Exploring the Colgate Model: A Case Study of the Role of Crisis and Risk Communication in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study of a return to in-person learning during the COVID-19 pandemic at a residential, liberal arts university examines the role communication played to facilitate the safety of students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding community. The study uses a grounded-theory approach to frame the communication situation, and a thematic analysis to highlight the dynamics of risk and crisis message development in the case. Results indicate that messaging was developed through engagement activities in a two-stage process, moving from an informative, two-way engagement stage to a branded, strategic stage that resulted in almost universal success, measured in low infection rates, in the messaging campaign. How did they do it? This article explores that question and, based on this case, concludes that the role of crisis and risk communication is to enable this two-stage process of message development. The article contributes to mental model and situational crisis communication theory by revealing the interplay of the two theoretical approaches.

Keywords: risk communication, crisis communication, higher education, messaging, community engagement, intervention, situational analysis

1. Introduction

In the summer of 2020, when the threat of COVID-19 infection was peaking, leaders at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York successfully preserved the school's residential and teaching mission while protecting the safety of students, faculty, staff, and community members. This situation created a natural laboratory for observing and analyzing communicative behaviors in higher education. This article explores the role of crisis and risk communication: something difficult to see and measure in the current of daily life, but which, through analysis, is brought out in this case in sharp relief.

Crisis and risk communication has a well researched history that is outlined in recent scholarship (Miller et al., 2021; Veil et al., 2008). While they share many of the same objectives and methods, the distinguishing features of crisis and risk communication show how *crisis communication* is often the purview of organizational messengers (i.e., public relations spokespersons) and the hazardous events they respond to, and *risk communication* is often the purview of public or health-agency messengers and strategies of message design (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). For example, crisis communication principles might be deployed in reaction to hazardous events like oil spills, natural disasters, and industrial accidents affecting surrounding populations. Sometimes seen as originating from private-sector actors, crisis communication messaging is often event-specific, and is controlled by internal communication teams. On the other hand, principles of risk communication, sometimes seen as health promotion, might be deployed in public or health agency-sponsored campaigns to affect public behaviors and thinking about long-term health hazards, such as smoking, obesity, water and air pollution, or climate threats. These two roles are well documented (Colby et al., 2011; Colley et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2021, p. 3; Veil et al., 2008).

This distinction between the roles for crisis and risk communication is reflected in contrasting underlying theories. Crisis communication frameworks, including the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) model, are based on principles derived from situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007). This theory, and other models that have been advanced to help communicators understand the role of crisis

communication, are structured around the phases inherent in hazardous events and how organizations and stakeholders can respond to them. Risk communication frameworks, on the other hand, like the SALT framework (U. S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2021) or the Health Canada framework (Health Canada, 2006) are constructed using a mental-models approach (Granger Morgan et al., 2002; O'Connor et al., 2015). This approach, grounded in behavioral psychology, explains message design as a process of addressing misalignments between the decision-making *behaviors* of risk stakeholders and the decision-making *advice* of experts and risk managers. In this article we are mindful of both the event-responsive role of crisis communication and communicative-engagement role of risk communication. Having a case of successful crisis and risk communication at hand in the *Colgate Together* campaign, we trace the interplay of these two roles in that situation and how they contributed to the remarkably successful outcome of the campaign to mitigate the hazards of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has focused the attention of both public and scholarly commentators on the role of crisis and risk communication (Covello & Hyer, 2020; Hauseman et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Lopez, 2020; Lunn et al., 2020; Reeves et al., 2020). In these and other studies, crisis and risk messaging falls under scrutiny as a viable but unpredictable strategy for pandemic hazard mitigation. Various researchers critique the value of messaging in the environment of the COVID-19 public health crisis (Balarabe, 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020; Ohme et al., 2020; Trueblood et al., 2020). This article underscores the relevance of these studies by exploring how risk messaging succeeded in a pandemic environment in an educational setting at a private, liberal arts university. The 2020 *Colgate Together* campaign, conducted in summer and fall of 2020, (Colgate Together Digest, 2020) is an interesting case study of communication leadership and message design processes because, through effective communication, administrators succeeded in bringing almost 3,000 students back to campus with a remarkably low rate of COVID-19 infection. This campaign provides an instructive case of how elements of information and data, strategic planning, operational organization, stakeholder engagement, and crisis and risk messaging operated together. An analysis of the communication efforts in this higher educational setting can enhance our understanding of the role of crisis and risk messaging in other educational and organizational settings.

