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## Seasons Of Change: A Discourse Analysis Of University Rhetorical Response During A Generational Pandemic

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**SEASONS OF CHANGE: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF UNIVERSITY RHETORICAL  
RESPONSE DURING A GENERATIONAL PANDEMIC**

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A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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By

Todd S. Moellendick

March 2023

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Approved March 2023 by

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Chairperson of Doctoral Committee

## **Dedication**

To *The Wizard of Oz*...thank you for inspiring me to get a Th.D.

## Acknowledgments

I would argue that the most essential part of any individual's dissertation is the acknowledgment page. In fact, I submit the first order in the dissertation process shouldn't be conceptualizing a research topic, but rather creating a list of those who helped you reach this point of your doctoral journey. Truth be told, when I was laboring in the final sections of my dissertation, I decided to write my acknowledgment page in an effort to inspire myself to keep pushing through the later stages of writing. This was not an act of arrogance. Rather, this was an act of gratitude—gratitude to have been surrounded by so many kind, loving, and brilliant people who walked, and sometimes carried me, through this journey. So, before the orchestra plays me off the awards stage, a heartfelt thank you to the following:

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Thank you for being a friend

Traveled down the road and back again

Your heart is true, you're a pal and a confidant

- Sweet Farren. My wish for you as you journey the world is that you are always surrounded by people who love you without conditions, make you laugh, and keep you safe. I hope your dreams know no boundaries and carry you to the stars and above. You are my sunshine, Farren.
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## **Abstract**

Institutions of higher education are no strangers to crisis situations. From world wars to campus violence, colleges and universities across the United States have been both directly and indirectly affected by these crisis situations. However, in the early part of 2020, higher education was faced with a situation that transcended anything colleges and universities had seen before—COVID-19. What made COVID-19 so unique was how the disease quickly permeated throughout the United States. Thus, a stage was set for institutions of higher education to defend their campuses and communities from a most historical pandemic. This study, understanding the historical significance of the COVID-19 pandemic, researched how two public universities in Virginia, William & Mary and the University of the Virginia, used email communication to inform the students, faculty, and staff in their respective institutions during the pandemic. A discourse analysis was conducted and found that both institutions framed their discourse using a science and data-driven approach coupled with a unity-based structural frame that advanced the rhetoric and narrative of their COVID-19 response.

**SEASONS OF CHANGE: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF UNIVERSITY RHETORICAL  
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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Throughout history, higher education institutions in the United States have encountered crisis situations that required immediate and exhaustive measures to mitigate the damage inflicted by these generational watershed moments. Consequential junctures affecting institutions of higher education have included the Civil War, the Spanish Flu, World Wars I and II, and The Great Depression (Thelin, 2004). As a sector, higher education has also dealt with campus gun violence with the shooting and killing of protestors at Kent State University in 1970 and the mass shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007 (Jenson, 2007). Today, institutions of higher education find themselves amid another historical crisis that has affected colleges and universities across the United States: The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that emerged in early 2020.

### **COVID-19**

In December of 2019, a cluster of pneumonia-like illnesses spread through the Chinese city of Wuhan, located in the Hubei Province (C. Wang et al., 2020). On January 20, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global public health crisis during an international health regulations emergency meeting in Geneva, Switzerland (Jahangir et al., 2020; WHO, 2020). The first reported case of COVID-19 in the United States occurred on January 21, 2020, from an individual who traveled to the United States from the Hubei Province of China (Schuchat, 2020). After this first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the United States, the infection and death rates climbed exponentially.

For context, as of early October 2020, there were 7.4 million cases of COVID-19 in the United States, with over 204,800 deaths reported (Johns Hopkins University, 2020). Shifting the timeline to 2021, as of October 20, 2021, there were 45,157,284 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the United States with 728,826 confirmed deaths (Johns Hopkins University, 2021). Worldwide, there were 241,837,753 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 4,918,215 known deaths from COVID-19 (Johns Hopkins University, 2021). By May 9, 2022, these numbers grew to 81,911,016 reported cases of COVID-19 infections in the United States with 997,586 deaths (Johns Hopkins University, 2022). Globally, as of May 9, 2022, there were 517,537,672 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 6,252,044 deaths due to surges in the Omicron variant of the virus (Johns Hopkins University, 2022). While these numbers provide a quantitative snapshot of the virus in terms of sheer numbers, the data compiled by Johns Hopkins University provides only a numeric glimpse of reported cases and deaths caused by COVID-19. The availability of accurate COVID-19 testing measures, coupled the premise that not all individuals afflicted with COVID-19 seek to confirm the presence of the virus, the assumption remains that the exact number of COVID-19, and potential death from the virus, remain underreported (Campolieti, 2021; Kratz & Rao, 2020; Lau et al., 2020).

### **COVID-19 Mitigation Efforts**

The preventative spread of COVID-19 was helped by the use of face masks, social distancing, and hygienic practices (Abideen et al., 2020). Despite the effort to flatten the rising curve of COVID-19 infection rates, infection rates remained high and continued to rise throughout the world. Not only did infection rates increase, but COVID-19-related deaths continued to rise globally throughout 2020. Notwithstanding the infection and mortality rates

attributed to COVID-19, the scientific community continued the formulation and development of a vaccine to mitigate the disease.

On December 11, 2021, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the emergency usage of the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine (Bok et al., 2021). Soon after, vaccines from Moderna and Johnson & Johnson became available in the United States after emergency FDA approval. Despite the availability and preventative measures of vaccines to combat COVID-19, the disease continued to affect Americans' daily lives as variants continued to emerge globally. Therefore, educational settings, including colleges and universities, had to adjust to delivering a reimagined campus and classroom experience that continued to monitor COVID-19 infection rates that resulted in changes in campus protocols to protect students, staff, and faculty. As the pandemic shifted to 2022, however, and more institutions instituted vaccine requirements for faculty, students, and staff (Paltiel & Schwartz, 2021), coupled with increased and sophisticated testing (Walke et al., 2020), college campuses began to restore a semblance of a more normative academic year.

Although the initial uncertainty of COVID-19 was problematic for academic planning in the early stages of the pandemic, history suggests colleges and universities can review the response to the Spanish Flu of 1918-1919 as a precursor of what to expect in the aftermath of the current pandemic and as the disease became endemic (Greenburg, 2018). Despite nearly the 100 years between the Spanish Flu and COVID-19, a historical blueprint emerged of both the similarities and differences between the pandemics.

### **Spanish Flu**

The Spanish Flu of 1918-1919 perhaps most resembled the COVID-19 pandemic gripping colleges and universities in the United States. The Spanish Flu was estimated to have

killed over 500 million globally (Greenberg, 2018). In the United States, the Spanish Flu left 670,000 dead and countless others afflicted (Greenberg, 2018). The epidemiology of the Spanish Flu, an airborne respiratory infection, found that the disease spread most easily through warm nasal passage temperature, poorly ventilated spaces, and crowded indoor spaces (Taubenberger & Morens, 2006). What made the Spanish Flu so virulent and fatal was that there were three distinct waves of the disease (Morens & Fauci, 2007; Taubenberger & Morens, 2006). The first wave of the Spanish Flu occurred during the spring and summer of 1918 and was characterized as having higher infection rates but low fatalities. Conversely, the second wave of the pandemic, Summer/Fall 1918, and final wave of Winter 1919, had significantly more deaths than the first iteration of the illness (Morens & Fauci, 2007).

Historically, there were lessons to be gained from the Spanish Flu. For example, social distancing helped mitigate the spread of Spanish Flu (Vannabouathong et al., 2020). The Spanish Flu also brought about the use of hygienic practices such as sneezing and coughing in handkerchiefs and handwashing (Schwartz, 2018).

During the Spanish Flu pandemic, colleges and universities did not have the medical or technological advances that higher education institutions are privy to today. Despite this difference, the historical narrative suggested many of the measures implemented by colleges and universities took during the Spanish Flu pandemic align with mitigation measures in place today. For example, Harvard University dealt with enrollment issues from the World War I draft and the Spanish Flu and decided to remain open despite the rising cases of the disease in Boston (Wong, 2020). Within a week of this decision, Harvard's Spanish Flu rates rose, and the university implemented temperature and health checks. In addition to flu tracing, Harvard required professors to report any student that had a cough or sneeze. These students were then

put into an infirmary to reduce the spread of the disease. Furthermore, Harvard canceled large lecture classes and separated those living together in residence halls. Thus, this example provided an initial blueprint for pandemic response for colleges and universities of the 21st century.

