

# Strategic Public Relations: Managing Communication During Crisis – A Case Study of the 2016 IUP Faculty and Staff Strike

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## Abstract

This study examines the 2016 Faculty Strike of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) and identifies the communication approaches and responses that were adopted by IUP to address the nature of the crisis, fix the reputational damage, and rebuild trust with stakeholders in the post-strike phase. The study also explored how IUP identified and prioritized stakeholders based on salience. As for the theoretical framework, the study used Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to understand how IUP aligned its crisis communication strategies with SCCT. As for the methodology, this study employed a case study and thematic analysis methods. The findings of this study indicated several key elements that characterized IUP's crisis communication strategies. The alignment of IUP's crisis communication strategies with SCCT was evident. This research contributes to the academic conversations on crisis communication and public relations and can also serve as a valuable resource for institutions seeking to promote their crisis management and communication practices in the face of complex and multifaceted challenges that define the modern landscape of higher education.

**Keywords:** Faculty Strike; Crisis Communication; Stakeholder Prioritization; Situational Crisis Communication; Higher Education.

## 1. Introduction

Managing communication during times of crisis is a responsibility that falls on public relations (PR) professionals in institutions and organizations across various sectors. Effective crisis communication maintains organizational reputation and plays a crucial role in fostering stakeholder relationships and upholding transparency and trust. This study explores the strategies and tactics employed by public relations professionals at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) during the faculty and staff strike crisis of October 2016, which was part of a bigger strike happening within the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) and affecting all 14 universities within the PASSHE system. The 2016 IUP Faculty and Staff Strike stands as a compelling case study, offering insights into the intricate dynamics and challenges faced by higher education institutions during periods of strikes and disputes. Furthermore, it underscores the critical importance of strategic public relations in preserving an institution's standing within the academic community and beyond. As organizations in the academic sector are increasingly confronted with crises that can have far-reaching implications, understanding how effective communication strategies were harnessed during this particular crisis holds significant relevance.

This study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted landscape of crisis communication, particularly within the context of a university setting. Moreover, I will delve into shedding light on the measures taken by IUP to rebuild relationships with the affected stakeholders, as well as the efforts made to restore the university's reputation within the academic community and among various stakeholders. By examining the 2016 IUP Faculty Strike, this research contributes to the academic discourse on crisis communication and public relations and can serve as a valuable resource for institutions seeking to bolster their crisis management and communication practices in the face of complex and multifaceted challenges that define the modern landscape of higher education.

## 2. Literature Review

Public Relations (PR) and crisis communication are essential components of organizational strategy, particularly when reputation, stakeholder trust, and continuity are at risk. This literature review discusses the major concepts, theories, and practices that shape PR and crisis communication today, with an emphasis on the role of social media and the relevance of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT).

### 3. Defining Crisis Communication and Public Relations

Crisis communication refers to the strategic management of information during events that threaten an organization's operations or reputation (Coombs, 2007). PR, more broadly, involves building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2013). In crisis situations, PR professionals work to mitigate harm, guide public perception, and maintain trust through accurate, timely, and strategic messaging.

### 4. Social Media and the Changing Landscape of Crisis Communication

The rise of social media has profoundly reshaped how organizations communicate during crises. Digital platforms allow information—true or false—to spread globally within seconds (DiStaso et al., 2014). This speed creates both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, organizations can provide real-time updates and engage directly with stakeholders (Austin & Liu, 2018). On the other hand, misinformation and rumors can circulate rapidly, intensifying crises and complicating response efforts (Starbird & Palen, 2010; Friggeri et al., 2014). To navigate these dynamics, scholars emphasize the importance of social listening and continuous monitoring of online conversations. These tools help organizations assess public sentiment, identify emerging issues, and respond promptly (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013; Veil et al., 2011). Effective crisis responses on social media are characterized by transparency, empathy, and timeliness, which contribute to restoring or maintaining stakeholder trust (Coombs, 2019).

### 5. Preparedness, Planning, and Reputation Management

Research consistently highlights that crisis communication is most effective when organizations have comprehensive crisis plans in place. Preparation includes risk assessment, message development, and clear communication procedures (Coombs, 2019). Reputation, a critical organizational asset, must be managed before, during, and after crises. Post-crisis reputation repair strategies include corrective action, transparency, and relationship rebuilding efforts (Deephouse, 2000).

### 6. Ethics and Transparency

Ethical communication is foundational to successful crisis management. PR practitioners are expected to uphold honesty, accountability, and transparency in all crisis-related messaging (Benoit, 1997). Ethical decision-making frameworks help organizations navigate complex dilemmas, especially when information is incomplete or rapidly changing.

### 7. Global and Cultural Perspectives

Crisis communication strategies vary across cultural and national contexts. Cultural norms influence how stakeholders interpret crises and how organizations should respond. Scholars such as Coombs and Holladay (2002) highlight the need for culturally sensitive crisis communication strategies when operating in global environments.

