



Voices in Crisis: High-Salience Stakeholders' Experiences and Perceptions of Communication During Educational Management Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how important stakeholders (professors and students) were informed and updated about the 2016 IUP faculty and Staff Strike crisis. The paper employs a qualitative case study methodology in which a group of four participants, two professors, and two graduate students, were snowballed and interviewed in a semi-structured interview style. The paper sought to answer the following questions: How did the professors and students experience the strike, and how did they perceive the way IUP handled communication during the strike crisis? The participants' responses were recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis. The study's findings were reported in nine themes that show the nuanced and multifaceted dimensions of the experiences and perceptions of the participants, showing the dynamics at play during this critical period. This study provides a comprehensive analysis that contributes to the broader discourse on crisis communication in university settings, emphasizing the importance of stakeholders' perspectives and experiences in shaping effective crisis communication strategies.

Keywords: Educational Management, Stakeholders, Experiences, Perceptions, Communication, University, Crisis

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Introduction

In the lifetime of most companies and organizations, crises happen. In the dynamic landscape of higher education, universities, and their educational management departments occasionally find themselves navigating through challenging crises that impact various facets of their community. One such pivotal event was the 2016 IUP (Indiana University of Pennsylvania) faculty and staff strike, which significantly disrupted the normal functioning of the institution. Crises of this nature pose operational challenges and test the communication strategies universities employ to keep their stakeholders informed and engaged. This paper delves into the experiences and perceptions of high-salience stakeholders—professors and students—during the 2016 IUP strike, with a particular focus on how communication was handled throughout the crisis. The context of a university strike involves complex dynamics, where faculty members and students, as key stakeholders, play pivotal roles in the academic ecosystem. The ability of an institution to effectively communicate during such a crisis is crucial for maintaining trust, transparency, and a sense of community. This study aims to provide insights into the lived experiences of those directly impacted by the strike and their perceptions of the communication strategies employed by IUP during this tumultuous period.

To comprehend the nuances of the communication challenges faced during the 2016 IUP strike, it is imperative to understand the backdrop against which this crisis unfolded. Traditionally perceived as bastions of stability and learning, universities can become hotbeds of tension when labor disputes arise. The faculty and staff strike at IUP in 2016 was a manifestation of unresolved issues related to wages, working conditions, and other contractual matters. As the strike unfolded, the entire university community found itself grappling with uncertainties, disruptions, and a palpable sense of unrest. The faculty, responsible for imparting knowledge and shaping academic experiences, and the students, eager to pursue their educational endeavors, were caught in the crossfire of this labor dispute. Effective communication during such crises becomes a linchpin in managing the fallout and fostering an environment conducive to resolution. The rationale behind this study stems from recognizing that communication is not merely a perfunctory element of crisis management but a critical determinant of how stakeholders perceive and navigate the crisis. As complex organizations, universities need to be adept at disseminating timely and accurate information to their stakeholders, especially during times of crisis. While the 2016 IUP strike undoubtedly left an indelible mark on the university's history, the experiences and perceptions of those directly affected—professors and students—remain relatively unexplored. By focusing on high-salience stakeholders, this study aims to unravel the intricate tapestry of their experiences and perceptions regarding the communication strategies employed by IUP during the strike.

Literature review

The higher education sector presents unique challenges that demand specific attention. One such challenge is the diverse stakeholder landscape, encompassing students, faculty, staff, alumni, governing bodies, and the broader community. Each group has distinct needs, expectations, and communication preferences, requiring universities to tailor their crisis communication strategies

accordingly (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). The increasing prevalence of social media amplifies the complexity of crisis communication in higher education. Social media platforms serve as influential channels for disseminating information, shaping public opinion, and fostering community engagement. However, they also pose challenges in terms of misinformation, rapid dissemination of unverified information, and the potential for crises to escalate quickly. A study by Veil et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of social media in crisis communication within the context of higher education, emphasizing the need for universities to actively manage their online presence during crises. Financial crises, academic misconduct, faculty disputes, and campus safety incidents are among the diverse array of crises that can impact higher education institutions. Each type of crisis requires a tailored communication strategy that addresses the unique characteristics and concerns of that specific crisis. Effectively managing crises in higher education involves not only understanding the challenges but also implementing best practices informed by empirical research and successful case studies.