### **College and University COVID-19 Response: 2020**

The impact of COVID-19 required quick action by colleges and universities across the United States. The timing of the COVID-19 community spread in the United States coincided with spring break at many colleges and universities. On March 10, 2020, Harvard University was one of the first institutions of higher education to suspend in-person instruction, requesting that students not return from spring recess (Bacow, 2020). Soon after, “nearly every state ordered or recommended that schools remain closed through the end of the 2019-2020 school year” (Education Week, 2020, para. 3). As a result of the emerging COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, many colleges and universities opted to vacate their campuses and institutions of higher education across the country became ghost towns in a matter of weeks (Sinatra, 2022).

Although nearly all aspects of college life (in-person instruction, residence life, campus activities, etc.) temporarily stopped during the spring, the summer of 2020 provided colleges and universities the opportunity to assess national and state COVID-19 infection rates and prepare for multiple best and worst-case scenarios for the start of fall semester 2020. The planning that occurred during this time was situated on the continuation of facial mask coverings, social distancing, and hand washing. A new tool, however, had emerged for college and university leaders that was not in play at the start of the pandemic—COVID-19 testing measures that more accurately detected the virus.

The start of the fall 2020 semester was initially promising. Colleges and universities began to utilize COVID-19 testing, required facial mask usage, and limited the gathering of students to proactively reduce the spread of the disease. For students having a positive COVID-19 test, colleges and universities implemented isolation measures to ensure the well-being of ill students while protecting the health of community members (Freeman et al., 2021; Walke et al., 2020).

Despite the measures put into place by colleges and universities to control and stop the spread of COVID-19, setbacks in preventing the disease's spread occurred almost immediately. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2020) was the first university in the United States to switch entirely from in-person to online having "seen COVID-19 positivity rate rise from 2.8% to 13.6% at Campus Health" (para. 2). Soon after, the University of Notre Dame, after bringing students back to campus, suspended in-class instruction after a rise in confirmed COVID-19 cases (Seltzer, 2020). Conversely, Michigan State University delayed first-year students from coming to campus and then moved all courses entirely online as COVID-19 spread in Lansing, Michigan (Seltzer, 2020). Further regional examples of how colleges and universities responded to COVID-19 are explored more thoroughly in the literature review of Chapter 2.

### **Conceptual Considerations**

Despite the uncertain nature of COVID-19, what could be controlled by colleges and universities was the response to their constituents during the pandemic. Even though institutional size varies, the ability to communicate rapidly with community members was vital during the ensuing crisis caused by COVID-19 (Wu, 2022). Typically, venues of communication and information sharing for the colleges and universities in the United States range from text alerts to

YouTube videos. Nevertheless, one method of intentional communication has been consistent since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: email. Email provided college and university leaders the opportunity to thoughtfully craft their COVID-19 response in ways that texts and other forms of communication cannot. For example, text messages are often quick bites of information. Colleges and universities might text students and community members, reminding them to “socially distance,” but the message would not convey the “why” of the situation. Email allowed for a more thoughtful response and the ability to communicate a much more measured response. This form of communication was vital in a public health crisis in which critical information needed to be shared and conveyed to a larger audience (Dawkins, 2019). Furthermore, as more colleges and universities developed websites specifically for COVID-19 updates, emails served to remind community members there was a centralized location for COVID-19 information that continued to evolve throughout the pandemic.

The focus of this dissertation centered on information conveyed in those email messages sent to campus communities during the COVID-19 pandemic by various campus leaders at William & Mary and the University of Virginia during the time period of February 14, 2020, to March 1, 2021. The response to COVID-19 by leaders of institutions of higher education has shifted back and forth as colleges and universities gathered more information regarding the pandemic. This shift in response occurred because of better COVID-19 testing measures and better public health guidance from federal and state agencies. Using a theoretical framework based on discourse analysis helped better understand better the changes in rhetoric over time (Brinton, 2015).

## **Theoretical Approaches**

A theoretical approach used in the research of this dissertation was Gee's (2011) conceptualization of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis helped analyze COVID-19 email communication from campus leaders at William & Mary and the University of Virginia. Gee (2011) described discourse analysis "as the analysis of language-in-use whether spoken or written" (p. 205). This dissertation framed the discourse used during the COVID-19 pandemic by understanding the context in which these emails were written. Thus, social constructivism undergirded the discourse analysis. Creswell and Poth (2018) situated social constructivism as the ways in which "individuals seek understanding in the world in which they live and work" (p. 24). For this dissertation, social constructivism was the collective understanding of the shared discourse experience from email communication from the leaders of William & Mary and the University of Virginia to the students, faculty, and staff of both institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other theoretical approaches used in this dissertation included Habermas's (1984) scholarship pertaining to communicative action theory, in which reasoning informs regulative response by William & Mary and the University of Virginia. Next, Goffman's (1974) framing theory and how organizational leadership frame communication to members during COVID-19 helped understand the way the crisis was presented to campus stakeholders. Finally, Weick's (1995) research on sensemaking, or organizational understanding during times of uncertainty, will conclude the theoretical approaches included in this dissertation. A more thorough exploration of theoretical considerations occurs in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.



## **Problem Statement**

Throughout the course of history, institutions of higher education in the United States have encountered problematic situations that required immediate and exhaustive measures to mitigate the damage inflicted by these generational junctures. These moments have included the Civil War, World Wars I and II, and The Great Depression. Higher education found itself in 2020 during another historical marker that has affected colleges and universities in the United States: the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 was yet another generational marker in historical higher education events. Due to the uncertainty of the disease in early 2020, over 1,000 colleges and universities closed their campuses, with the exception of essential personnel, in an effort to keep community members safe (Hess, 2020). Not only did many colleges and universities become ghost towns, but faculty and students also had to shelve in-person instruction and conduct classroom activities remotely. The impact and significance COVID-19 had on higher education in day-to-day operations cannot be overstated. Perhaps at no other time in higher education has something been as disruptive as COVID-19 in upending operational functions of college and universities across the United States.

With so many moving pieces to the COVID-19 response by colleges and universities, communication became vital to articulate the problems COVID-19 presented to campus communities and how institutions plan to respond to problems presented by the pandemic. The nature of the public health crisis COVID-19 required college and university leaders to communicate quickly with all members of the university community. The fastest way to do this was with emails to their communities. With email, colleges and universities were given an opportunity to communicate in a more formal tone and reach community members

instantaneously (Dawkins, 2019). Emails can also be carefully constructed in terms of information given, as well as subsequent tone, to convey the seriousness of COVID-19 to a wide array of constituents such as faculty, students, or donors among other stakeholders. From faculty and staff to students and parents, email can reach a broad audience. Furthermore, it informs community members about the plans and steps their institutions are taking to maintain the safety and well-being of their community. This was especially important during a public health crisis such as COVID-19.

With the safety and the well-being of community members of colleges and universities at the core of college and university response to COVID-19, communication that provided guidance to the community was paramount. Email offered an efficient way to accomplish this task. The ability to hit “send” and reach all community members is the most impactful way to reach such a large audience (Dawkins, 2019).

While the ability to send an email is vital, the message conveyed in the body of that email was even more important. The constructed response might include an explanation of the rationale for a decision that is going to be implemented. Rhetoric contained in the email might consist of information about how policies will be enacted and how those policies impact the community both individually and operationally. Emails sent to the community by university officials might include links that provide guidance on how to properly maintain social distance or the proper way to use a face mask. The information contained in those emails are important to conveying information that is critical to maintaining the safety of college and university community members during a national public health crisis (Wu, 2022).

Understanding the importance of communication in crisis situations and how that communication allows those affected by crisis to begin to understand the totality of the situation

(and begin socially constructing the pandemic), we begin to see how community members look to leaders to address and inform them about the emerging public health situation of COVID-19. With a rapidly evolving public health situation like COVID-19, information was especially critical as communities began to gather information about the transmission of the virus, the disruption caused by COVID-19 pandemic, and the potentially fatal consequences of the disease.