2. Materials and Methods

In this study we take a grounded-theory approach to understanding the communicative behaviors at Colgate University during the summer of 2020 (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2007). Our process is, first, to construct a descriptive model of the communication events as they occurred. Following Kallet, we organized our methodology around materials, protocol, and measurements (Kallet, 2004).

For our materials we examine a 72,000-word body of texts and transcripts accumulated from public postings on the Colgate University website that record the message development during the summer of 2020 (https://www.colgate.edu/colgate-together). We examine both operational risk management documents (plans and guidelines) and communicative—engagement events (recordings of town halls, forums, and broadcast video messages) in a time period from early spring 2020 when students left campus to early fall 2020 when students returned to in-person learning. These materials were first analyzed using situational case analysis (Blokdyk, 2018; Clarke, 2021; Clarke et al., 2016) consisting of 1) a situational description, 2) communication goals, 3) models of expert and stakeholder knowledge, and 4) a gap analysis highlighting communicative interventions. Second, we conducted a timeline analysis of message development to show the timing of communication activities that occurred during the summer of 2020. Third, we analyzed the text corpus for themes and arguments that emerged during community-engagement activities, addresses, and announcements. Rather than provide an exhaustive analysis, we focus on a document early in the process and a document later in the process: a focus that shows the thematic message development clearly. We rely also on corroborating evidence in the form of statements by the communication leader about the themes of the *Colgate Together* campaign that show how message-branding strategies were developed.

3. Results

The results of the analysis are organized in three parts: 1) a case analysis of the communication situation and the communication team, 2) a timeline analysis of message development, and 3) a thematic analysis of the messages that were used in the *Colgate Together* campaign that contributed to extraordinarily successful health outcomes.

3.1 Case Analysis

One of the tenets of risk communication analysis and planning is to describe the communication situation, ie. the challenges facing message design for communicators (Gurabardhi et al., 2004; Hamilton, 2003; John Garrick & Gekler, 2013). The materials for our situational analysis consist of descriptions of the following five elements:

1) Communication goals

2) The communication team

3) Models of expert, risk-mitigation knowledge

4) Models of stakeholder decision-making style in regards to hazard mitigation

5) Messages that target gaps between expert and stakeholder decision-making

Communication goals. The health-information needs and communication goals that guided the *Colgate Together* campaign were identified in a *Task Force Report on The Return To Campus*, submitted to the president for approval on June 13, 2020 (Executive Summary, 2020). The report contained a complete and detailed plan for risk mitigation under the admittedly dynamic, complex, and uncertain circumstances of the COVID-19 situation at that time (Norros, 2004). While the report was preoccupied with risk-mitigation guidelines for health, travel, operations, teaching, housing, and athletics, among other areas, it provided clear directions for communication as a component of risk mitigation. For example, the report called for "clear communications" noting that, "We hope that, together, we can promote a campus culture centered on public health awareness and selflessness that will put us in the best possible position for the types of on-campus experiences that are central to a Colgate education (Executive Summary, 2020). The report specified, in the appendix, that "conversations" should be "multi-layered" and "on-going," focusing on "enhancing understanding" and "fostering ongoing exchange of information." The direction was set to focus communications on two things: "awareness" (of health measures) and "selflessness" (as a motivational theme) (Executive Summary, 2020).

The communication team. Table 1 describes the *Colgate Together* communication team in terms of the roles they played in communication development during the time period from June to August, 2020.