### 8. Theoretical Framework: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs (2007), provides a structured framework for aligning crisis response strategies with the nature of the crisis. SCCT categorizes crises into three main types:

**Victim Crises** – The organization is perceived as a victim (e.g., natural disasters or external attacks). Recommended response: express empathy and concern.

**Accidental Crises** – The organization is viewed as unintentionally responsible (e.g., equipment failure). Recommended response: acknowledge responsibility and commit to corrective action.

**Intentional Crises** – The organization is blamed for deliberate wrongdoing (e.g., misconduct or unethical behavior). Recommended response: transparency, accountability, and decisive corrective measures.

By tailoring communication to the crisis category, organizations can better manage stakeholder perceptions, mitigate reputational damage, and enhance trust. SCCT's emphasis on flexibility acknowledges that crises are dynamic and require adaptable strategies.

Beyond categorizing crises, SCCT has been widely applied in comparative analyses of institutional crises such as university labor disputes, campus misconduct incidents, data breaches, and athletic scandals. Research consistently shows that institutions facing high-responsibility crises—such as administrative negligence or ethical violations—experience greater reputational threat and thus require more accommodative strategies, including clear acknowledgment, corrective action, and transparent communication. In contrast, universities confronting victim crises such as external threats or statewide policy disruptions benefit most from supportive, empathy-driven messaging (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Positioning the 2016 PASSHE/IUP strike within this broader landscape highlights how academic institutions must adjust their communication strategies depending on the crisis type; unlike victim crises (e.g., natural disasters affecting campuses) or accidental crises (e.g., system outages), labor disputes fall closer to the intentional/high-responsibility category, requiring proactive explanation, accountability framing, and dialogue with stakeholders. This comparative perspective strengthens the applicability of SCCT to the present case by demonstrating how institutional crises differ in perceived responsibility and required communication strategies.

### 9. 2016 Faculty Strike

In 2016, a faculty strike broke out at the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), spanning from October 19 to October 21, 2016. The strike impacted all 14 universities within the PASSHE system. The primary cause of the strike revolved around contract negotiations between the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties (APSCUF) and the PASSHE administration. Some key issues that contributed to the strike included faculty salaries, healthcare benefits, temporary faculty, and workload. The faculty

strike led to class cancellations that affected tens of thousands of students. During this time, many faculty members and staff participated in picket lines and protests both on campus grounds and in nearby areas. Following three days of negotiations APSCUF and PASSHE reached an agreement on October 21, 2016 that tackled concerns brought up during the strike, and classes resumed after.

## 10. Methodology

The following section outlines the methodological approach used to guide the study.

### 10.1. Study context

The strike took place at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). IUP was founded in 1875 and has a long and rich history in higher education. It was originally established as a teacher training institution and has since evolved into a comprehensive university offering a wide range of academic programs. The university's main campus is situated in Indiana, Pennsylvania, a picturesque town in the western part of the state. IUP also has several satellite campuses and centers throughout the region. IUP is home to a diverse student body, including students from various backgrounds and locations. The university enrolls both undergraduate and graduate students, and it has a sizable international student population. IUP is part of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), which is a public university system in the state of Pennsylvania in the United States. PASSHE was established in 1983 through the merger of the Commonwealth System of Higher Education and the State System of Higher Education. Its primary purpose is to provide high-quality, affordable education to the residents of Pennsylvania. PASSHE comprises 14 universities across the state of Pennsylvania. Each university offers a diverse array of undergraduate and graduate degree programs in various academic disciplines.

### 10.2. Research questions

This study answers the following two research questions:

RQ1: What specific communication approaches and responses were adopted by IUP to address the deliberate nature of the crisis, mitigate reputational damage, and rebuild trust with stakeholders following the strike?

RQ2: How did IUP identify and prioritize stakeholders based on salience, and how did this dynamic salience evolve over the course of the crisis, impacting communication efforts and reputation management?

RQ3: How did IUP align its crisis communication strategies with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) during the 2016 faculty and staff strike?

### 10.3. Research design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore the crisis communication practices surrounding the 2016 PASSHE faculty strike, focusing specifically on Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). A case study approach enables an in-depth, contextualized examination of a real-world event and the communication processes associated with it. To complement the interview data, the study also incorporates a thematic analysis of nine newspaper articles covering the strike. Newspaper reports were selected because they reflect public discourse, media framing, and stakeholder sentiment during the event, offering a valuable external lens through which to analyze the university's crisis response.

### 10.4. Data collection

Two main data sources were used:

#### 1) Interview data

The Chair of the Office of Media Relations at IUP was selected through purposive sampling due to their central role in coordinating the university's messaging and serving as the institution's public spokesperson during the strike. The interview provided insight into internal communication strategies, decision-making processes, and institutional constraints.