While the scientific community has been prolific in research about transmission, mitigation, and the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Freeman et al., 2021; Hess, 2020; Paltiel & Schwartz, 2021), no such research existed prior to the start of the pandemic. Aligning this with higher education, a question emerges: “How did higher education leaders communicate with faculty, students, and staff at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and what was included in those communications to community members?”

As noted by Hess (2020), over 1,000 college campuses opted to temporarily close access to students, faculty, and staff at the beginning of the pandemic. Despite the effects COVID-19 had on higher education, a paucity of research existed on how colleges and universities responded to COVID-19. With that in mind, a closer examination of the impact of COVID-19 on higher education was needed to examine the public health response from college and university administrators. Furthermore, what actions did higher education leaders take to ensure the health and safety of community members during a global health crisis was a key problem this dissertation sought to explore. For the purpose of this dissertation, in face of the disruptive effects of COVID-19, I specifically examined how William & Mary and the University of Virginia responded to the COVID-19 pandemic from February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021, and what actions each institution communicated via email to ensure the health and safety of

community members (and indirectly the larger communities of Williamsburg, VA, and Charlottesville, VA) during this timeframe.

The research conducted in this dissertation showcased how William & Mary and the University of Virginia used email to communicate with faculty, students, and staff during a rapidly changing and disruptive COVID-19 pandemic and how the messaging evolved as the pandemic unfolded. Imagine, for a moment, if college and university administrators were derelict in responding to a COVID-19 public health crisis and how that might have had an even greater effects on an already chaotic pandemic. With institutions of higher education responsible to not only their campus communities but also their locality, the effects colleges and universities have on public health in the community were critical. This influence on the community was further compounded by the open nature of college campuses. With the mix of visitors to the respective campuses of William & Mary and the University of Virginia coupled with the students, faculty, and staff residing and working there, the possibility of COVID-19 transmission was increased. It therefore became paramount for both institutions to act quickly to mitigate the spread of the disease by communicating COVID-19-related information and policy to their constituents.

### **Research Questions**

Since the start of the pandemic, colleges and universities dealt with COVID-19 in real-time. The constantly evolving nature of a pandemic response was guided by what was known about the disease, and what remained unknown about the disease. With COVID-19 rapidly disrupting colleges and universities at the start of the pandemic, it became increasingly important for college and universities in the United States to communicate to faculty, staff, and students not only the awareness of COVID-19, but also about each campus responded in dealing with the potential impact of the virus. In this dissertation, I sought to understand the email rhetoric used

by William & Mary and the University of Virginia that addressed the problematic nature of COVID-19 and what specific health measures did they enact to protect community members early in the pandemic when much was uncertain about the epidemiology of the disease. The questions guiding this research included “How did two universities inform their communities during the pandemic?” A secondary question was “How did that response change from February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021?” Specifically, I explored:

1. How did the emails distributed by William & Mary and the University of Virginia from Winter 2020 until Winter 2021 frame the COVID-19 response to community members?
2. How did this rhetoric change and evolve from Winter 2020 until Winter 2021?

### **Significance of the Study**

Over 100 years have passed since the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918. Since that historical moment, the United States created the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 1946 (O'Brien, 2011) to provide states and citizens guidance and support in dealing with a major public health crisis. Despite the lessons learned from the Spanish Flu, colleges and universities in the United States have encountered several roadblocks in dealing with the health crisis that emerged from COVID-19 pandemic. Operational challenges emerged and were initially compounded by a lack of testing capabilities, shortages of medical supplies, and mixed messaging from the COVID-19 taskforce and the highest level of government in the United States (Unruh et al., 2021). While there appeared to be firmer footing tackling this health crisis later in the pandemic, COVID-19 was still a major public health issue in America with continued infection and death rates brought about by the disease.

On a collegiate level, student health centers, which typically functioned as the initial entry point for student illness, did not have the infirmary space nor the personnel to handle rapidly escalating COVID-19 cases. Furthermore, colleges and universities that had no local hospital to handle the influx of students needing medical assistance found themselves dealing reactively with multiple student cases of COVID-19 on their campuses. Makeshift infirmaries, or isolation measures for those testing positive for the disease, quickly became a part of mitigation efforts as students returned to campus in fall of 2020. Despite these measures, infection rates rose across college and universities throughout the pandemic.

As of 2021, more than 700,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on college campuses across the United States according to survey data gathered from 1,600 colleges and universities according to *The New York Times* (2021). While this data provided an initial snapshot of how COVID-19 was impacting the health and well-being of college students across the country, it should be noted that there are 1,955 public institutions and 4,547 private four-year institutions of higher education in the United States as of 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The actual number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 was unknown and assumed to be higher than the 700,000 cases reported by *The New York Times*. Without the ability to accurately track COVID-19 cases at all higher education, infection rates continued to rise during this time and thereafter. This affected not only colleges and universities, but also the communities where those institutions were located. These COVID-19 infection rates only affirmed student cases of the disease. A logical assumption would be that faculty and staff also tested positive during this time and infection rate numbers across colleges and universities across the United States added to student totals.

Not since the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 has higher education in the United States encountered something of the epidemiologically like of COVID-19. From operational disruptions to the physical severity of the disease, institutions of higher education were adversely affected during the pandemic. As a historically new event in higher education, the paucity of research was noticeable in September of 2020. An EBSCO search using the Boolean terms “COVID-19” and “university response” turned up one periodical article. Taking this EBSCO search further, using the terms “COVID-19,” “discourse analysis,” and “college” yielded seven results. Thus, the need for scholarship about the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect on institutions of higher education in the United States. With those considerations in mind, this dissertation study will add to a body of literature to complement the medical community contribution to understanding the science behind COVID-19 and established a social science perspective to the research. This dissertation was among the first in the United States to address COVID-19 communication response by colleges and universities and contributed a unique piece of scholarship to the academy.

While the research contained in this scholarship can be used across disciplines, such as business or communication studies, the target audience was intended for higher education professionals. However, any educational setting from K-12 through postsecondary institutions would benefit from understanding how email communication impacted the COVID-19 response. The importance of email language and the measured use of that language would be beneficial to not only education but to the private sector as organizational leaders seek ways to handle emerging crises.

Ultimately, however, higher education served as the organizational focus of discourse analysis during the pandemic and the use of email throughout the pandemic to communication

with their students, faculty, and staff. During COVID-19, email provided a reliable and consistent communication mechanism for colleges and universities. The use of email was twofold. Not only did email serve to convey information during the pandemic, emails sent to students, faculty, and staff also provided a study in crisis communication due to the severity of COVID-19. With COVID-19 and the use of email to inform and maintain safety, we can begin to draw parallels to other historical crisis situations in higher education and how institutions of higher education responded during those times.

### **Definition of Terms**

- **Communication:** verbal or written language used to convey information.
- **Crisis:** A significant and unplanned event that can cause significant negative damage (Zaremba, 2014).
- **Crisis communication:** methods used by organizations to address crisis situations (Jablin & Putnam, 2001)
- **Context:** the space in which communication is delivered (Gee, 2011)
- **Discourse:** any language which is written or spoken (Gee, 2011)
- **Discourse analysis:** the attention to themes and messages in written language (Gee, 2011)
- **Frame problem:** the context in which discourse occurs (Gee, 2011)
- **Rhetoric:** the definition of rhetoric is adopted from Knoblauch (1985) who asserted rhetoric “is the process of using language to organize experience and communicate it to others” (p. 29)



## **Chapter Summary**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a tremendous impact on higher education in terms of public health safety and day-to-day operations. Compounding the COVID-19 response from higher education leaders were the epidemiological unknowns of the disease early in the pandemic. The pandemic challenged higher education to a historical level of operational adaptation. These adaptations included, but were not limited to, instructional delivery, student life and engagement, and public health considerations.

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, historically institutions of higher education have risen to crisis situations. With that in mind, the literature review contained in Chapter 2 addresses the historical context of crisis situations encountered by institutions of higher education and their response to those situations. From that historical perspective, the focus shifts to COVID-19 response from colleges and universities.