Sub-topics of crisis communication

Transparency and timeliness

Timely and transparent communication is consistently emphasized in the literature as a critical factor in crisis management within higher education (An & Gower, 2009). Delays in providing information or attempts to withhold crucial details can erode trust and exacerbate the crisis. Open and honest communication, even in the face of uncertainty, fosters credibility and helps manage stakeholder expectations.

Engagement with stakeholders

Successful crisis communication involves actively engaging with stakeholders throughout the crisis lifecycle. This includes not only disseminating information but also listening to concerns, addressing questions, and incorporating stakeholder feedback into communication strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Veil et al., 2011). Engaging with stakeholders builds a sense of community and demonstrates organizational responsiveness.

Utilization of multiple communication channels

The advent of digital communication platforms has diversified the channels through which information can be disseminated during a crisis. Universities are encouraged to leverage traditional and digital communication channels, including social media, official statements, press releases, and direct communication with key stakeholders (Veil et al., 2011). Each channel serves a unique purpose and caters to different segments of the university community.

Consistent messaging

Consistency in messaging is crucial for maintaining coherence and credibility during a crisis (Coombs, 2014). Inconsistencies or contradictions in communication can lead to confusion and

diminish the effectiveness of crisis response. Universities should ensure that messages conveyed through various channels align with the overarching narrative, reinforcing key themes and actions.

Preparedness and training

Proactive crisis communication requires institutions to be prepared for potential crises. This involves developing crisis communication plans, conducting drills, and providing training for key personnel (An & Gower, 2009). Preparedness enhances an institution's ability to respond swiftly and effectively, mitigating the impact of the crisis.

Humanizing communication

Recognizing the human element in crisis communication is essential, especially in the academic context where relationships between faculty, students, and administrators are significant. Humanizing communication involves conveying empathy, acknowledging the emotional impact of the crisis, and demonstrating a commitment to supporting the well-being of the university community (Coombs & Holladay, 2014).

Empirical studies on crisis communication in higher education

Several empirical studies have explored crisis communication within higher education, shedding light on the experiences, challenges, and strategies universities employ during various crises. While the literature is extensive, a few noteworthy studies are discussed here to illustrate the diverse facets of crisis communication in higher education. In their examination of the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, Figley and Jones (2008) explored the role of communication in managing the crisis. The study highlighted the importance of clear and consistent messaging, the utilization of multiple communication channels, and the challenges posed by the rapid dissemination of information through social media. Lessons from the Virginia Tech case underscored the need for universities to adapt their communication strategies to the evolving media landscape.

Examining a financial crisis in higher education, Johnson (2021) conducted a study on the communication challenges faced by a university during a period of fiscal distress. The study emphasized the significance of transparency, stakeholder engagement, and consistent messaging in navigating financial crises. It also highlighted the role of leadership communication in shaping perceptions and maintaining trust during challenging times.

In a study specific to school strikes, Fiksenbaum et al. (2012) conducted a longitudinal study that tracked students' experiences before, during, and after a 12-week strike involving teaching assistants and contract faculty at a prominent Canadian university. Hierarchical regression analysis unveiled that students' contentment with their academic program before the strike played a role in shaping their post-strike perception of fairness. The extent to which students' plans were disrupted during the strike correlated with a notable decrease in perceived fairness. Notably, post-strike fairness was positively associated with students' satisfaction with course remediation efforts and their sense of having a faculty member for support after the strike. Surprisingly, neither students' financial concerns nor their attitudes toward the strike were predictive of perceived fairness. The

discussion delves into the implications of addressing students' concerns after an academic labor dispute.

Zigarmi and Sinclair (1979) conducted a research investigation at a middle school in Ohio, highlighting the adverse impacts of a strike on the perceived environment. Employing a pre-post design, the study utilized a climate questionnaire known as The Staff Development School Climate Questionnaire, developed by the author. This instrument was administered to 40 teachers before and after a two-week district-wide strike. The findings indicate a noteworthy decrease (at the 0.01 significance level) in the climate across all five attitude subscales: Communication, Innovation, Professionalism, Inservice, and Decision-Making. Additionally, a significant alteration was observed in the leadership style of the principal, as assessed by the SDSCQ and through researcher interviews.