#### 2) Newspaper articles

Nine publicly available newspaper articles from regional and statewide outlets were collected. These articles offered a broader view of how the event was framed in the media and how various stakeholders—including faculty, students, administrators, and public officials—were represented.

### 10.5. Data analysis

## 11. Transcription and Initial Coding

After transcription of the interview, the data were analyzed using a systematic thematic analysis. Initial (open) coding was applied line-by-line to both the interview and the newspaper articles. Codes were descriptive at first, capturing explicit meanings in the text.

Examples of initial codes from the interview included:

- “protecting institutional reputation”
- “ensuring message consistency”
- “coordination with PASSHE system office”
- “concern for student disruption”
- “need for real-time response”

## 12. Examples of Initial Codes from Newspaper Articles Included

- “student frustration over class cancellations”

- “faculty criticism of administrative decisions”
- “public pressure on PASSHE leadership”
- “dispute over contractual fairness”
- “community support for striking faculty”

### 13. Code Clustering and Development of Themes

After initial coding, similar codes were grouped into clusters. For example:

- Codes related to protecting reputation, message consistency, and coordinating messaging were clustered under a broader category.
- Codes related to student frustration, disrupted schedules, and uncertainty about semester progress were clustered under.
- Codes such as faculty criticism, concerns about fairness, and workload disputes were clustered into.

Using an iterative process, these clusters were examined for conceptual coherence and then elevated into preliminary themes. Themes were refined by comparing them across data sources (interview vs. media coverage), removing overlap, and ensuring that each theme captured a distinct dimension of the case.

### 14. Trustworthiness and Validation

To ensure rigor and methodological transparency, multiple validation strategies were used:

- **Member Checking:** A summary of preliminary findings was shared with the interview participant to verify accuracy of interpretation.
  - **Peer Debriefing:** A colleague reviewed portions of the coded data and theme structure to check for bias and coding consistency.
  - **Audit Trail:** Detailed records of coding decisions, theme revisions, and analytic memos were maintained throughout the study.
- These steps enhance the dependability, credibility, and confirmability of the analysis.

### 15. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards. The interview participant’s identity was protected through pseudonymization, and all data were stored securely. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and participants were assured that no identifying information would appear in the published work.

Study

The use of a single insider interview represents a methodological limitation; however, the participant’s role as the Chair of the Office of Media Relations—directly overseeing all crisis messaging—positions them as the most appropriate and authoritative source for understanding IUP’s communication strategy. To strengthen credibility, this perspective was triangulated with newspaper coverage reflecting external viewpoints and public sentiment.

Limitations

### 16. Thematic Findings

The semi-structured interview with the chair yielded some important themes that reflect the IUP’s readiness and response to the faculty strike, the concerns and impact on students and parents, the focus on maintaining a calm and safe campus environment, the importance of the faculty-student relationship, and the learning and preparation for similar situations in the future. The themes also highlight the adaptability of IUP in the face of challenges, the importance of maintaining normalcy for students, the emphasis on student well-being, and the multi-channel communication strategy used during the faculty work stoppage. The themes are discussed below.

#### 16.1. Theme 1. preparedness for faculty work stoppage

Nicole indicated that IUP was well-prepared for the faculty work stoppage. They had not only planned for the event but also had mechanisms in place to address concerns, communicate effectively with stakeholders, and ensure minimal disruption to scheduled classes. This level of preparedness is a crucial component of effective crisis management. Nicole said, “So, we had already been a little bit ahead of the curve because we had kind of planned with what would we do,” and this illustrates that IUP had taken anticipatory steps. This suggests that they recognized the potential for a work stoppage and devised a plan in advance. Nicole highlighted a practical aspect of their preparedness when she mentioned, “We organized managers throughout the university... they physically went to buildings and made sure that those classes that they were scheduled.” It is clear that the university organized its management team to ensure that scheduled classes were not disrupted.

Additionally, Nicole said, “We took calls all day long. We probably had about 150 calls when it all was said and done,” and this reflects the proactive engagement of the university during the crisis. They were responsive to inquiries and concerns, which is a critical aspect of crisis management. Furthermore, the interview with Nicole indicates that IUP had a well-structured plan in place for the faculty work stoppage, including a website with FAQs. This suggests that they had already thought through potential questions and concerns that might arise during the crisis and were ready to address them promptly.

#### 16.2. Theme 2. stakeholder priority

This theme highlights the importance of addressing stakeholder concerns, particularly emphasizing the significance of students and parents during the crisis. Nicole, for instance, said, “They [parents] were concerned about what was happening,” which underscores the heightened level of apprehension that parents experienced during the crisis. This concern is natural, as parents are often deeply invested in the well-being and educational experience of their children. It implies that the institution needs to have strategies in place to reassure and inform parents effectively. Nicole continues saying, “There was a lot of angst and a lot of worry from parents,” which reiterates the emotional distress faced by parents. This sentiment is significant because when parents are anxious, it can affect students, as well. Managing their concerns is crucial for maintaining a conducive learning environment.