Table 1. The *Colgate Together* communication team

Team role	University position / role	Knowledge area
Communication leader: executive	president of the university	led many of the meetings and was the primary voice for the vision of the campaign
Communication leader: operations	vice president and dean of students	co-chair of the task force charged with planning the return to campus who served as the voice for students and staff
Communication leader: expertise	associate professor of biology	co-chair of the task force charged with planning the return to campus who served as the voice of the in-house scientific and epidemiological expertise
Stakeholder expert: student body	president of the student body	represented the voice of the primary stakeholders: the students
Stakeholder expert: faculty	provost of the university	represented the voice of the faculty stakeholders
Stakeholder expert: village	mayor of the urban community surrounding the university	represented the voice of businesses, schools, and landlords in the surrounding community

Models of expert risk mitigation knowledge. Modeling expertise in risk management and mitigation was represented in the Colgate case by a number of factors being not just in place, but easily accessible to leadership and communication planners: a faculty of scientists and an active EOC comprised of health and safety professionals, faculty, and staff (EOC Staff List, 2020). These groups consisted of trusted members of the stakeholder community. Additionally, the university possessed the financial resources to accommodate space, testing, and staffing needs; it could use the services of a communications design team with influence at the vice-presidential level; and it could rely on a well-established community connection (with Hamilton, NY) going back 200 years (Weaver, 1970). These factors are represented in Figure 1 under "Expert modeling: Mitigation factors."

These mitigation factors played an important part in shaping the later branding of the *Colgate Together* campaign. For example, the university had funding resources that many organizations and communities did not have, spending upwards of $5 million in its mitigation efforts. The university could afford to purchase, install, and run its own COVID-19 waste-water monitoring equipment in university residence halls and in the Hamilton community. It could purchase an entire quarantine hotel, tents and other space accommodations, and it could and did hire additional staff. Information about these resources was shared frequently in town halls and forums. This information created a climate of factors in which communication as a mitigation intervention was likely to succeed.

Identifying models of stakeholder decision-making style in regards to hazards. Stakeholder understanding and decision-making in the case of the *Colgate Together* campaign is represented in Table 1, under the column header "Knowledge area." The members of the communication team represented the thinking of these stakeholder groups and the media channels needed to reach them. According to Stein et al., and others, narratives and messages develop from the relationship between internal and external forces and "active participation in the development process" (Fontainha et al., 2017; Stein et al., 1997). The shaping of narratives and messages that resulted in the *Colgate Together* campaign developed primarily through the interaction of these thought leaders and their constituents in town hall meetings and forums that were conducted between June 13 and August 23 (see Figure 1: "Stakeholder modeling").

Designing messages to target gaps between expert and stakeholder decision-making. The communicative engagement approach frames message design as a process of finding and addressing gaps between expert models of thinking (risk management and scientific assessment) and stakeholder models of thinking (stakeholders, transactors, audiences, and other groups). These two elements, keys to strategic communication, are discussed above (Comes et al., 2011; Heath & Dan O'Hair, 2020). At Colgate, the message warrants that helped bridge the thinking of the expert and the stakeholder models of the COVID-19 threat lay in three areas: the residential mandate, the learning mandate, and the moral imperative (see Figure 1 "Message design"). The following are examples of statements of these mandates found in transcripts of forums and town halls from the summer of 2020.

- Residential mandate. Unlike some some state and private universities where dorms are optional, Colgate is a live-in university or *residential educational environment*. This environment, and having on-site waste-water and other testing equipment, afforded Colgate the opportunity to create a very large "bubble" community (Appleton, 2020).

Example of residential mandate (27 examples total): "We begin as a community thinking about how do we continue what we know is what we do best—in-person residential education with a liberal arts focus—in a way that also acknowledges the public health limitations of SARS Co V2 and the potential of contracting COVID-19." (June 24)

- Learning mandate. The university, understandably, had a learning mandate that functioned as a co-accelerator of the residential mandate. As mentioned above, the fact that this was a university suggests that messages advocating innovative, knowledge-accumulating measures would find a receptive audience. They did; in the fall months after the campaign was officially launched, student and faculty groups were making their own videos *as learning exercises in their classes* to support mitigation identities.

Example of learning mandate (21 examples total): "We have to think about good communication and that's caused me to think about one of the things we do best here at Colgate and maybe best in the United States." (July 8 Town Hall meeting)

- Moral imperative. Notions of the common good or a higher calling wove through the engagement communications about COVID-19 at Colgate during the summer of 2020. The dynamics of working together, self monitoring, and enforcement of basic mitigation efforts, became, as we will see in the analysis below, voices in an echo-chamber of communication, within which the *Colgate Together* campaign could be spawned.