Grayson (1997; 1999) conducted a study during the fifth and sixth weeks of a faculty strike at York University in Ontario. The survey evaluated how students perceived the strike, its advantages, and its drawbacks. The survey involved 502 randomly chosen full-time undergraduate students from various disciplines. The questionnaire's content was developed through student focus groups. This report outlines the methodology and presents the findings across various areas: student demographics; key issues during the strike; potential long-term benefits for students at the institution; effects on student schedules; academic and economic consequences; impact on stress levels; the significance of strike-related issues compared to other challenges faced by students throughout the year; support for the faculty's actions; concerns about the strike's impact; communication from the institution regarding the faculty's actions; student engagement in strike-related activities; and satisfaction with the academic program. The results suggest that students did not anticipate an enhancement in their education as a result of the dispute. Instead, they experienced substantial academic and economic challenges and perceived that neither the faculty union nor the administration prioritized students' best interests. Approximately one-third of respondents supported the faculty's action, but a considerable number expressed contentment with their academic program at the university.

Wickens (2011) investigates the repercussions of unionization and labor strikes involving faculty and graduate employees in higher education. The study delves into the academic implications of unionization and labor conflicts, encompassing the effects on research productivity and the mentorship dynamics between faculty and graduate students. Additionally, it scrutinizes the impact of strikes on student learning outcomes, grades, and dropout rates. Psychosocial aspects are explored, including the potential sense of empowerment, job satisfaction, and identity associated with unionization, along with the emotions, attitudes, and mental and physical well-being of students affected by a strike. The study concludes by offering recommendations for managing future strikes within university settings.

Wickens et al. (2016) conducted a longitudinal study to investigate (a) alterations in students' emotional reactions to the 2008–2009 York University labor strike, (b) changes in how students accessed pertinent information throughout the work stoppage, and (c) the correlation between students' information access and their emotional responses. The findings indicate that the majority

of students expressed feeling moderately informed about the labor strikes, with less than 10% feeling very well informed. Dissatisfaction prevailed regarding the quality of strike-related information provided. Over 70% of students endorsed three communication strategies: more frequent email and social media updates on negotiation status and class impact and a 24-hour notice for class changes posted online. Students who felt well informed and satisfied with communication reported lower psychological distress. A supportive faculty member was perceived positively, providing strike-related information and being flexible.

Gerlach (2023) conducted a qualitative case study to investigate the crisis leadership within the athletic departments of five mid-major universities situated in the Midwest United States—Blue University, Red University, Green University, Orange University, and Purple University—during the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. The study focused on examining the leadership response and decision-making processes related to the pandemic. The research leaders included members from both the university's executive leadership team and the senior staff of the athletic departments. Data for this study were gathered through one-on-one interviews conducted in person and virtually with each member of the executive teams. These interviews provided valuable insights and an in-depth understanding of their leadership experiences during the challenging period of crisis. While existing studies have explored leadership in the context of college athletics, there is a noticeable gap in research specifically addressing leadership during crises. Given the constraints and critical decision-making required in mid-major universities, particularly in times of crisis, effective leadership becomes paramount. The findings from this study offer valuable insights and understanding into the nuanced dynamics of crisis leadership within mid-major universities, especially during the unprecedented challenges posed by a global pandemic.

Theoretical framework

Understanding crisis communication in higher education necessitates a theoretical framework that captures the intricacies of this dynamic process. In the context of crisis communication, organizations must recognize the diverse groups that may be affected by the crisis. These stakeholders include employees, customers, shareholders, regulatory bodies, the media, and the general public. Different theories tried to provide us with different ways to understand stakeholder management (Reed, 1999). Stakeholder Management Theory has become a fundamental framework within the fields of public relations and crisis communication (Minoja, 2012). At its core, this theory centers on the notion of stakeholders, individuals or groups with vested interests in an organization's operations, decisions, and outcomes (Atkin & Skitmore, 2008). This theory provides essential guidance on how organizations should strategically engage with these stakeholders during times of crisis. The theory emphasizes that not all stakeholders are of equal importance, and organizations must prioritize their engagement based on the potential impact of the crisis on each group (Wasioleski & Weber, 2017). The concept of "stakeholder salience" is another critical aspect of his theory (Mitchell & Agle, 1997). Stakeholder salience refers to the degree to which an organization perceives a stakeholder as significant. Salience is determined by three key attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency (O'Higgins & Morgan, 2006). Stakeholders

with higher salience are those who wield greater influence, have legitimate claims, and require immediate attention during a crisis (Neville & Menguc, 2006). Using this lens in this study is important because IUP has different stakeholders, and it is important to see which stakeholders they prioritized during the strike.