Furthermore, the overarching theme here is the priority of stakeholders during a crisis. The interview suggests that the highest priorities for communication during the crisis were students and parents. This reflects an understanding that these two groups are particularly sensitive to disruptions in the educational process and need clear, timely, and reassuring communication. Nicole said, “The internal community, alumni, faculty, and non-faculty staff were also important stakeholders.” This statement about the internal community, alumni, faculty, and non-faculty staff also being important stakeholders underlines the broad spectrum of individuals impacted by the crisis. While students and parents might have been the highest priority, these other groups are also significant and were kept informed and assured during a crisis. This theme highlights the critical importance of prioritizing effective communication with stakeholders during a crisis. The focus on students and parents acknowledges their emotional and practical concerns, but it also recognizes the broader network of individuals who are part of the institution’s community. Addressing these concerns with empathy and transparency is essential for maintaining trust and ensuring that the crisis is managed effectively.

### 16.3. Theme 3. maintaining campus safety, normalcy, and student well-being

The theme of “Maintaining Campus Safety, Normalcy, and Student Well-being” during a crisis sheds light on the strategies and priorities that IUP employed to ensure a stable and reassuring campus environment. Nicole’s comment “Our main emphasis was how are we keeping the campus calm?” underscores the importance of ensuring that the campus remains a safe and calm place during the crisis. This reflects a proactive approach to managing the crisis, where the institution recognized the potential for anxiety and unrest among students and made it a priority to maintain a sense of security. Faculty members and the campus police played essential roles in ensuring the well-being of students. Nicole’s comment attested to this fact; she said, “University police, of course, our faculty were very, very kind and respectful to students,” which is indicative of the collaborative efforts involving various stakeholders within the university. The mention of kindness and respect is noteworthy, as it highlights the human aspect of crisis management, where the emotional needs of students are recognized and addressed.

Nicole said, “But what we kept on telling our students is to try to continue normalcy in your day because that was really important; this rattled them,” which reinforces the significance of returning to a sense of normalcy for students. Acknowledging the disruption caused by the crisis, IUP encouraged students to maintain their routines as much as possible. This approach aimed to provide a stabilizing influence and prevent further distress. IUP also made efforts to provide information, but more importantly, it focused on how that information could assist students in moving forward. This underscores a commitment to not only addressing immediate concerns but also supporting students in the aftermath of the crisis. Nicole said, “We did our very best to provide the information that we knew, but always thinking about what can help students move forward,” which reflects a student-centric approach to crisis communication.

### 16.4. Theme 4. faculty-student relationship

This theme focuses on the significance of the faculty-student relationship, how it was maintained during the crisis, and the positive outcomes associated with this approach. It could be derived from the interview with Nicole that a student-centric approach, where the focus is on the holistic development and support of students beyond the classroom, was adopted by the professors. The faculty members’ commitment to this role helps build trust and strong relationships between faculty and students. Supporting this understanding, Nicole said, “We want students to feel that the faculty are their advisors and mentors.” This also emphasizes the role of faculty members as not just educators but also mentors and advisors. When “[f]aculty came back to the classroom, they helped their students make up work,” Nicole said. This illustrates the dedication and commitment of the faculty during the crisis. Faculty members not only resumed their teaching responsibilities but also went the extra mile to assist students in catching up on missed work. This reflects a sense of responsibility and care for students’ academic progress.

We can also see a non-adversarial approach in crisis management, as seen in this quote from the interview when Nicole said, “We were not at all interested in vilifying the professors or the faculty union.” The focus, however, was not on blame or confrontation but on maintaining positive relationships. This approach likely contributed to a more collaborative and less divisive atmosphere during the crisis. Nicole’s phrase, “Despite the challenges, relationships between students, faculty, and the administration remained positive,” reflects the resilience of the faculty-student-administration dynamic. It also highlights the ability of the university to navigate challenges while preserving a positive environment where students continue to receive support from both faculty and administration. On the other side, “[s]tudents showed a great deal of regard for their faculty members, even during the work stoppage,” as Nicole said, showcases the mutual respect and appreciation within the faculty-student relationship. Despite the disruption caused by the work stoppage, students continued to hold their faculty members in high regard, reinforcing the strength of these bonds.



Fig. 1: Students Supporting Their Faculty Members During the Strike (Erdely, 2016).