Example of moral mandate (67 examples total): "Our mission to teach, to produce knowledge, to engage with each other with great care and empathy is what the world needs now and with your help we can do this." (June 23 President shares Colgate's plan)
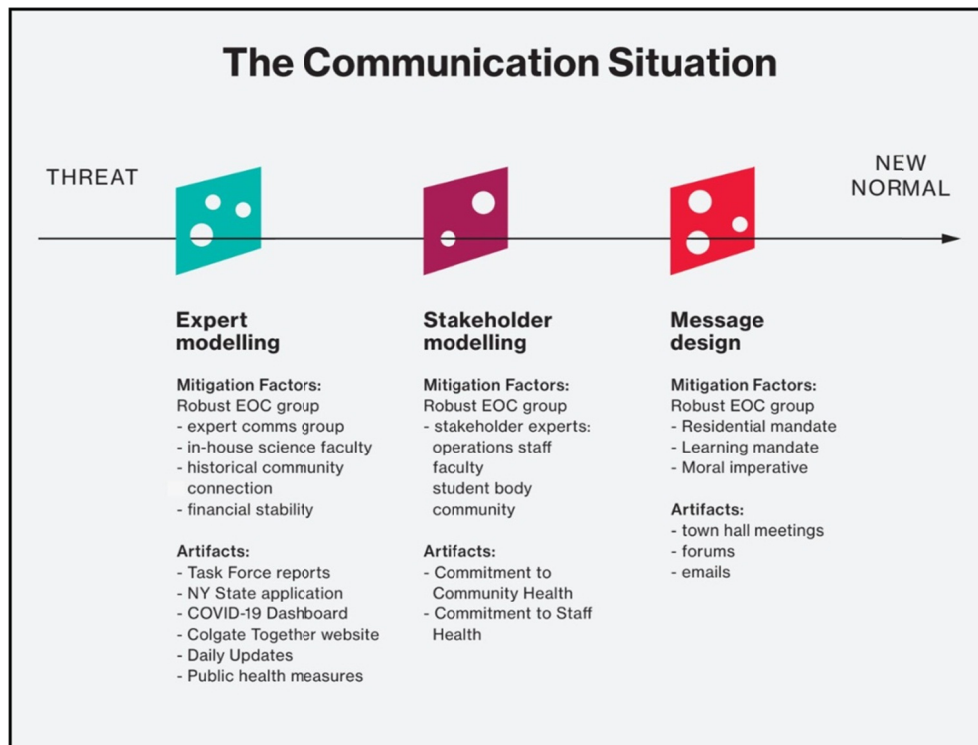
Figure 1. The communication situation

A useful analytical tool for visualizing the characteristics of accident causation is the so-called "Swiss-Cheese" model (Swuste et al., 2014; Underwood & Waterson, 2014). The case of COVID-19 messaging at Colgate University in the summer and fall of 2020 is, in some ways, an example of the swiss-cheese model in reverse. Instead of situational factors aligning to *cause* an accident, the situational factors in this unique case aligned to *mitigate* accidents.