Research question

This study answers the following research question.

RQ: How did the professors and students experience the strike, and how did they perceive the way IUP handled communication during the strike crisis?

Methodology

The methodology employed for participant selection in this paper utilized a snowballing technique involving both professors and students. The snowballing technique is a non-random sampling method where existing participants recommend or introduce potential participants, creating a chain-like recruitment process (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This approach is particularly useful when studying specific groups that may be interconnected or when access to the target population is challenging (Berg, 2009).

For the selection of professors, an initial contact was established with a faculty member who had experienced the 2016 IUP faculty and staff strike. Subsequently, this faculty member was asked to recommend other professors with relevant insights into the strike crisis. This process continued iteratively until a diverse and representative group of professors was identified. Similarly, in the case of students, initial contact was made with a graduate student who had direct experience with the strike. This student was then asked to suggest other graduate students who could provide valuable perspectives on their experiences during the strike. The snowballing technique continued until a comprehensive and diverse group of graduate students was identified. The choice of the snowballing technique aligns with the qualitative nature of the study, aiming to capture a range of nuanced perspectives from participants who had direct involvement in or were significantly affected by the 2016 IUP strike. This method facilitates the identification of key informants who possess in-depth knowledge and varied experiences related to the crisis, enriching the qualitative data collection process (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

The semi-structured interview format was chosen to allow for flexibility and depth in exploring the participants' experiences and perceptions. A set of open-ended questions was designed to elicit rich narratives from both professors and students regarding their encounters with the 2016 IUP faculty and staff strike and their perspectives on the communication strategies employed by the university during the crisis (Appendix A & B). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in capturing participants' responses. The data obtained through this process is subjected to rigorous coding and thematic analysis to identify patterns, common themes, and unique insights within the narratives.

By adopting a qualitative case study methodology and utilizing the snowballing technique for participant selection, this research aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of

the voices of professors and students during the 2016 IUP faculty and staff strike and their perceptions of the university's communication strategies throughout the crisis.

Ethical consideration

To maintain ethical considerations, participants were provided with detailed information about the research objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and assurances of confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the semi-structured interviews. For confidentiality and privacy, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants involved in the study. This measure ensures that the real identities of the professors and graduate students remain protected, aligning with ethical considerations in research.

A. Findings and discussions from the interview with the professors

The following is a group of themes that represent the findings in this study.

Theme 1: common concerns for semester disruption and financial impact

Analyzing both professors' interview transcripts, Dr. Parker emphasized the urgent need to address issues swiftly in order to prevent any significant disruptions to the academic semester for students. His primary goal was to ensure a smooth and continuous learning experience for the students despite the challenges posed by the strike. This emphasis aligns with existing literature on crisis management in educational institutions, which underscores the importance of timely responses to maintain continuity in the learning process (McCaffery, 2018). Additionally, the concern extended to the financial impact on faculty members, especially those who were relatively new, as they faced the potential loss of income and insurance coverage during the period of the strike. This aligns with research by Stratford et al. (2023), which discusses the financial vulnerabilities of early-career academics in times of crisis. The potential loss of income and insurance coverage during the strike underscores the broader issue of financial instability faced by faculty members, aligning with the findings of McCaffery (2018) on the economic challenges within academia. Dr. Parker said, "The major concern was resolving the issues quickly to avoid disrupting the semester for students. Another major concern was a loss of income and insurance, especially for newer faculty, during the strike." Dr. Parker's emphasis on swift resolution resonates with the urgency advocated by Suarez (2022) in the exploration of effective crisis communication in academia.