From COVID-19 response, the literature moves to research considerations. These considerations focus on key elements of qualitative research, theoretical considerations, and discourse analysis as the focus of qualitative inquiry.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

COVID-19 was the first major historical crisis to affect higher education broadly in the 21st century. What emerged for institutions of higher education in the United States, and for that matter globally, was a case study in not only crisis response but crisis communication as well. As a better understanding of the COVID-19 disease emerged in the scientific community, so too did colleges and universities' responses to operational issues such as bringing community members back to campus safely. While the development and availability of multiple COVID-19 vaccines allowed institutions of higher education to return to a more normalized pre-COVID-19 experience starting in 2021, the collective trauma and continued presence of COVID-19 remains in the psyche of American higher education.

Just as COVID-19 was a complex public health crisis phenomenon, the literature review contained in Chapter 2 sought to understand many facets of not only public health and how colleges and universities responded to the pandemic, but also how institutions of higher education communicated their response to community members. This broad approach required a cross-disciplinary literature review that covered historical crisis events in higher education, COVID-19 public health response from higher education, discourse analysis, communication theory, and constructivist understanding of the pandemic.

### **Crisis Leadership**

Taleb (2007), in discussing events that are catastrophic yet difficult to predict, coined the phrase “black swan” to describe historically significant moments that fundamentally change

society. In ascribing these black swan events, Taleb (2007) pointed to historical events such as 9/11 and World War I. Although Taleb disputed the term black swan applied to the COVID-19 pandemic (Avishai, 2020), the inability of world leaders to mitigate the spread of the virus led to COVID-19 becoming a black swan event (Glenn et al., 2021).

The inability of the global community to stop the spread of COVID-19 as it became a generational pandemic highlighted the need for COVID-19 strategic planning and response. Bryson (2011), in addressing Taleb's (2007) conceptualization of black swan events, stated that while "some might dispute the unpredictability of these occurrences...the fact is that most people were taken by surprise as much of their world changed dramatically around them, temporarily in some cases and profoundly in others" (Bryson, 2011, p. 152). Even though Bryson situated the difficulty of crafting a comprehensive strategic plan to address black swan events, he posited "strategic planning is *not* a substitute for effective leadership. There is no substitute for effective leadership (and committed followership) when it comes to planning and implementation" (Bryson, 2011, p. 355). With Bryson's statement, a larger question arises: "What makes a leader effective during a crisis and catastrophic event?"

The ways in which leaders respond during crisis situations require a nuanced understanding of not only the problem, but how they communicate their understanding and response to a crisis. Bryson (2011), in addressing how visionary leaders communicate meaning (and subsequently respond) during times of uncertainty, suggested that visionary leaders

help people make sense of the experience, and...offer guidance for coping with the present and future by helping answer the questions: What is going on here? Where are we heading? What traditions should we preserve? And how will things look when they get there? (p. 373)

Rather than react to the puck, leaders, in times of uncertainty, anticipate the puck. The proactive response from those in leadership positions is crucial in times of crisis.

In establishing the use of dialogue to create meaning, Bryson (2011) stressed that leaders “seize opportunities to be interpreters and direction givers in areas of uncertainty and difficulty (p. 374). Thus, black swan events, despite their unpredictability (Taleb, 2007), create opportunities for leaders to address crises by thinking both in and outside the box to craft a narrative that is both pragmatic and visionary.

In articulating meaning during crisis situations such as COVID-19, where life and death are a reality, leaders must “articulate desired actions and expected consequences” (Bryson, 2011, p. 376) and communicate them to stakeholders. COVID-19, as a rapidly changing public health crisis, required an immediate response from college leaders (Wu, 2022). This response initially involved first communicating to community members that the virus was one that had never been seen before and required constant diligence and due diligence in university response. Failure to act during this time by college and university leaders could be potentially viewed as an act of administrative malpractice by faculty, staff, and students. Thus, the ability to articulate a cogent understanding of the uncertainty of COVID-19, and the consequences of not treating the disease as a public health crisis while maintaining a sense of control and optimism was crucial for college and university leaders to create dialogue and meaning during times of uncertainty.

### **Crisis Management**

Higher education is no stranger to crisis situations. Historically, crises faced by colleges and universities in the United States have included: The Civil War, World War I and II, The Spanish Flu, shootings at the University of Texas, Kent State University, and Virginia Tech, and now COVID-19. Within each crisis, narratives begin to form. These narratives often center on

“whether colleges and universities can timely prepare and respond to crisis events while still maintaining a culture of inclusivity and open access” (J. Wang & Hutchins, 2010, p. 553). What might ease college and university community members and stakeholders’ anxiety about crisis response and the unknowns about those situations is an informed plan built to address such unknowns. This forms the essence of crisis management.

Even though colleges and universities can run simulations to prepare for a potential crisis, J. Wang and Hutchins (2010) suggested that survey research from college consulting firm Simpson Scarborough found that;

almost 100% of the respondents (mostly presidential assistants and chiefs of staff) reported that although their institutions had written crisis plans, these rarely addressed situations falling outside traditional parameters—suicides, strikes, terrorist attacks, mass shootings, administrative scandals, hazing, or incidents of racial discrimination that have occurred with increasing frequency in recent years (p. 553).

While crisis plans are now the norm in higher education, that was not the case historically. An in-depth look at the University of Texas shooting of 1966 served as a case study for the need for crisis response plans.

### ***University of Texas Shooting 1966***

When drawing a historical picture of crisis situations in higher education, the mass shootings at the University of Texas in Austin (UT-Austin) in 1966 marked a dark beginning of campus violence in the United States. Stearns (2008) addressed the tragedy of the mass shootings on August 1, 1966, by the stating the UT-Austin was the largest mass shooting in American higher education, which was accurate until the shootings at Virginia Tech in 2008. Charles Whitman, a former Marine Corp service member enrolled as an engineering student at UT-

Austin, opened fire from a tower on campus. The violent aftermath of the shootings from the tower alone left 10 people dead, with 31 wounded (with one victim dying later) from the gunfire (Stearns, 2008).

The technological advances of cell phones and social media that are present today were not yet developed at the time of the UT-Austin shootings of 1966. At that time, once the realization occurred that there was an active shooter on campus, phone calls were placed to the police department from faculty and staff across campus (Rosenwald, 2016). Individuals with police scanners listened in real time as information was shared between law enforcement. As local media learned of the shootings, local television stations began to report on the situation unfolding at UT-Austin campus.

Sadly, what made the initial response difficult in the UT-Austin shooting was the location of Whitman on the tower observation deck. His ability to shoot randomly from a high vantage point was something the police force of Austin had never seen before (McGlinchy, 2016). In fact, Milton Shoquist, a recent police academy graduate, stated “there was no plan, no training, when you encounter something like that” (McGlinchy, 2016, para.10). Furthermore, Ponder (2018) in describing the scenes of that day, stated that those in the area around the tower at UT-Austin during the sniper fire “initially assumed that those lying on the ground were not really injured, but instead were part of a psychology experiment or Vietnam war protest” (p. 240). When coupled with the ongoing war in Vietnam and the inconceivableness of sniper mass shooting on campus, the situation on campus that day quickly turned chaotic.

What exacerbated the 1966 mass shooting at UT-Austin was the lack of traumatic empathy by the university. As Ponder (2018) stated

A UT Regent reportedly demanded that the mess be cleaned up, as if erasing the blood and glass would erase the memories. Within a day, sand was spread on the concrete to soak up the blood, and broken windows soon replaced. The university was closed for one day after the shootings, then reopened for business as usual. (p. 244)

As quickly as the shootings occurred, any evidence of the shootings evaporated just as quickly. While the administrators at UT-Austin sought to erase the memory of that day and move forward, the Governor of Texas wanted to make sure a mass shooting like this would not occur again. Thus, hereinafter the coordination efforts to deal with such a crisis became more streamlined in Texas (Krueger, 2016).