3.2 Timeline Analysis

The timeline phase of our analysis required a representation of events to help isolate the conditions leading to the strategic branding of the *Colgate Together* campaign. The timeline in Figure 2 frames the communication efforts at Colgate ("COMMS" in red) within the context of recognizable life and social events ("EVENTS" in green). During this period, all but a small number of students were absent from campus, allowing the operational and communication teams to share policy and float messaging ideas. While the workload during this time intensified, a kind of lull, or "calm before the storm," existed between the date the task force set the goals (June 13) and the date the students returned (August 23). This delay created a two-and-a-half-month "communication window" through which to view the interaction of external events and the discourse going on in the town halls and forums.
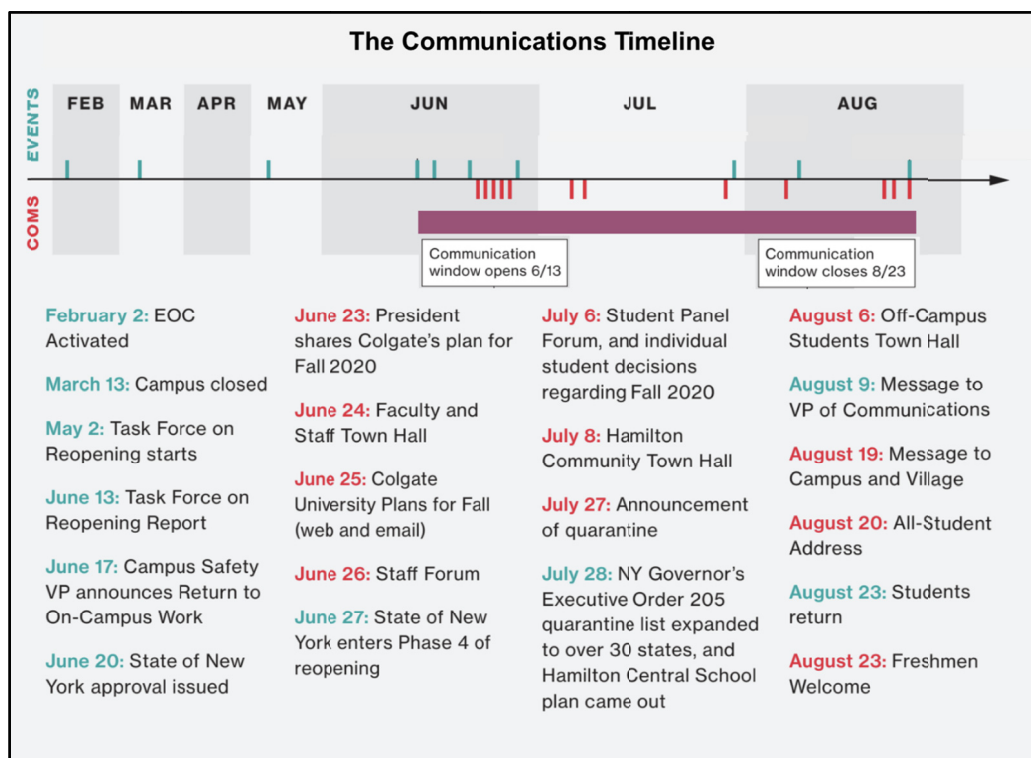
Figure 2. The communications timeline

The "communication window" was envisioned in the *Task Force Report*. That report acknowledged that not all the decisions had been made and messages developed; many details (travel, athletics, and contingency closing plans) still needed to be worked out (Executive Summary, 2020). But the objective was clear: 1) students would return to campus (having signed a "Commitment to Community Health",) and 2) the campus and learning interactions would look different (under the new normal). Essentially, what lay before the college was the implementation of these decisions for stakeholders through town halls and other two-way communicative interventions. The total transcript of these interventions resulted in a file containing 12 documents totalling roughly 72,000 words. As Table 2 shows, most of the events in the communication window were attended and led by various communicators representing the risk mitigation experts on campus who were themselves informed by the Colgate EOC, and New York State and National pandemic policy authorities. The point of the themes shown in Table 2 is not so much the content, but the variety. As might be expected, where a number of voices participated, a number of themes might present themselves or emerge as candidates for effective messaging around which the entire stakeholder community might coalesce.