On the other side, Dr. Vanessa expressed her deep concern and uncertainty about the implications of the strike, highlighting the anxiety surrounding the unknown aspects of the situation. She underscored the gravity of the situation by pointing out that being on strike meant she had no medical insurance, adding another layer of worry to an already stressful situation. The looming threat of financial instability and the absence of crucial insurance coverage during the strike added an extra layer of complexity to the challenges faced by faculty members like Dr. Vanessa. She said, "I was very concerned. I had no idea what to expect [...] I knew that being on strike meant I had no medical insurance." Dr. Vanessa's expression of deep concern and uncertainty resonates with the psychological impact of crises on individuals, as highlighted by

McCaffery (2018). The anxiety surrounding unknown aspects of the situation is a common psychological response during crises, as discussed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in their stress and coping theory.

Both participants shared concerns about minimizing disruption to the academic semester and dealing with financial repercussions, particularly regarding insurance coverage. This aligns with the broader discourse on the importance of healthcare coverage for academics. It now becomes evident that both participants shared common worries about the dual fronts of maintaining the academic integrity of the semester and grappling with the financial repercussions of the strike. The overarching theme revolves around the collective effort to navigate these concerns, with a shared understanding that minimizing disruption to the academic semester and addressing financial insecurities, particularly related to insurance coverage, was paramount.

Theme 2: reliance on union for communication

Both faculty members relied on the faculty union as the primary source of communication during the strike, highlighting a common trend of union-centric information channels. Dr. Parker said, “During the strike, the majority of information came from the faculty union through their secure website and emails to faculty non-IUP email accounts.” This quote clearly indicates a strong reliance on the faculty union as the primary source of information during the strike. The mention of a “secure website” suggests that the union employed secure communication channels, potentially fostering trust and confidence among the faculty members. The emphasis on communication to non-IUP email accounts highlights the union’s effort to reach faculty through diverse and accessible channels. Also, Dr. Vanessa said, “We did not communicate with the university. We communicated with the union.” This quote reinforces the theme by explicitly stating that communication during the strike bypassed direct communication with the university. The exclusive reliance on the union for communication underscores a deliberate choice made by the faculty members. This quote further emphasizes the union-centric approach to information flow. This underscores a strategic preference for utilizing the faculty union’s communication channels (Ulmer et al., 2007).

Theme 3: limited recall of university communication impact

Both interviewees had limited recall of impactful communication from the university, suggesting a potential gap in the effectiveness of IUP’s direct communication during the strike. The insufficient time to develop a communication campaign or stream suggests challenges in crafting and disseminating information effectively. This resonates with research highlighting the need for preparedness in crisis communication, even during short-lived events, to ensure stakeholders receive accurate and timely updates (Fearn-Banks, 2016). Dr. Park said, “The strike did not last long, so there wasn’t much time to share information or develop a communication campaign/stream.” This quote implies that the limited timeframe may have constrained the university’s ability to share comprehensive information or implement a robust communication strategy. This aligns with crisis communication literature that underscores the importance of timely

and efficient communication during brief, high-impact events (Coombs, 2021). The role of PASSHE in Communication was clear. Dr. Parker said, “PASSHE did the communicating for the universities so IUP’s direct role was minimal.” As seen with PASSHE’s role, centralized coordination aligns with crisis management principles that stress the importance of a coordinated and centralized approach to crisis communication. This ensures consistent messaging and a unified response, especially in multi-institutional settings.

Dr. Vanessa said, “I do not remember communication from the university. I think that we were informed by the union.” Dr. Vanessa’s inability to recall communication from the university indicates a potential gap in the impact of the university’s direct communication efforts. This lapse in recall could be attributed to various factors such as the perceived effectiveness of the communication received, the source of information (union vs. university), or the content of the messages. Research on crisis communication emphasizes the significance of information retention and the role of message clarity in ensuring stakeholders’ understanding (Seeger et al., 2003). Dr. Vanessa said that they were informed by the union, which implies a reliance on the union as a primary source of information. This underscores the importance of alternative communication channels during crises and aligns with studies emphasizing the role of unions as intermediaries in disseminating information to their members (Waters, 2014). This raises questions about the effectiveness and reach of the university’s communication strategy during the strike. The gap in recall may have implications for stakeholders’ perceptions of the university’s responsiveness and transparency during the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