Lavergne (2017), in addressing the aftermath of the UT-Austin shootings, posited the shootings as a “seminal event in law enforcement history because of how it influenced changes in police departments throughout the United States” (para. 7). In response to the mass shootings at UT-Austin, Governor John Connally signed into law “the creation of police forces for institutions of higher education” (para. 7). By signing the bill, Governor Connally created the UT-Austin Police Department. With the establishment of the department, no longer would the university be patrolled by UT-Austin “traffic and Security Services, which had consisted of unarmed watchmen who supervised traffic and parking and never investigated felonies” (para. 7). The move to a more formalized police presence on campus signaled a change on college campuses beyond Texas (Krueger, 2016).

### ***Hurricane Katrina***

In terms of physical destruction, casualties, and socioeconomic impact, Hurricane Katrina remains one the worst natural disaster events to affect the United States (Elliott & Pais, 2006; Johnson & Rainey, 2007; Olshansky, 2008). Hurricane Katrina “damaged an estimated 90,000

square miles of housing throughout southern Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama” (Elliott & Pais, 2006, p. 302). Katrina made landfall on the Louisiana-Mississippi border as a Category 4 hurricane on August 29, 2005 (Ewing et al., 2007). The death toll from Hurricane Katrina tallied approximately 1,836 individuals, “although it is not known how many people subsequently died or suffered because of a lack of health care, stress, or hurricane-related injuries” (Kahn & Sachs, 2018, p. 2). While the physical devastation of Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, the emotional trauma the hurricane caused was incalculable, especially those from Black communities. Elliott and Pais (2006) indicated that “Blacks across the region were less inclined than whites to evacuate before the storm” (p. 317) and found that “Black workers from New Orleans were four times more likely than [White] counterparts to lose their jobs after the storm” (p. 317). The experiences along racial lines were unequal.

Hurricane Katrina also affected colleges and universities (Davis et al., 2010), especially those of historically Black colleges and universities (Johnson & Rainey, 2007). In summarizing the communication process during Hurricane Katrina, Comfort and Haase (2006) stated that:

In the absence of timely, valid communications, organizations cannot function effectively under the urgent stress of disaster. Individuals are left to make their best guesses about risk and safety, rumors spread wildly, and available skills and resources are overlooked as personnel search hurriedly for workable strategies of action. The collapse of interorganizational response to Hurricane Katrina was regrettably apparent when the existing communications infrastructure failed (p. 329).

Hurricane Katrina, with the storm damaging electrical grids and cell towers, created vast communication challenges for local and state governments affected by the storm. With no way of effectively communicating with residents of the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina, residents



were literally and figuratively left in the dark about the duration of the storm and subsequent rescue and recovery operations provided by state and national governments.

Colleges and universities from the Gulf Coast region also felt the brunt of Hurricane Katrina. What separated Hurricane Katrina from other crisis situations in higher education was the ability of meteorologists to forecast when Hurricane Katrina would make landfall in the United States. Given the advanced hurricane warning, colleges and universities had begun evacuation efforts and began to strategically communicate how they would deal with the impact of Hurricane Katrina prior to the hurricane hitting shore.

Despite the plans colleges and universities communicated to faculty, staff, and students of their institutions to vacate their respective campuses, a more significant issue, as devastating as the physical impact of Hurricane Katrina, was looming –how and when to bring community members back to campus safely with physical and technological infrastructures in place relative to pre-Katrina. Following are some examples of how different universities in New Orleans dealt with the crisis.

**Tulane University Response.** Hahn (2018) researched Tulane University’s response to Hurricane Katrina and noted that the first official response from university President Scott Cowen came on August 26, 2005. In his email to the Tulane University community, Cowen assured faculty, staff, and students that the university was aware of the impending hurricane and, until further notice, would continue be fully operational (Hahn, 2018). When it became apparent that Hurricane Katrina was going to materialize as a hurricane of considerable force, President Cowen enacted Tulane University’s hurricane response to Katrina on August 27, 2005, with the immediate evacuation of faculty, students, and staff (Hahn, 2018).

First-year students had moved into the residence halls and participated in an abbreviated convocation ceremony and then President Cowan sent an email to the university community directing all Tulane University students to leave New Orleans immediately (Hahn, 2018). The timing of President Cohen's university email left the division of student affairs scrambling to gather students' evacuation plans from Tulane as these administrators had no advanced warning.

In his reflections post-crisis, Tulane University President Scott Cowen (2007) stated that in the event a level four or five hurricane touched down on the Tulane University campus, the university's emergency preparedness plan stipulated the president of Tulane, along with four or five senior university leaders, stay on campus. University leaders who initially stayed on campus during Hurricane Katrina included the "Chief Financial Officer, Vice President of Communications, Director of Emergency Management, and the Chief of Police for the Uptown Campus" (Hahn, 2018, p. 72). However, within 48 hours after Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005, Cowen stated that approximately two-thirds of the campus was underwater. At that point, Tulane "lost all communications—telephones, satellite phones, cell phones, computers—and there was no sewage system, no water, and no power" (Cowen, 2007, para. 2). On September 2, 2005, President Cowen announced that Tulane University would be closed for the remainder of the semester with only "the President, Chief Financial Officer, Vice President for Communications, Director of Emergency Management, and the Chief of Police" (Hahn, 2018, p. 72) remaining on campus in Tulane's recreation center supported by a back-up generator and emergency supplies.

**Dillard University.** Dillard University is a private, faith-based university in New Orleans. President Marvalene Hughes had been the president of Dillard University for 2 months when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans (United Negro College Fund Institute for Capacity

Building, n.d.). The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina on Dillard's campus was catastrophic. Skinner (2006) stated "perhaps the hardest-hit campus in the city, Dillard experienced wind, flood, and fire damage. Every building was affected, and damage was estimated at several hundred million dollars" (p. 180). Like Tulane, damage to campus was extensive due to the hurricane.

A report sponsored by the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS, 2006) stated that Dillard University "did have a predetermined chain-of-command for the management of the crisis" (p. 4-4). What hampered Dillard University's response to Hurricane Katrina was the city officials of New Orleans. Confusion arose from a lack of clear understanding as to whether there would be a mandatory evacuation from the city of New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina.

Rather than wait for official word from the city of New Orleans about evacuation plans, President Hughes coordinated the evacuation efforts of Dillard University. Communicating the evacuation response was designated to Dillard's Communications Department (DHS, 2006). While the Communications Department of Dillard University centralized the flow of information about Hurricane Katrina, the dissemination of that information varied. Dillard University "informed local media of the closure 48 hours before evacuating campus" (DHS, 2006, p. 4-5). The Planning Office of New Orleans distributed "maps and essential information" (DHS, 2006, p. 4-5) to faculty, staff, and students of Dillard University pertaining to Hurricane Katrina. The Dillard University public safety also assisted with the evacuation efforts of residential students and ensured the campus was secure two days prior to the landfall of Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005 (DHS, 2006).

As a result of Hurricane Katrina, Dillard University suffered extensive flooding and fire damage that was estimated at \$400,000,000 (Associated Press, 2006). As a testament to the

resilience of Dillard, the university raised \$280,000,000 in the 3 years after Hurricane Katrina, made extensive renovations to campus buildings damaged by the hurricane, and completed the construction of two buildings to replace those destroyed by Hurricane Katrina (University of Colorado Boulder, 2008).

**Xavier University of Louisiana.** Xavier University of Louisiana is a private 4-year institution founded in 1925. The institution is affiliated with the Catholic church (DiMaggio, 2017). Nearly 80% of undergraduate students in the college of arts and sciences are STEM majors (DiMaggio, 2017). Furthermore, the university is noted for the number of graduates obtaining graduate degrees in scientific fields (Foroozesh et al., 2019).

In describing the destruction due to Hurricane Katrina, Skinner (2006) noted that all the buildings at Xavier University of Louisiana were flooded as a result of Katerina. The library, in particular, suffered extensive damage that left the ground floor in two feet of water. Skinner estimated the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina to Xavier University of Louisiana's campus to be \$50,000,000.

While the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina affected Xavier University of Louisiana's physical campus, the months after the storm were brutal. Skinner (2006) noted that the floods water, brought about due to the damaged levees, left Xavier University of Louisiana without "instant communication by land-line, phone mail, and campus e-mail accounts" (p. 182). Additionally, nearly all of the cell phone towers in the Southern part of Louisiana were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

Historians will long note the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina on the campus of Xavier University of Louisiana. However, what is noteworthy were the actions of campus administrators prior to Hurricane Katrina's landfall in New Orleans. Despite uncertainty from

city officials of New Orleans, Xavier University of Louisiana crafted real-time protocols to evacuate the campus community two days prior to the arrival of Hurricane Katrina.