Table 2. The *Colgate Together* corpus

Date	Title	Media	Communicators	Audience	Genre	Themes
June 23	President Shares Colgate's Plans for the fall	web video	comm leader: executive	All	scripted message	plan information work community
June 24	Faculty and Staff Town Hall	ZOOM meeting 750 participants	comm leader: executive comm leader: operations comm leader: expertise	faculty, staff	meeting with slides	listening posture finances change plan
June 25	Colgate University Plans for fall 2020	web text, email	comm leader: executive	faculty, students, staff, alumni	memo/letter	community flexibility
June 26	Staff Forum	Zoom meeting	comm leader: executive comm leader: operations comm leader: athletics, biology	staff	meeting with slides submitted questions	principles safety residential and teaching mandate research
July 6	Student/Parent Forum website created	Zoom meeting	comm leader: executive comm leader: operations comm leader: expertise stakeholder expert: faculty	families and students	meeting with slides submitted questions	safety competence residential and learning mandate
July 8	Hamilton community town hall	Zoom meeting	comm leader: executive comm leader: operations comm leader: expertise	village citizens	meeting with slides submitted questions	tradition community safety guiding principles
July 28	Faculty Staff Town Hall	Zoom meeting	comm leader: executive comm leader: operations comm leader: expertise stakeholder expert: student body stakeholder expert: faculty	faculty and staff	meeting with slides submitted questions live questions	quarantine and state and national guidelines flexibility logistics commitment to community
August 6	Off-Campus Students Town Hall	Zoom meeting	comm leader: executive comm leader: operations comm leader: expertise	students	interactive meeting live questions	perception quarantine working together
August 19	From the campus and the village: A Message from Mayor and President	Web message	comm leader: executive stakeholder expert: village	students, faculty, staff, community	text	community once-in-a-lifetime moment to engage unity
August 20	All-Student Address	web video	comm leader: executive	students	scripted message	shared commitment quarantine service something transcendent
August 23	Welcome First-Year Students	web video	comm leader: executive	first-year students	scripted message	excitement bonding challenges

3.3 Thematic Analysis

The third result of the case study consists of an analysis of documents in the *Colgate Together* corpus. We suspected that, because the branding of the *Colgate Together* campaign occurred relatively late in the communication window, an analysis of a representative text from early in the communication window and a representative text from later in the communication window might demonstrate how the themes from the earlier communicative engagement phase coalesced in the later branded phase. Accordingly, we analyzed two documents: one was an early transcription of the first address by the president to the entire community on June 23, 2020, shortly after the Task Force recommended a full return to in-person instruction in the fall. The second document was the last document in the *Colgate Together* corpus, dated August 23, 2020, that served the same "orienting" function, but reflected the decision for universal quarantine, recommended by the EOC on June 21, 2020. This second document was influenced by the discussion with off-campus students in a town hall meeting (announcing and discussing the quarantine) on August 6. The August 23 document also follows the president's decision to brand the *Colgate Together* campaign, announced internally to the VP of communications on August 9. The result of the analysis of these two documents is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Salient themes showing the narrative development in the *Colgate Together* corpus

Themes	Example
June 23 President Shares Colgate's Plans for the Fall	
collective burden	"We all must acknowledge that to open fully will place a heavy burden on Colgate's tremendous staff who will support all of these efforts."
rules	"Every one of us faculty, staff, and students will be asked to agree to a community compact that sets forth a series of principles and direction specifically designed to safeguard the health of our campus community and of the village of Hamilton."
plan	"As you will see in the plan there are some matters still to be worked out and it's important to note that the plans will have to adjust to changing state and federal guidelines and circumstances." "It's a great report!"
August 20 All Student Address	
together *(residential mandate)*	"Now I can't monitor every move of every student. That's an impossibility. So our ability to be on this campus this year will rely on the thousands of decisions each of us will make every day for the next 90 days. What someone does in the townhouses will affect those in Gatehouse. Curtis Hall is now deeply linked to La Casa. East Hall residents are united with 110 Broad St. The decision to wear a mask in the Village means a third grader can go to one of our village schools. **We're all fundamentally connected now.** All this relies on each of us."
together *(learning mandate)*	"So why do this? At the most fundamental level, we are doing this to get you back to the form of education that we believe in, the form of education we know to be the most powerful. This is something worth fighting for. Your education, your preparation for the future, and the fight we will undertake **together** will be a lesson in itself."
together *(moral mandate)*	"We have a different approach to welcoming you back. We have a plan and we have you. We live in a world that seldom asks us to **work together in service of something important, something you can't achieve on your own**. We live in a time of hyper individuality. We also live in cynical and partisan times. We are divided more often then were called to join together. But sometimes we're faced with something that is about the common good and sometimes there's a chance to achieve something that's only possible through joint effort."

This thematic analysis is not intended to be scientific. The themes that developed from the early "read the report" messages to the inspirational "we're in this fight together" tone of the later messages understandably reflect the experience of the president and communication team having gone through a two-month crucible of communicative engagement. The message mandates are top of mind as a result. Also, as we will see in the next section, the decision to lead the story have conferred a confident, unified tone to the messaging.