Theme 4: impact on perception of union employment

There was a perceived disconnect between the administration and the faculty during the strike. This suggests a breakdown in communication or understanding between these two key stakeholders. Dr. Parker said, “During a strike, there is a disconnect between administration and the faculty [...] It certainly taught me what it’s like to work for a union.” The observation aligns with the literature on labor relations, emphasizing the importance of effective communication and collaboration between stakeholders, especially during times of crisis (DeMartino & Weiser, 2021). Dr. Vanessa said, “It certainly taught me what it’s like to work for a union.” Both participants acknowledged that the strike experience influenced their perception of working for a union, indicating a shared impact on their understanding of union employment dynamics. Both participants expressed that the strike experience taught them about working for a union. This shared sentiment indicates a significant impact on their understanding of union employment dynamics. The strike served as an experiential learning opportunity, providing insights into the roles, challenges, and dynamics associated with unionized work environments. This shared perception change could be attributed to various factors, such as interactions with the union during the strike, exposure to union-led activities, or a firsthand understanding of how unions operate in advocating for faculty rights.

The theme implies that the crisis experience had an educational impact on the participants’ awareness of union employment. This aligns with research emphasizing the transformative

potential of crisis experiences, where individuals gain new perspectives, skills, and knowledge through navigating challenging circumstances (Boin et al., 2016). The participants' recognition of the strike as a learning experience about union employment extends beyond the immediate crisis context. It emphasizes the broader aspect of workplace learning, where crises become pivotal moments for individuals to gain insights into organizational structures, power dynamics, and collective bargaining processes (Fatima Oliveira, 2013).

Theme 5: communication challenges with students

Both participants expressed frustration over the challenges of communicating with students during the strike, suggesting a shared need for improved communication channels in such crisis situations. Dr. Parker said, "During a strike, there is a disconnect between administration and the faculty with faculty access to email restricted [...] It was frustrating not being able to communicate with my students." And Dr. Vanessa said, "It was frustrating not being able to communicate with my students." Both participants expressed frustration over the inability to communicate with their students during the strike. This highlights a broader disruption in the usual channels of communication between faculty members and students, which is a crucial aspect of the academic environment (Birnbaum & Edelson, 1989). The theme implies potential pedagogical implications, as disruptions in faculty-student communication can impact students' learning experiences and create uncertainty. It aligns with literature emphasizing the importance of communication in higher education and its role in facilitating a supportive learning environment (Tinto, 2012).

The theme also provides insights into the intricate communication dynamics during crises, particularly when faculty members navigate challenges imposed by administrative decisions. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for institutions to develop effective communication strategies that consider the needs of both faculty and students during crisis situations (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2010). The frustration expressed by the participants underscores the importance of timely and accessible communication mechanisms, especially during crises. It suggests that ensuring faculty members can communicate with students is vital to crisis preparedness and response within higher education institutions (Kapucu & Khosa, 2013).

B. Findings and discussions from the interview with the student participants

Theme 1: initial awareness through word of mouth

Both student participants, Ramzi and Yassin, highlighted that their first knowledge of the strike originated from informal channels rather than official university communication. Ramzi suggested that information circulated through word of mouth at the beginning of the strike. He stated, "I think it's just word of mouth at the beginning...I was aware of that before any email communication." This aligns with findings in crisis communication literature that emphasize the significance of informal communication networks during crisis events (Coombs, 2007).

Similarly, Yassin mentioned that he first heard about the strike from his professors in class before it began. He recalled, "They told us there is a possibility of a strike." This underscores the role of direct communication from professors as an initial source of information for students.

Research by Seeger et al. (2003) emphasizes the importance of interpersonal communication, particularly from credible sources, during crisis situations. The emerging theme from these quotes suggests that, during the onset of the strike, students primarily depended on informal sources such as word of mouth and direct communication from faculty members to become aware of the impending crisis. The absence of communication through official channels like email or social media at this early stage indicates a potential gap in the university's initial crisis communication strategy, aligning with the literature on crisis communication effectiveness (Coombs, 2007; Seeger et al., 2003).