A report sponsored by DHS (2006) pertaining to Hurricane Katrina response by colleges and universities of the gulf coast noted that Xavier University of Louisiana “did have a predetermined chain-of-command for management of the crisis and the Senior Vice President was responsible for coordination with the outside Emergency Management Office and other public safety agencies” (p. 14-4). The crisis management plan of Xavier University of Louisiana even went as far as securing boats for college administrators to travel around the flood-damaged campus.

From a communication aspect, Xavier University of Louisiana did maintain contact with students, faculty, and staff prior to Hurricane Katrina making landfall. In analysis after the hurricane, university officials did note that communication with parents needed to be improved pre-Katrina. Understanding that perhaps communication might be cut off at some point, the public information office of the institution maintained contact with local media outlets for updates pre- and post-Katrina. Staff were called back to campus by phone and email post-Katrina.

In summarizing the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the campuses of Tulane, Xavier, and Dillard suffered extensive damage. The cost of the estimated damage from Hurricane Katrina was significant for each institution with Dillard at \$400,000,000, Xavier at \$50,000,000, and Tulane at \$650,000,000 (Thomas, 2008).

### ***Virginia Tech Mass Shooting of 2007***

When thinking about crisis situations in higher education, the mass shooting at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007, is historically etched in memory in terms of the physical and emotional

trauma incurred by the community of Virginia Tech and the tragic aftermath that still lingers in our country today (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008; J. Wang & Hutchins, 2010). Forty-nine community members were shot that day, resulting in 32 deaths (Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008). The mass shooting at Virginia Tech remains “the largest single act of violence at an American university” (Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008, p. 479).

Although the Virginia Tech administration was caught off guard by the rapidly changing and evolving crisis, students amid the lockdown began using social media to document the situation (Wigley & Fontenot, 2010). Graduate student Jamal Albarghouti sent a cell phone video to CNN “of armed police surrounding a campus building as gunfire rang in the background” (Wigley & Fontenot, 2010, p. 188). The availability of mobile devices allowed for immediate reporting of the unfolding crisis.

With Albarghouti’s video account of the Virginia Tech shooting in real-time, a fundamental shift occurred in the presentation of crisis situations. Faculty, staff, and students could now “report” from the ground. Technology, in the form of social media and cell phones, changed how information was shared about rapidly the unfolding crisis such as Virginia Tech. No longer was the narrative presented on the terms of university administration. Instead, the narrative was now shaped by cell phone videos, text messages, and social media accounts of those amid crisis situations. We see the evolution of social media, specifically Facebook, capturing historical events such as the Arab Spring in the early 2010s (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) as a permanent precursor to the use of social media as a perspicuous threshold that was crossed in social media functionality.

**Virginia Tech Response.** The enormity and totality of the mass shootings at Virginia Tech affected not only Virginia Tech, but colleges and universities across the United States and

the world. Thus, a historical overview of the actions taken by Virginia Tech after the shootings began provides a valuable case study for crisis management response.

Davies (2008) provided a historical overview of the events that unfolded immediately after the shootings began on April 16, 2007, and Virginia Tech's immediate response to the active shooter on their campus in Blacksburg, VA. Davies, using information gathered by a panel convened by former governor Tim Kaine, provided a clear picture of the events that unfolded on that day. Davies (2008) pieced together the traumatic events of that spring day, but also the systems in place that allowed, but may have prevented, the tragedy that unfolded that day at Virginia Tech. In his discussion of the panel's findings, he stated:

One of the metaphors that recurred during the panel's discussions and in public testimony was that "no one connected all the dots." It is true that there were dots all over the map, but the way Virginia Tech is organized virtually ensured that no one ever was in a position to see them all and intervene in a potentially dangerous situation that eventually spiraled into disaster. (p. 12)

While the connection of the dots prior to the shooting might have prevented the events of April 16, 2007, at Virginia Tech, the reality was that a deadly mass shooting did take place. Davies (2008) was astute in stating "there may not be a way to ensure that a mass killing like the one at Tech never happens again, but we can lessen the chance that one will" (p. 8). Perhaps what was controllable on the most chaotic of days at Virginia Tech was the emergency response of the administration of the university.

Virginia Tech was not without an emergency response team on April 7, although the campus did not use the moniker of "emergency response team." Instead, the university had what it called the Policy Group (Davies, 2008). The Policy Group at Virginia Tech consisted of

senior-level administrators across campus. Thus, when a crisis emerged at Virginia Tech, the Policy Group was charged with the university's subsequent response. Critically, however, the Policy Group did not include Virginia Tech's chief of police.

Davies (2008) stated that the Policy Group of Virginia Tech, on the morning of April 16, 2007, in the effort to suppress campus-wide panic, was sluggish in alerting the campus community. In fact,:

The emergency message it sent out almost two hours after the first shootings at West Ambler Johnston Hall, the group said there had been a shooting but did not state explicitly that two people had been killed and that the killer had not been apprehended. (p. 12)

What further compounded the situation at Virginia Tech was the chief of police's agency to act independently to activate the university's notification system of emergency situations.

Even though the Policy Groups' work at Virginia Tech sought to protect the faculty, staff, and students on April 16, 2007, the implementation of the emergency response was lacking.

Davies (2008) found that:

the university did not establish an emergency-operations center, which would have been a central locus for all communications. The university did establish a family-assistance center, but it was plagued by difficulties for at least three reasons: lack of leadership, lack of coordination among service providers, and lack of training. Volunteers tried to step in but were not able to answer many questions or guide families to the resources they needed. (p. 13)

The evaluation of the aftermath of Virginia Tech signaled a new approach to how colleges and universities responded to crisis situations. No longer were decisions made from the top down.



Instead, crisis management was now about having more expertise and professionals at the table to not only respond to a threat but to anticipate the crisis scenario. As Flynn and Hietzmann (2008) stated:

The aftermath of the Virginia Tech tragedy has witnessed the emergence of threat assessment teams, student concern teams, and other groups designed to manage and assess risk as it pertains to high-profile or acting-out students on campus. This is a way of reassuring the campus that select stakeholders are in the same room, communicating across individual information silos. (p. 486)

If there were a silver lining of sorts from Virginia Tech, it was the realization from college administrators that crisis response does not occur in a vacuum. The goal of crisis management is to mitigate collateral damage from an event and protect community members, and perhaps a more critical consideration of crisis management are the individuals responding to the crisis. With Virginia Tech, we see the totality of crisis management, from law enforcement to first responders, to upper-level university management and counseling and psychological personnel to deal with the long-term effects of the crisis.

### ***UT-Austin Shooting in 2010***

On September 28, 2010, a male shooter opened fire at the UT-Austin (J. Wang & Hutchins, 2010). While shots were fired, there were no reported physical injuries from the event. What does emerge from this situation is the surfacing of synchronous mechanisms of communication via social media from colleges and universities during crisis situations.

The response from the UT-Austin administration to the active shooting of 2010 was swift. Within minutes of the start of the shooting, an emergency text message was sent to the entire university alerting them to the shooting and initiate lockdown procedures. In addition to

text messages, the university also sent out alerts via Facebook. By using Facebook, the university not only sent out more information via social media, but also gave students the opportunity to share their accounts of sightings of the shooter and the shootings (J. Wang & Hutchins, 2010).

What also begins to emerge from the UT-Austin mass shooting of 2010 is the use of Twitter to as a communication tool in crisis. Li et al. (2011) conducted research focused on how UT-Austin Twitter followers reacted on the Twitter platform to the 2010 shooting on campus. Of a sample of 2,857 Twitter followers, the researchers “noted that for the day of the event (Sept. 28), there was a peak of over 15,000 posts, while for the other days the maximum number of posts was around 6,000 to 10,000” (Li et al., 2011, p. 335). The peak time period for Twitter posts from UT-Austin followers occurred at 9 a.m., with 2,635 Twitter posts about the mass shooting (Li et al., 2011).