### 16.5. Theme 5. communication strategy and media engagement

This theme explores the various elements of IUP's communication strategy and how they effectively engaged with their university community. Nicole's confirmation of having a communication strategy, even without specific details, reflects IUP's preparedness and commitment to keeping their community informed. Their readiness to adapt and adjust their strategy based on how events unfold shows flexibility and the ability to respond to changing circumstances. In response to a question, "So can we say that you already have a communication strategy to keep the community of your university informed about any update? So you already have like what we call it, the communication strategy, you already have it," Nicole said, "Correct. Correct. And while we may not have the specific details, because we just sort of have to see how things play out."

However, the setup of a dedicated website with Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and clear guidance, such as the direction to continue attending classes, is a practical and user-friendly approach. It ensures that students and other stakeholders have easy access to essential information during a crisis, promoting clarity and minimizing confusion. Nicole said, "We set up a website with kind of FAQs. Should you go to class? Yes, you should." IUP's strategy of being "web first" is noteworthy. This means that they prioritize their website as the central hub for information dissemination. When utilizing social media, they strategically direct the audience back to their website for comprehensive details. This approach not only centralizes information but also ensures that the most accurate and up-to-date information is readily accessible on their official platform. Nicole said, "We tend to be web first. So when we would do a social media post, find out more about this, we would refer them to the website." Nevertheless, IUP's use of social media, including Twitter, is consistent with modern communication practices. By consistently sharing updates and referring users to their website for more detailed information, they maintain a unified and informative communication strategy. Furthermore, the mention of sending at least two posts or emails per day demonstrates IUP's commitment to transparency and regular updates. Frequent communication is crucial during a crisis to keep stakeholders informed and alleviate concerns. Nicole voiced, "IUP relied on its own communication channels: email, website, and social media to provide updates."

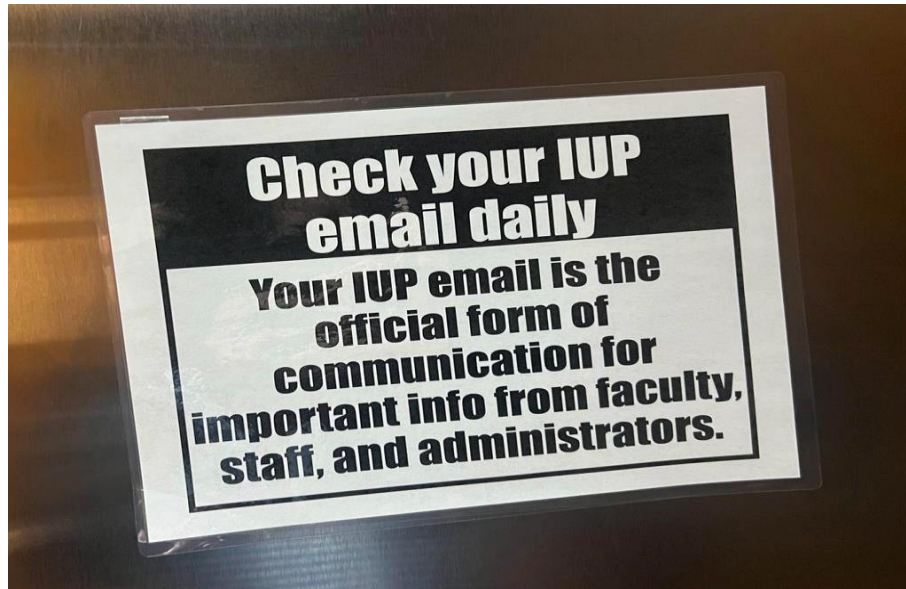


Fig. 2: A Sign in the Elevator Asking Students to Check Their Emails (By the Author's Camera).

In addition, the establishment of a calling room to handle inquiries efficiently is another practical aspect of their strategy. It demonstrates their dedication to addressing concerns promptly and ensuring that callers don't face long wait times. Nicole commented saying, "A calling room was set up to process calls more efficiently and ensure no waiting for callers. Also, the collaboration with other universities in the Pennsylvania State System is a strategic move. Sharing information and strategies among peer institutions is vital during a crisis. This not only ensures that IUP is well-informed about the evolving situation but also promotes a united front among universities in the region. Nicole said, "Collaboration with other universities within the Pennsylvania State System was vital. IUP maintained contact with other schools, especially in the Western region, to exchange information on the evolving situation." To conclude this important theme, it is clear that IUP's primary reliance on their own communication channels, such as email, website, and social media, ensures that they can control the narrative and maintain accurate and consistent messaging during a crisis. This approach aligns with best practices in crisis communication.