Theme 2: university communication efforts

Ramzi acknowledged that the university made efforts to communicate with students by sending multiple emails. He mentioned, "We received multiple emails...the head of the department told us about our rights...they are trying to get us informed." This indicates that the university employed email communication as a primary channel to keep students informed about the situation. Research in crisis communication emphasizes the importance of timely and transparent information through credible channels (Coombs, 2014), aligning with the university's use of emails. On a similar note, Yassin reflected on the official communication received from the university, which informed students about the strike and advised them to attend class even if professors were absent. Yassin, however, expressed reservations about the effectiveness of this communication. He stated, "When I received the official email from the university informing us of the strike and asking us to still come to class even if professors are not there, I already knew that and thought the communication was not so effective as it was not as credible to me as what I previously heard from my professors." This quote underscores the significance of credibility in crisis communication (Coombs, 2007), as students may prioritize information from their professors over official university communications.

The student participants, although not recalling specific rumors or misinformation, acknowledged the university's effort to address and clarify any potential false information through emails. This proactive stance aligns with crisis communication strategies emphasizing the importance of promptly addressing and correcting misinformation (Coombs, 2014). Research in crisis communication emphasizes the significance of managing rumors to maintain organizational credibility (Coombs, 2007).

Theme 3: impact on classes and students' involvement in the strike

This theme reflects the diverse experiences of students. Both Ramzi and Yassin highlighted students' flexibility during the strike, allowing them to miss classes if needed. However, they also noted that, in their personal experiences, classes were not significantly interrupted. This situation aligns with crisis communication literature emphasizing the importance of maintaining normalcy and continuity, where possible, during a crisis (Coombs, 2014). Allowing students some flexibility while minimizing disruptions to classes demonstrates an effort to mitigate the impact of the strike on the academic semester. Moreover, the active involvement of students and faculty members in the strike, as described by Ramzi and Yassin, illustrates a sense of solidarity and support for the

cause. Students participating in strikes alongside their professors and expressing understanding of their situation reflects a collaborative atmosphere during the crisis. Ramzi said, “I remember during the strike, we were given the opportunity to be out of our classes...my personal classes weren’t interrupted.” Yassin said, “the university asked us to attend classes if even professors are not there, we are still required to not miss the classes. The professors felt bad about not being able to help us by being in class, but we understood their situation and supported them.” Ramzi and Yassin both mentioned that they chose not to attend the class but rather held signs and stood with their professors on the streets. Yassin also mentioned that he drove his car around and honked his car horn to support his professors. This theme resonates with the literature on crisis communication, emphasizing the role of stakeholders, including students, in the overall crisis management process (Seeger et al., 2003). The active involvement of students in supporting faculty members through various means, such as holding signs and honking car horns, indicates a shared commitment to the cause and solidarity within the university community. This theme underscores the dual dynamics of flexibility for students and active involvement in the strike, portraying a nuanced picture of how classes were impacted during the 2016 IUP faculty and Staff Strike. The collaborative efforts of students and faculty members align with the principles of crisis communication and stakeholder engagement.

Theme 4: cultural and international perspective

The student participants, who both happen to be international students, noted that their perspective on the strike and the university’s communication efforts might differ from American students who are more accustomed to this culture. Their comments highlight that cultural factors can influence how individuals perceive crisis communication. Ramzi said, “I want to say that my perspective is coming from an international student’s perspective...it might not be that good from others’ perspectives...from native American perspectives who were used to this culture.” Yassin said, “I never had this experience before. It was new to me, and I consider it a good non-academic learning experience that taught me about liberty in education.”

This theme aligns with the broader literature on cultural sensitivity in crisis communication (Coombs, 2007; Waters, 2014). Ramzi explicitly mentions that his perspective comes from an international standpoint, indicating an awareness of potential variations in how individuals from different cultural backgrounds perceive crisis communication. This resonates with the cultural approach in crisis communication literature, emphasizing the need for communication strategies to be sensitive to cultural nuances (Fearn-Banks, 2016). Yassin’s acknowledgment of the strike as a unique and non-academic learning experience adds depth to understanding how international students may view such situations. This aligns with the literature on crisis as a learning opportunity (Boin et al., 2016), suggesting that crises can provide individuals, including international students, with insights into cultural aspects and the nature of education within a specific context. These observations by international students underscore the importance of considering cultural diversity in crisis communication planning and execution. Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping individuals’ expectations, interpretations, and responses during a crisis (Fatima Oliveira, 2013).