What was beneficial about the use of Twitter during the active shooter situation in 2010 at the UT-Austin was the ability of followers to give synchronous updates in real-time. Li et al. (2011) in summarizing followers’ tweets using only one word during the active shooter situation using a word cloud, found the words “UT,” “shooter,” and “gunman” were most used in tweets. Pair words (the combination of two separate words) used during this time included “active shooter,” “armed suspect,” and “Castaneda Library” which gave greater clarity about the crisis situation that was unfolding. This response at UT-Austin stands in marked contrast to the active shooter on campus in 1968.

### **Organizational Communication During a Crisis**

While not exhaustive, colleges and universities facing crisis situations have used a variety of communication platforms to inform community members not only of emergency situations, but crisis responses as well. From campus-wide emails to Twitter posts, institutions of higher

education have more communication tools, and subsequent outreach, to alert and notify their respective campuses today compared to in the past. With outreach critical during a crisis, a larger question looms as to what communication mechanism makes the most sense to use during a crisis.

In researching the UT-Austin 2010 active shooter situation, Egnoto et al. (2016) noted that:

unlike some disasters, active shooters events are often unclear as to whether there is an actual danger (rather than a false alarm), what the location of the danger is, the [number] of perpetrators involved, and the best course of action. (p. 49)

Nevertheless, while ambiguity exists during real-time crises, colleges and universities “must balance the requirements of operating an effective educational environment while preparing their police, faculty and students for potential crisis situations” (Egnoto et al., 2016, p. 49). This balancing act not only requires acknowledgement of potential or impending emergency situations, but a modus operandi of communicating during such circumstances.

Traditionally, colleges and universities have used text messaging and email to inform community members of immediate and potential threats to their campus environs (Egnoto et al., 2016; Gow et al., 2008). In noting immediate campus threats, such as an active shooter or an environmental issue, Gow et al. (2008) suggested that mass notification systems such as text messaging “be reserved for exclusively for critical, or so-called ‘short-fuse’ emergency incidents that require the campus community to be alerted widely and quickly” (para. 6). Relying on text messaging during immediate crisis scenarios prepares campus members better such that they pay attention differently relative to email alerts.

While short-fuse crisis situations require an immediate emergency notification communication, such as text messaging, what occurs when a long-fuse situation such as COVID-19 occurs at colleges and universities? Text messaging, with a touch of a button, allows for quick, short bursts of information to reach the campus community in an immediate crisis, but only so much can be conveyed to the campus audience in this manner. However, when information is denser, and the crisis situation's fuse is longer, email becomes a viable communication tool in a long-term crisis.

Colleges and universities have long used email as a primary source of communication between community members (Hassini, 2006; Pignata et al., 2015; Sheer & Fung, 2007; Uddin et al., 2014). From colleges presidents emailing community members about the start of the academic year to students sending an email to faculty about a course assignment, email not only gives faculty, staff, and students an opportunity to communicate with one another, both formally and informally, but also gives institutions of higher education the platform to communicate with their respective communities during times of crisis.

In addressing communication during crisis situations, in particular COVID-19, Eldridge et al. (2020) noted that the CDC, in describing potential pitfalls leaders may encounter in relaying information about crisis situations, "leaders must obtain information from credible sources, understand the information, and carefully disseminate the information in a manner congruent with the original expert's message" (p. 51). In noting the delivery of information during crisis situations, such as pandemics, leaders must also be cognizant of the vulnerability of organizational members to address and minimize the anxiety they may experience during a crisis. Leaders, "whether communicating verbally or in writing, need to state the facts as known, provide answers if known (openness), and state what he or she doesn't know (honesty)"

(Eldridge, 2020, p. 51). Furthermore, using the expertise of medical and public health experts also helps alleviate helplessness and uncertainty during public health emergencies.

### **University Response to COVID-19**

The start of Fall 2020 across many colleges and universities started with many unknowns regarding the feasibility of an in-person semester for students. Walke et al. (2020) found that with colleges and universities operating remotely during the summer of 2020, administrative leaders were left to prepare for the Fall 2020 with the hope that a more robust in-person campus experience could replace the virtual reality of Spring 2020. With a move towards testing the feasibility of a more traditional Fall 2020 opening, colleges and universities were faced with providing that experience coupled with testing and isolation protocols in the absence of a COVID-19 vaccination. With families leery of sending their students to campus in the fall, colleges and universities faced declining enrollment numbers that affected not only room and board costs, but tuition as well. Furthermore, how would colleges and universities absorb the costs of newly implemented COVID-19 protocols for faculty, staff, and students?

Paltiel et al. (2020) found that college and universities had many unknowns regarding COVID-19 testing. These unknowns included “logistics of deployment, the ease and comfort of sample collection; and the accuracy, scalability, turnaround time, and cost of kits” (p. 2). However, despite the COVID-19 testing uncertainties, colleges and universities implemented testing policies and “symptom-based testing” (Walke et al., 2020, p. 1727). The process of communicating these requirements occurred by email (Wu, 2022) due to the rapidly changing epidemiological landscape of the pandemic.

Measures taken by many colleges and universities included:

(1) universal entry screening: testing all students before arrival on campus; (2) 2-phased universal screening: prearrival testing paired with a follow-up test, typically about 1 week after arrival; (3) scheduled screening, with repeated testing of the entire campus population (e.g., weekly); (4) random screening, with testing a random sample of the campus population; (5) testing on-demand, by making tests available to students on campus on demand but not requiring testing; and (6) wastewater testing to detect virus in the sewage overall or for specific facilities (e.g., residence halls). (Walke et al., 2020, p. 1727)

Furthermore, colleges and universities in the United States implemented COVID-19 mitigation policies that included “spacing and scheduling move-in times, increasing physical spacing in classrooms, a face mask requirement for classroom settings and other indoor common spaces, and adjusting dining options to reduce crowding” (Walke, 2020, p. 1727).

**Spring 2021.** In Spring 2021, with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) granting emergency approval to Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson vaccines and assurances that the vaccines would be readily available to the public, Rutgers University became the first university in the United States that required students to be fully vaccinated for the Fall 2021 semester (Associated Press, 2021a). They notified students and families of this requirement via email. Students who were granted medical exemptions or unable to get the vaccine were exempt from receiving the vaccine. Rutgers also advised students under the age of 18 to opt for the Pfizer vaccine when it was granted FDA approval for individuals under the age of 16.

Furthermore, Rutgers required all faculty and staff to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

Following Rutgers’s COVID-19 vaccine mandate, Cornell University, Northeastern, Brown, Fort Lewis College, Roger Williams, St. Edwards University, and Nova Southeastern

University also announced mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations for all students for Fall 2021 (Glatter, 2021). However, despite data showing the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines, political divides began to schism vaccination efforts of colleges and universities across the United States.

As of April 2021, “just 15 of the 181 colleges with COVID-19 vaccine requirement included in a list maintained by the Chronicle of Higher Education” (Redden, 2021, p. 2). Many of the colleges and universities without vaccine mandates were states that were or leaned politically conservative. Within those conservative or trending conservative states, private institutions implemented COVID-19 often differed from their public counterparts regarding vaccine directives. For example, in North Carolina, Duke, and Wake Forest required all students to be vaccinated by the start of Fall 2021 (Redden, 2021). In contrast, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a public institution, refrained from issuing a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for students. Similarly, Vanderbilt University, located in Nashville, Tennessee, announced on May 17, 2021, that students attending Fall 2021 would be required to be vaccinated against COVID-19 (Thomason & O’Leary, 2021). The University of Tennessee, a public counterpart to Vanderbilt, at the directive of the University Board of Trustees, opted not to include COVID-19 to a list of required vaccines (Redden, 2021).

**Fall 2021.** The 2021-2022 academic year began with an increase in higher education institutions requiring student and or staff COVID-19 vaccinations. Data collected from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* identified 838 campuses that had a vaccination requirement for students and/or staff as of September 1, 2021 (Thomason & Leary, 2021).

