisis intervention services, and declines in nonemergency outpatient services across college campuses (Bonnie & Hamilton, 2009). There was a massive dissension at this time regarding the deinstitutionalization of students with mental illnesses, which further polarized administrative leaders and faculty from being able to properly address Cho's challenges which were systematically obscure. This may have made it increasingly difficult to provide him with the help he needed due to the lack of mental health resources on campus and general policies within academia at the time to address mental health issues, in addition to the deficit in proper training and calls-to-action for administrative roles across the institution.

In accordance with the progressive modernization of emerging higher education leadership practices and committed research to further developing leadership programs for administrative roles in our academic communities, the Virginia Tech crisis will serve as a basis

for identifying areas with specific leadership theory integration and recommended programs that could have assisted in the attenuation of the incident and increased cross-collaboration between leaders within multiple institutional departments.

Discussion

A key element for providing contextual and integrative insight for leadership development for Virginia Tech first requires an overview of post-incident response and initial steps for policy reconstruction from institution leaders. Virginia Tech News (2007) reports that following the wake of the incident, President Charles Steger directed three internal reviews by enlisting chairs "to look at the strengths and weaknesses of existing systems/infrastructure for the institution and how they may be improved or augmented to address emergency situations that might arise in the future" (Virginia Tech News, 2007). President Steger made extensive reaches to formulate revitalized strategies, identify areas that called for intervention within the institution, and highly communicated his compassion for all afflicted throughout the community in lieu of the dismissive backlash from parents and advocacy groups. In addition, an external review was enacted by the presiding Governor Kaine at the time to review state policies on mental health regulations in correlation with existing university policies and infrastructure.

Virginia Tech News (2007) discusses that three groups were in charge of analyzing different areas of the incident: [1] The Security Infrastructure Group; [2] The Information and Communications Infrastructure Group; [3] and The Interface Group (Virginia Tech News, 2007). For the purpose of this discussion, the primary focus will be on the review and identification of critical areas in leadership practice conducted by The Interface Group. The Interface Group was responsible for the evaluation of relationships between university's students

counseling services, academic affairs, judicial affairs, and the legal system – the group of chairs were responsible for examining existing systems and identifying the interface between them to determine what limitations misdirected effective interactions to respond to and support at-risk students for Virginia Tech.

The Interface Group implemented an entire series to review policies, procedures, capabilities, and interdepartmental relationships and communications for selected areas related to identifying and supporting at-risk students. Though it was found that the Division of Student Affairs is supported by interacting with law enforcement, the academic enterprise, and other university resource offices – though the final report did find confusion about the applicability and interpretation of privacy laws among some offices or faculty. Virginia Tech News (2007) found that consistent with the national findings of the federal report commissioned by President Bush, this created internal silos and feedback problems preventing some offices from having salient information on students at risk – finding that the system may not be robust enough to provide the kind of analysis that is warranted by more complex, high risk cases with need for significant mental health services (Virginia Tech News, 2007).

The committee finalized it's report by making a series of recommendations under three broad themes: [1] Refining and expanding the Care Team, a key administrative group that identifies and responds to students at risk (among other responsibilities), including addition of the Virginia Tech Police Department to standing membership and connecting academic personnel to deliberations where appropriate; [2] Creating a Threat Assessment Team charged with examining the most complex cases of distressed students and empowering it to act quickly, when necessary; [3] and Expand Case Management Capacity by adding case managers to the Dean of

Students office and Cook Counseling Center to improve follow-up with students and to improve information flow through appropriate units about students at risk (Virginia Tech News, 2007). The report concluded this section with a focus on improving systematic communications for the institution with an emphasis on privacy law education throughout the institution, particularly the clarification of policies for communications with external agencies, and establishing a central institution contact with a clear scope of students experiencing mental challenges.

In relation to the post-incident review, the institution at the time may have not had consistent or secure leadership methodology in practice to foster strong communication practices, collaboration, and established assessments for administrative staff to support high-risk students. Extensive research on leadership theories in the 21st century have contributed to the transition from linear strategies to increasingly multifaceted and dynamic approaches for higher education leaders influencing policies, developmental programs, and strengthening departments towards alignment for encompassing holistic student support strategies. Perry (2010) discusses the Multifaceted emergence of leadership theory, which sparked early development in the 1990s with transparence in present day, for the emphasis on integrating the major schools, especially the transactional schools (trait and behavior issues largely representing management interests) within an era affected by a highly competitive global economy and the need to provide a more sophisticated and holistic approach to leadership (Perry, 2010). Virginia Tech at the time of the incident had a leadership team that was seemingly disconnected from the rest of it's administrative leaders, in addition to departmental leaders also being disengaged from connecting on seemingly controversial issues campus wide.

Commonly in the wake of an emergency or crisis situation – administrative leaders are placed in a high pressure and condemnation from students, faculty, parents, government organizations, and various external entities. Leaders who are part of campus communities in the wake of these moments can utilize their sense of urgency and the tools available at their best discretion to ensure the safety of the college community, in respects to this case study diverting from the intention to discredit Virginia Tech's leadership capacity during the midst of this high-stress crisis. Though, progressive methodology and tools for leadership to help foster the institute pre-incident was pivotal.