### 16.6. Theme 6. transparency

This theme reflects the commitment of IUP to open and transparent communication during the faculty work stoppage, acknowledging the limitations and challenges they faced in this crisis. Nicole said, "IUP aimed for transparency and believed that the communication plan effectively communicated what was known at the time," which highlights IUP's dedication to keeping their community well-informed. Transparency is a cornerstone of crisis communication, and IUP recognized its significance. They strived to ensure that their communication plan effectively conveyed the information available to them at each stage of the crisis. This approach likely fostered trust among their stakeholders, including students, faculty, and parents, as it showed their commitment to honesty and openness during a challenging situation. Nicole continued saying, "There was recognition that the negotiations were not within the control of the university but were determined at the state level," and this underscores IUP's understanding of the limits of their influence during the crisis. This is a crucial acknowledgment because it sets realistic expectations for their community. When a crisis is caused by external factors, it's vital for an institution to communicate that certain elements are beyond its control. By making this clear, IUP likely managed their stakeholders' expectations and prevented unwarranted blame or frustration directed at the university itself.

Nicole also said, “We did our very best to provide the information that we knew, but always thinking about what can help students move forward,” which reflects IUP’s focus on not only providing information honestly but also considering how it would aid students in continuing their education, and this indicates their commitment to minimizing disruptions by being transparent and honest.

### **16.7. Theme 7. post-event learning and preparedness**

This theme demonstrates a reflective and adaptive approach to crisis management and communication and showcases IUP’s ability to learn from past events and continuously improve. Learning from past experiences is important in crisis management. Nicole said, “We’ve taken what we’ve learned through that situation and kind of moved forward and said like, ok, so this would happen again,” which reflects IUP’s proactive approach to crisis management. They acknowledge the value of learning from previous crises and using that knowledge to enhance their preparedness for future events. This forward-looking perspective can help an institution become more resilient and better equipped to handle similar challenges in the future.

Post-crisis gratitude and return to normalcy can also be noticed from the interview with Nicole when she said, “After the event, communication was focused on thanking the campus community for their patience and emphasizing a return to normal operations.” This highlights the importance of post-crisis communication. Expressing gratitude to stakeholders for their patience and support is not only courteous but also helps rebuild trust and maintain positive relationships. Emphasizing a return to normal operations signals stability and can alleviate concerns among the affected community. Also, acceptance of mistakes and continuous improvement is clear from the interview. Nicole said, “I talk about this a lot that every time we do something, we absolutely make mistakes because that’s, you know, when you’re in uncharted territory, you sort of just make mistakes,” and “We learned from them, we learned what we need to do better,” which underscores a culture of learning and adaptation. Acknowledging that mistakes are inevitable, especially in unfamiliar situations, is a sign of humility and a commitment to improvement. It is essential to learn from errors and identify areas for enhancement, ensuring that similar mistakes are not repeated.

We can also notice from the interview that Nicole confirmed that IUP identified effective practices. She said, “We know what we did and what worked, and we’re gonna continue that,” and this indicates a focus on recognizing and perpetuating successful practices. After a crisis, it is crucial to assess what strategies were effective and to incorporate these into the crisis management plan. This iterative approach ensures that the organization builds on its strengths and maintains a sense of stability and continuity.

## **17. Thematic Analysis**

By applying thematic analysis to the newspaper articles that tackled the strike, my research endeavors to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the 2016 IUP and PASSHE strike and its place in the context of labor disputes, higher education, and the media’s role in shaping public discourse. Searching the Search engines, I could find these nine articles:

- 1) Amid historic faculty strike, anxiety, confusion and jubilation reign at IUP by Colin Deppen, published on Oct. 19, 2016.
- 2) Faculty Members at 14 State Universities in Pennsylvania Go on Strike by Erin McCann and Richard Pérez-Peña. Published on Oct. 19, 2016.
- 3) Strike underway at all Pennsylvania state-owned universities by Katelyn Sykes. Published on Oct 19, 2016.
- 4) Faculty strike rocks 14 Pa. colleges, 100,000 students by John Bacon. Published on Oct. 19, 2016.
- 5) State university faculty union goes on strike by By John Finnerty. Published on Oct 20, 2016.
- 6) Union ends strike at Pennsylvania state campuses, pushes concessions by Samuel Davidson. Published on 22 October 2016.
- 7) Strike ends with tentative agreement between APSCUF, PASSHE bargaining parties by Alexandria Mansfield. Published on Oct. 25, 2016.
- 8) News media, IUP students and the strike by David Loomis. Published on November 14, 2016.
- 9) IUP faculty union president: Why I will strike by Nadene A. L’Amoreaux. Published on September 2, 2016.

## **18. Thematic Findings**

Thematic findings revealed nine themes that provide an in-depth perspective on the faculty strike, revealing issues surrounding education funding, political involvement, solidarity, and social mobility, all within the context of the struggle for high-quality education in Pennsylvania.

### **18.1. Theme 1. student impact and activism**

The articles highlight the confusion, anxiety, and uncertainty experienced by students, who were concerned about class disruptions and the potential nullification of their semester due to the strike. Some students showed support for the striking faculty through actions like joining picket lines and organizing demonstrations (Articles 1, 3, 4, 5).