The international perspective brought by Ramzi and Yassin enriches the overall understanding of how stakeholders, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds, engage with and interpret crisis communication efforts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has delved into the multifaceted experiences and perceptions of key stakeholders—professors and students—during the 2016 IUP faculty and Staff Strike, with a specific focus on communication dynamics. Through a qualitative case study methodology, insights were gathered from interviews with two professors and two graduate students, shedding light on their diverse encounters with the crisis and the University's communication strategies. The thematic analysis revealed several critical dimensions of the stakeholders' experiences. The research uncovered themes related to limited recall of university communication impact, the impact on perceptions of union employment, challenges in communication with students, and cultural influences on crisis communication perceptions. These themes contribute nuanced perspectives to the broader discourse on crisis communication, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches considering various stakeholders' perspectives and cultural diversity. Furthermore, the study highlighted the proactive measures taken by the university to counteract rumors and misinformation, reflecting a commitment to transparent and accurate communication during times of crisis. Importantly, the international student perspective brought a valuable dimension to the research, emphasizing the impact of cultural factors on crisis communication perceptions. The findings underscore the significance of cultural sensitivity in crafting effective crisis communication strategies within diverse university communities. In sum, this research provides a comprehensive exploration of the voices of professors and students during a critical university crisis, offering valuable insights for academic institutions seeking to enhance their crisis communication approaches and strategies.

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Appendix A

Interview questions with professors

1. Can you share your personal experience during the 2016 faculty and staff strike at IUP? What were your initial reactions and concerns when the strike began?
2. How did you, as a professor, and your colleagues stay informed about the developments and updates related to the strike? Were you satisfied with the communication from IUP during the strike?
3. From your perspective, what were the primary reasons or issues that led to the strike, and how did these issues impact you and your fellow faculty members?
4. What was your perception of IUP's communication strategy during the strike? Did you feel that the university adequately addressed the concerns and questions of the faculty?
5. Were there any rumors or misinformation circulating during the strike, and how did you and your colleagues respond to them? Did IUP take steps to address and correct any false information?
6. In your opinion, how did the strike affect the relationship between faculty and staff and the university administration? Were there efforts made to bridge any divides or tensions that arose during the strike?
7. Did you have any concerns about the impact of the strike on students and their education? How was this aspect of the strike communicated to you and your colleagues?
8. Looking back, do you believe the strike achieved its intended goals, and how has it shaped the relationship between the faculty and staff and IUP in the years since?
9. Were there any specific actions or measures taken by IUP that you believe could have improved the handling of the strike or the communication with faculty members during that time?
10. How has the strike influenced your perception of crisis management and communication within higher education institutions, and what improvements or changes would you suggest based on your experience?

Appendix B

Interview questions with students

1. Can you share your personal experiences and observations during the 2016 faculty and staff strike at IUP? How did it impact your daily life as a student?
2. How did you first learn about the strike, and what were your initial thoughts and concerns when it began?
3. How did IUP communicate with students during the strike? Were you satisfied with the information provided and the university's efforts to keep students informed?
4. Were there any rumors or misinformation circulating during the strike, and how did you and your fellow students respond to them? Did IUP address and clarify any false information?
5. How did the strike impact your classes and coursework? Were there disruptions or changes to your academic schedule, and if so, how were these changes communicated to you?

6. Were there any student-led initiatives, protests, or actions in response to the strike, and how did these activities contribute to the overall atmosphere on campus during that time?
7. How did the strike influence your perception of the relationship between students and faculty/staff, as well as the relationship between students and the university administration?
8. Looking back, do you believe the strike achieved its goals, and how do you think it has shaped the campus community and dynamics in the years following the strike?
9. In your opinion, what lessons can be learned from the 2016 strike experience at IUP in terms of communication, conflict resolution, and labor relations within educational institutions?
10. Were there any specific actions or measures taken by IUP that you believe could have improved the handling of the strike or the communication with students during that time?

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Conflict of Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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