A central recommendation for leadership initiatives could have been the increased focus on providing leadership training and educational programs for higher education administrators at the institution to ensure constant guidance is available for the faculty. Considering the confusion and misconceptions which were found prominent following the incident, leadership first could have repositioned their focus on reviewing principal communications and strategies within their emergency management plans. Though, enactment of this initiative requires a high level of collaboration, attentiveness, and focus on relationships between leaders and administrative staff through some form of shared governance. Hendrickson and colleagues (2016) discuss the concept of shared governance in which leaders of healthy, thriving institutions understand their purpose and niche in the broader higher education community, and because of this knowledge, their institutions are better governed and positioned to succeed in tough times (Hendrickson et. al, 2013). In relation to better governing through acknowledging shared governance practices, theoretical leadership concepts between integral and distributed leadership practices could have

assisted in setting accountability, planning, and determining prioritized focuses for the institution to pioneer.

Hendrickson and colleagues (2013) additionally discuss that integral leaders need to have a broad worldview if they are to make decisions that are in the best interest of the institutions they serve – to acquire broad perspective leaders are required to be collaborative yet resolute in their approach and willing to make appropriate changes in direction when the environment demands it (Hendrickson et. al, 2013). In correlation, McCauley-Smith and colleagues (2015) address the Distributed Leadership Theory as a response to the requirement for effective leadership in an increasingly complex, fast-paced, hazardous, and unpredictable world that identifies the need to harness leadership capabilities of all employees in the organization for it to perform at its maximum potential…collaborative leadership includes assembling the right teams, bringing leaders together so that they work collaboratively with colleagues inside the organization…it requires shared control, joint endeavor, and engaging in mutual dialogue to problem solve (McCauley-Smith et. al, 2015). Utilizing a distributive and collaborative approach could have assisted in assessments for emergency respondent planning for the institution. Administrative leaders prior to the Virginia Tech shooting could have adopted modernized and emerging theoretical concepts to aid in the development of workshops and programs to initiate more cross-collaboration between departments, led by President Steger, board members, and additional administrative leaders to foster the development of departmental leaders.

These conceptual workshops and programs could have been developed based on a framework with cross-overs in integral and distributive leadership methodology for faculty to discuss controversial issues with other departments, address areas of administrative education

(such as FERPA and HIPAA), and touch base on ideas for emergency planning in respects to the campus threats which took place prior to the shooting. These workshops and programs could have also helped in identifying gaps which certain departmental leaders felt were present, debate on sparse resources deemed necessary for progressing the institute's goal for student development, and provide increased educational tools for departmental leaders to leverage.

In reflection of the ambiguous policies for Virginia state on mental health issues, the leadership for the institute could have also placed a heightened emphasis on establishing upgrades for mental health resources. Federal policies at this time were advancing in bridging the evident gaps in the mental health sector, which could have given Virginia Tech leaders the opportunity to follow suit for the beginning stages to allocate proper resources and emerging training for leaders on campus involved in the front-line of student engagement, such as the Cook Counseling Center, academic advising offices, and campus residences. In addition, institutional leaders through utilizing distributive and integral practices may have increased communication with the Policy Group and the Virginia Tech Police Department to collaborate on ideas for leadership training across departments, reviews of procedural action for emergency/crisis management, and gain feedback on challenges these groups face as they serve the campus community.

The Virginia Tech crisis consistently holds exceptional prominence in present day discussions when accounting for effective leadership practices that foster student safety, development for emergency/crisis management plans, and the continuance for college campuses to evaluate their mental health resources in relation to the needs of their student body. Leadership qualities and theoretical practice which is founded on leadership maintaining relationships,

constructing policies based on cross-collaborative measures, and shaping opportunities for

distributive and integral notions of leadership involvement for staff to be involved may have

provided advantageous components for institutional preparedness during the initial peak of this

incident.

References

Barker, G. G., & Yoder, M. E. (2012). The Virginia tech shootings: Implications for crisis communication in educational settings. *Journal of School Public Relations*, *33*(2), 78-   101.

Bonnie, R., Reinhard, J., Hamilton, P., & McGarvey, E. (2009). Mental health system transformation after the Virginia Tech tragedy. *Health Affairs*, *28*(3), 793-804.

Davies, G. K. (2008). Connecting the dots: Lessons from the Virginia tech shootings. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, *40*(1), 8-15.

Deisinger, E. D., & Scalora, M. J. (2016). Threat assessment and management in higher education in the United States: A review of the 10 years since the mass casualty incident at Virginia Tech. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, *3*(3-4), 186- 199.

Hendrickson, R.M., Lane, J.E., Harris, J.T., & Dorman, R.H. (2013). *Academic leadership and governance of higher education: A guide for trustees, leaders, and aspiring leaders of two- and four- year institutions*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

McCauley-Smith, C., Williams, S. J., Gillon, A. C., & Braganza, A. (2015). Making sense of

leadership development: developing a community of education leaders. *Studies In*

Higher Education, *40*(2), 311-328.

Perry, James L. (2010). *The Jossey-Bass reader on nonprofit and public leadership.* San

Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Virginia Tech News (2007) *Overview of the findings and recommendations of the April 16th*

tragedy internal review committees.

Retrieved from https://vtnews.vt.edu/articles/2007/08/2007-459.html