### **18.2. Theme 2. faculty concerns and working conditions**

The articles indicated that the strike was primarily driven by faculty concerns over their contracts, including health insurance contributions, proposed raises, better working conditions, and the preservation of education quality. Faculty members sought not only fair pay but also reduced workload, addressed disparities between adjunct and full-time faculty, and protested against cuts in health care and benefits (Articles 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9).

### **18.3. Theme 3. administrative response, political implications, and public funding**

The articles report on the government’s involvement and express disappointment at the failure to reach an agreement, with Governor Tom Wolf urging both sides to return to the bargaining table. Discussions revolve around financial challenges in public higher education, declining government subsidies, and the reliance on part-time faculty, which contributes to faculty dissatisfaction. A contentious point was the allocation of health insurance costs, where the state sought to shift more of the burden onto faculty members. Public education funding is highlighted as inadequate, leading to increased tuition fees, student loan debt, and decreased education quality (Articles 5, 6, 7, and 9).

The articles also reveal details of the negotiation process, with mentions of both sides making proposals, offering compromises, and experiencing last-minute breakdowns in talks. There's hope for a resolution and a compromise benefiting both faculty and students (Article 5).

#### **18.4. Theme 4. student and faculty solidarity and political involvement**

The articles indicated that various groups, including students, express solidarity with striking faculty, emphasizing the interconnectedness of different stakeholders within the education system. Political involvement and the role of political figures, such as Governor Tom Wolf, are discussed in the context of influencing the strike's resolution (Articles 6, 7, and 8).

#### **18.5. Theme 5. quality of education, economic disparities, and social mobility**

The articles discuss concerns about the quality of higher education and working conditions are prominent. Economic disparities and social mobility related to access to higher education are discussed, emphasizing the importance of accessible and affordable education in addressing social and economic inequalities (Article 9).

#### **18.6. Theme 6. media influence and stereotyping**

The articles talked about the media's role in shaping public perception and stereotypes related to the strike and the university's reputation is highlighted, emphasizing the need for more accurate portrayals (Article 8).

#### **18.7. Theme 7. administrator-faculty relations and ethical imperatives**

The articles discuss the tensions between faculty and administrators that they are evident, reflecting a broader issue concerning the administration of higher education institutions. The strike is framed as a stand for moral and ethical imperatives, highlighting the collective responsibility to ensure affordable and high-quality education for future generations (Article 9). The articles also talked about the historical significance of the faculty strike which is emphasized as it marks the first such strike in 34 years within the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, highlighting the rarity of faculty strikes in higher education nationwide. The strike is situated in a broader context of labor relations and the quality of higher education in the state (Article 6).

### **19. Discussion**

This paper was set to answer two research questions. The first research question asked, what specific communication approaches and responses were adopted by IUP to address the deliberate nature of the crisis, mitigate reputational damage, and rebuild trust with stakeholders following the strike?

It is vivid from the findings that IUP's communication approaches and responses adopted by IUP during the faculty work stoppage demonstrate preparedness, transparency, and an adaptive approach. Their use of digital channels, consistent updates, and collaboration with peer institutions all contribute to effective crisis communication. Also, the themes from the interview indicated that IUP is committed to learning from its experiences, expressing gratitude to its community, accepting mistakes, and continuously improving its crisis management and communication strategies. Such an approach is fundamental to building resilience and maintaining trust within the community during and after challenging events (Booth, 2015; Khodarahmi, 2009; Mitroff, 1987).

The themes show a proactive and empathetic approach to managing a crisis on campus. Maintaining safety, normalcy, and student well-being emerged as key priorities, with various stakeholders working collaboratively to create a reassuring and supportive environment for the student body. This highlights the importance of a holistic approach to crisis management in an educational institution. The themes also emphasize the importance of the faculty-student relationship in higher education and how it was maintained and strengthened during a period of crisis. The approach taken was student-centered and collaborative, with the focus on mentorship and support rather than blame or vilification. This approach likely contributed to the overall positive atmosphere within the university community during the challenging times. It underscores the significance of strong faculty-student relationships as a crucial component of a successful educational institution (Guzzardo, Khosla, Adams, Busmann, Engelman, Ingraham, ... & Taylor, 2021; Hansman, 2012; Komaraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010; Wang, R., BrckaLorenz, A., & Chiang, 2015). The interview themes also illustrate IUP's emphasis on transparency, their recognition of the influence of external factors, and their dedication to supporting their students. Transparency during crisis communication is crucial as it not only fosters trust and credibility but also empowers stakeholders with accurate information, enabling them to make informed decisions and better navigate the challenges presented by the crisis (Erickson, 2021; Holland, Seltzer & Kochigina, 2021; Padgett, Cheng & Parekh, 2013). These principles align with best practices in crisis communication, helping to build trust and maintain a sense of normalcy within the university community during a challenging period.