3.4 Corroborating Evidence

If we look even closer at the events and communications later in the communication window, we can see evidence of a noticeable change or shift in emphasis in the messaging by the president.

This development of this messaging strategy is anticipated in an email sent by the president to the vp of communications at this time (August 9) suggesting, *for the first time on record*, the branding of the campaign as "*Colgate Together*":

　　　One thing that we all learned from the "I am quarantining" video message last week is that people respond
　　　very well to a call to higher purposes. And, we also learned that, without such a higher purpose, we will get

overwhelmed by rule-breaking [and other competing warrants]…. So I think we are entering a phase where we aren't just communicating, we are *leading and shaping the story* [italics added].

This internal memo (not a part of the *Colgate Together* corpus) represents an important turning point in the entire messaging activity that comprised the *Colgate Together* campaign. If we see this shift in the context of a previous, somewhat contentious meeting in which students living in the village questioned the universal mandate, we see how the role of communication has shifted, become more fixed and direct, with an emphasis on "together," taking on not just a vague suggestion of community, but a universal regulation (for quarantine). Further evidence of a shift in messaging can be seen in an example of a key statement of the communication strategy that evolved at Colgate. This articulation comes from the president in a CBS interview, aired on August 29, at a time when the communication strategy had matured into a well-coordinated message (CBS News, 2020). Asked why it was "essential" for students to go through a quarantine living experience, the president responded,

> "Because, in our culture, we rarely talk about public good. You rarely talk about sacrificing individual needs for benefits that accrue to everybody. That's not part of our political rhetoric; it's not part of our culture anymore. So we wanted to tell them this is going to be hard and that they need to learn to think about not just themselves but other people and I think, we're an educational institution, why don't we make that something they're learning this year? Why don't you make that the lesson?" (CBS News, 2020).

The messaging is reflected in the image (captured from the video) of the president undergoing the quarantine with the students, embodying desired health behaviors under the new normal.
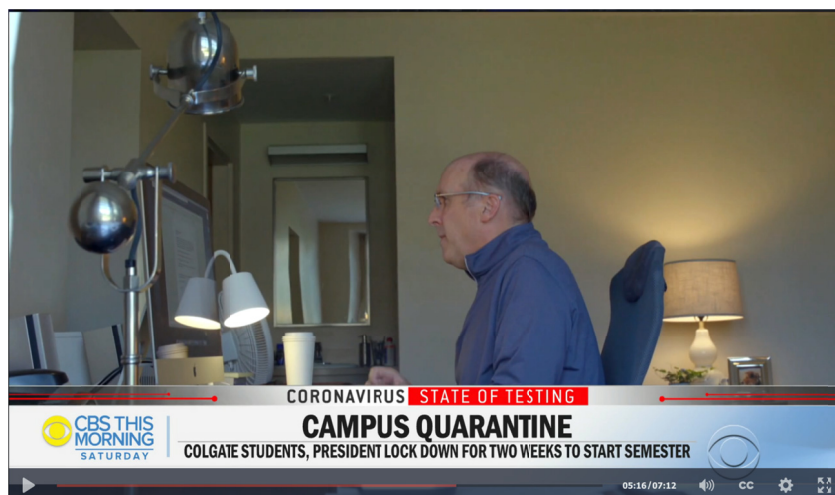