The second research question asked, how did IUP identify and prioritize stakeholders based on salience, and how did this dynamic salience evolve over the course of the crisis, impacting communication efforts and reputation management?" From the findings, I can say that the emphasis on students and parents during the crisis suggests that IUP recognized the salience of these groups. Understanding the concerns and anxieties of parents and the impact on students highlights the importance of prioritizing these stakeholders in communication efforts. IUP had specific strategies in place to reassure and inform parents, recognizing their deep emotional investment in their children's education. This prioritization of stakeholders aligns with effective crisis communication practices, where understanding the salience of different groups helps in tailoring communication strategies to their needs (Ndlela & Ndlela, 2019; Patel, 2020; Rawlins, Plowman & Stohlton, 2005).

As I mentioned in answering the first research question, the commitment to transparency during the crisis reflects IUP's recognition of the salience of their stakeholders, including students, faculty, and parents. Transparent communication is essential for building and maintaining trust (Erickson, 2021; Holland, Seltzer & Kochigina, 2021; Padgett, Cheng & Parekh, 2013). It's evident that IUP aimed to provide accurate information and openly acknowledge the limitations they faced during the crisis. This approach demonstrates a focus on keeping their stakeholders well-informed, which is a key aspect of effective stakeholder prioritization.

The focus on learning from the crisis and continuous improvement indicates that IUP is committed to understanding the evolving salience of stakeholders. By assessing what worked and what needs improvement, they can adapt their crisis communication strategies and stakeholder prioritization for future events. This reflects an adaptive approach to stakeholder engagement, acknowledging that stakeholder

saliency can change over time. Understanding the evolving saliency of stakeholders throughout the crisis is instrumental in shaping organizations' communication efforts and reputation management (Schoofs & Claeys, 2021; Schoofs, Claeys, De Waele & Cauberghe, 2019). The third research question asked: How did Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) align its crisis communication strategies with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) during the 2016 faculty and staff strike? To answer this question, SCCT categorizes crises into different types, including intentional and unintentional. Intentional crises involve harmful actions taken deliberately. IUP, in facing a faculty and staff strike, was dealing with an intentional crisis, as it resulted from labor disputes and strike actions. In such crises, SCCT recommends adopting an "accommodative" response strategy. This involves accepting responsibility, expressing concern, and taking steps to rectify the situation. IUP's communication efforts align with this recommendation as they focused on acknowledging the strike and addressing concerns, especially those of key stakeholders.

SCCT also emphasizes the importance of using effective communication channels during a crisis. IUP's use of various communication channels, such as email, website, social media, and a calling room, aligns with this principle. These channels allowed IUP to control the narrative and maintain accurate and consistent messaging, which is in line with SCCT's recommendation to provide information through channels that are familiar to stakeholders. In addition, SCCT highlights the significance of transparency and openness in crisis communication. According to the findings, IUP's commitment to transparency during the strike, as indicated in your input, reflects their alignment with SCCT's principles. By openly communicating what was known at each stage of the crisis and acknowledging the limitations they faced, IUP demonstrated a commitment to honesty and openness, in line with SCCT's recommendations. SCCT suggests that organizations should prioritize communication efforts based on the saliency of stakeholders. In the case of IUP, they recognized the importance of students and parents as key stakeholders during the strike and emphasized addressing their concerns. This aligns with SCCT's recommendation to consider the interests and concerns of stakeholders when developing communication strategies.

## 20. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has examined Indiana University of Pennsylvania's (IUP) communication approaches and responses during the 2016 faculty and staff strike, with a focus on addressing the deliberate nature of the crisis, mitigating reputational damage, and rebuilding trust with stakeholders. The findings and thematic analysis shed light on several key elements that characterized IUP's crisis communication strategies. The alignment of IUP's crisis communication strategies with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) was evident. The intentional nature of the crisis, stemming from labor disputes and strike actions, categorized it within SCCT's framework as an "intentional crisis." The findings indicated that IUP effectively employed various communication channels and demonstrated transparency, both of which are emphasized by SCCT. The recognition of the importance of students and parents during the crisis aligns with SCCT's emphasis on prioritizing communication efforts based on the saliency of stakeholders. IUP's approach to crisis communication during the 2016 faculty and staff strike exemplified best practices and principles recommended by SCCT. Their strategies not only addressed the deliberate nature of the crisis but also contributed to reputation management and trust-building within the university community. In doing so, IUP showcased its commitment to proactive, empathetic, and transparent crisis communication, ultimately helping to navigate the challenges of an intentional crisis successfully. In the end, this study suggests that more studies be conducted on other organizations in different fields to yield best practices for communication with the public and stakeholders during crises.

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