Figure 3. Embodying the crisis/risk communication message

3.5 The Colgate Model

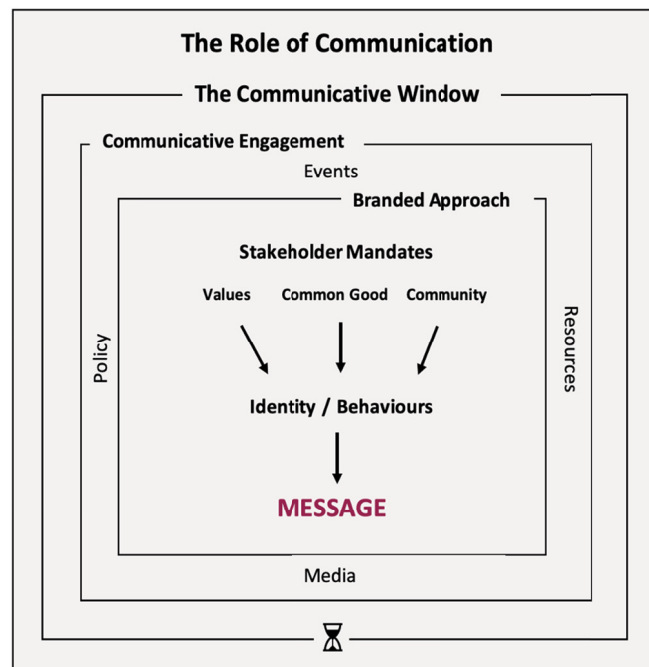A visual depiction of our results is indicated in the diagram in Figure 4.

Figure 4. The Colgate model of the role of communication in crisis and risk message design

As we can see in Figure 4, the elements of message design can be depicted as a layered series of overlapping communicative engagement activities. Communication is shown to play a role over time, with activities moving from an informative and two-way phase to a strategic, one-way phase.

4. Discussion

In this paper we have analyzed the crisis and risk communication that occurred over the summer of 2020 at Colgate University. Communication facilitated the return to in-person learning in the fall, and its power developed during what we call the "communication window." We have asserted that a key role of communication in this context was to lay the groundwork for the strategic or symbolic framing of mitigation information. The discovery of a symbolic element in health messaging is not new. There is theoretical justification for viewing the role of risk communication as the promotion of symbolic communicative behaviour (de Rosa & Mannarini, 2020; Informational, Symbolic and Communicative Actions, 2020; Wetherby & Prizant, 2003). The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion encourages an identification on the part of a stakeholder with "central route processing" which, itself, suggests a "behaviour worthy of enactment" (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Similarly, theories of performative acts of gender constitution suggest the compelling nature of communicative action through ties to identity (Butler, 2010). There may be a number of ways in which the enactment of risk mitigation behaviors, which we have uncovered during the course of this investigation, can intersect with research in self presentation and impression management (Dillard et al., 2000; Goffman & Others, 2002), personna development in developmental psychology (Pruitt & Grudin, 2003), identity construction and change (Breakwell & Jaspal, 2021), and gender and identity studies (McMurray, 2006; Ryan, 2014). Our grounded case analysis can be seen against the backdrop of this scholarship.

5. Conclusion

Our approach has been to regard the challenges that faced Colgate University during the summer of 2020 as a unique situation for communicators and communication scholars. We endeavored to chart the path of message development in this unusual setting. Communication in crisis and risk engagement settings benefit from interactive community engagement resulting in the shaping of messaging based on stakeholder connectedness, leading to widespread adoption of mitigating behaviors. If messaging does not take the lead in doing this, then the vagaries of individual action and variant behavioral decision-making win out, budgets get cut at the wrong time, initiatives get ignored in political struggles, and groups fight against each other. This dynamic was very real elsewhere during the fall of 2020, but not at Colgate. Our research suggests that message development succeeded because it was deeply embedded in the situational opportunities for convincing warrants that

presented themselves in communicative engagement activities during the "communication window" in the summer of 2020. We may even suggest that all crisis and risk communication scenarios can similarly take advantage of a communication window, no matter how long or how brief.

What may be new in our results is the simple confirmation of how one-way, branded messaging developed out of the informational, two-way communicative interaction. This shift, almost like a tipping point, is an important indicator of the role that communication has played in this environment. It indicates, first, that an environment like this is itself conducive to changes or revisions in message design. Seeing that dynamic occur, again much like a tipping point, reveals insight into how the behaviors encouraged by crisis and risk communication messaging are meant to be taken symbolically even when they are presented as "just information," or the remediation of existing information. Wearing a mask while one is jogging, for example, is largely a symbolic act of compliance, just as not wearing a mask, in some situations, may be seen as a symbolic act of non-compliance. Scholars have identified instances of the symbolic nature of risk mitigation behaviors both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lupton et al., 2021), but they may not have been able to see it represented clearly as it is in our case because of our grounded approach and our focus on how the messages developed, which are themselves unique to the Colgate University situation.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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