While the increase of mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations across institutions of higher education grew during fall 2021, institutions such as The University of Virginia, Duke University, and West Virginia Wesleyan flexed administrative muscle and penalized students

and staff who were unvaccinated. The University of Virginia unenrolled 49 registered students who still needed to meet the vaccination requirement of the university (Lumpkin, 2021). Duke University, in a similar zero-tolerance policy, stated that any faculty and staff not fully vaccinated by October 1, 2021, would be fired from the institution (Murphy, 2021). West Virginia Wesleyan, while not requiring students to be vaccinated, charged unvaccinated students an administrative fee of \$750 if they had not received their first shot by September 7, 2021 (Neuman, 2021).

While university administration has dictated COVID-19 policy and procedure, faculty members at colleges and universities also asserted their power to mitigating the spread of COVID-19. Clemson University avoided a faculty walk-out by implementing a three-week indoor mask wearing policy (Flaherty, 2021). Despite this measure, “some Clemson professors still used the planned protest space on campus Wednesday to pass out hundreds of masks to students who either forgot them or were surprised by the mandate, and to promote masking and vaccination” (Flaherty, 2021, para. 1).

Despite the increase in vaccination requirements across colleges and universities, some notable institutions of higher education had not yet mandated vaccine requirements for faculty, staff, and students. For example, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, while urging community members to receive the COVID-19 vaccination, did not make it a requirement at the start of the Fall 2021 semester (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2021). Instead, the university, to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, required unvaccinated student to test twice weekly as of August 23, 2021, with unvaccinated faculty and staff to be tested once a week as of September 15, 2021 (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2021).



The UT-Austin, like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, did issue a university-wide mandate for immunization from COVID-19. In not issuing a directive for a vaccine requirement, UT-Austin found that only 57% of students were fully vaccinated by the start of the Fall 2021 semester (Menchaca, 2021). To boost vaccination rates, UT-Austin began offering an incentive program in which vaccinated students would be entered in weekly drawings with an opportunity to win \$10,000 in cash among other gift perks (Menchaca, 2021).

As the Fall 2021 semester continued to unfold, a growing number of colleges and universities opted to require all campus community members to be vaccinated. Ohio University announced on August 31, 2021, that faculty, staff, and students produce documentation that they have been fully immunized against COVID-19 by a November 15, 2021, deadline (Behrens, 2021). The vaccination mandate included employees working from remote locations. Students who were enrolled in online programs were exempt from the vaccination requirement. President Hugh Sherman, in addressing the Ohio University community about the vaccination mandate said, “therefore after thoughtful consideration, in consultation with public health experts and in agreement with many of our peer institutions across the state, all OHIO students, faculty, and staff at all locations are required to be vaccinated against COVID-19” (Behrens, 2021, para. 4). This announcement came in light of vaccination rates for the Ohio University community which found that only 59% of enrolled students at Ohio University and regional campuses were fully vaccinated as August 31, 2021, whereas the highest vaccination rates were among university administrators (85.2%) and faculty (83.7%; Behrens, 2021).

In an identical mandate, Miami University required all university community members to be fully vaccinated by November 22, 2021 (Mitchell, 2021). In announcing his decision, President Crawford stated:

we strongly urge all members of our community to start the vaccination or exemption process as soon as possible. The delta variant has shown to be particularly contagious and dangerous for those who are unvaccinated; this is not the time to wait for a deadline to act. (Mitchell, 2021, para. 3)

Students who did not meet the November 22 deadline were unable to register for spring 2022 semester. Faculty and staff who were unable to provide proof of vaccination faced unspecified disciplinary measures.

Conversely, the University of Vermont faced a different compliance issue—nearly all Fall 2021 students had been vaccinated (Associated Press, 2021b), with fewer than 100 students of an expected class of over 13,000 students not meeting the vaccination requirement. On August 29, 2021, The University of Vermont (2021) tweeted “#UVM is proud to announce that 100% of undergraduate students have complied with our #COVID19 vaccine requirement for the fall semester.” Despite total compliance for COVID-19 vaccination among students, the university still required students, faculty, and staff to wear a mask while indoors on campus.

Institutions of higher education in the western territory of the United States, much like their geographic counterparts across the country, also scrambled to deal with the impending COVID-19 pandemic taking shape in early 2020. For example, the response to COVID-19 from universities such as The University of North Dakota, The University of Wyoming, and the University of Oregon, for example, showcase how selected universities in the west responded to the COVID-19 pandemic during the initial year of the pandemic.

**The University of North Dakota.** On March 20, 2020, the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks announced on their COVID-19 blog that while the institution would continue to be operational, students at the Grand Forks campus would continue the spring 2020 semester

remotely (University of North Dakota, 2020). The university also canceled commencement exercises for spring 2020.

Prior to the start of the Fall 2020 semester, the University of North Dakota, President Dean L. Bresciani announced that face coverings and social distance measures would be implemented at the institution. President Bresciani framed his COVID-19 response by stating, “We’ll need to remember that some people on campus may be more at risk from the virus than others, and their precautions deserve to be respected. Like I said, we’re all in this together” (Bresciani, 2020, para. 9).

Although University of North Dakota President Bresciani advocated masking and social distance measures on campus, he was unable to require a vaccine mandate for students or staff. In a letter addressed to the University of North Dakota community, he stated, “we understand from the North Dakota University System that we are not allowed to mandate vaccinations, and unfortunately, there is no effective way of knowing who has been vaccinated and who has not” (Bresciani, 2021, para. 1).

**The University of Wyoming.** The University of Wyoming was facing a unique situation as the pandemic was beginning to emerge in early 2020. The university had announced on March 4, 2020, that Edward Seidel would become the next president of the university (Maher, 2020). While Seidel’s presidential tenure would not start until July 1, 2020, he addressed the university community with a welcome message on April 20, 2020, in which he stated:

Financial uncertainty will be with our communities for some time, and the university, our donors, the state and federal governments will together do everything we can to support our students and the university community during this period. Online learning will clearly be a major focus of the university going forward; we will redouble our efforts to reach the

entire state with educational offerings, both for our students and community members who may need to rethink their career paths as a result of the current economic environment. UW will be there for you, and we will emerge stronger than ever. (Seidel, 2020, para. 9)

While the University of Wyoming prepared for the arrival of Seidel in July, interim President Neil Theobald extended spring break for a week to further determine how the university would address COVID-19. Acting President Theobald, in addressing the university community electronically, stated the extra week would give faculty time to prepare for online instruction. Furthermore, the additional week of spring break allowed administrators at the University of Wyoming an opportunity to further develop COVID-19 response for spring semester (University of Wyoming, 2020a).

Ultimately, the University of Wyoming opted to have remote instruction for the remainder of spring 2020. As Fall 2020 approached, the university opted for a phased approach in which online instruction would take place the first week of classes, with some students returning to campus on September 7 and all students returning to campus by September 28 with in-person instruction for the remainder of the semester (University of Wyoming, 2020b) with random sample COVID-19 testing for all university faculty, students, and staff with social distancing and indoor masking also in effect.

While the University of Wyoming maintained COVID-19 testing, coupled with social distancing measures and face masks, the university maintained neutral on mandatory vaccination for faculty, students, and staff in 2021. Officially, the University of Wyoming (2021) maintained, “while vaccinations are not required for UW students and employees, they’re strongly encouraged. And, to allow the university to track overall vaccination numbers, students and

employees must report their vaccinations once they received them” (para. 9). Thus, the use of institutional influence over directives and mandates framed the University of Wyoming’s vaccination response.

**The University of Oregon.** On February 28, 2020, the University of Oregon Incident Management Team was gathered “to monitor and respond to an outbreak of a respiratory disease caused by a novel coronavirus” (University of Oregon, 2020, para. 1). The University of Oregon, in response to COVID-19 vaccination status, required “COVID-19 vaccines for students and employees. This public health measure helps protect our community by reducing the potential for serious illness, hospitalization, or death. There is an option for requesting an exemption to the requirement.” (University of Oregon, n.d., para. 1)

Furthermore, in a letter addressed to the University of Oregon community, President Michael H. Schill (2020a), in his initial response to the threat of COVID-19, noted:

we will err on the side of caution as it relates to the health and safety of the UO community and are closely monitoring the latest information and guidance from the department of Lane County Public Health, the Oregon Health Authority, CDC, and World Health Organization. (para. 3)

Science would dictate the response to COVID-19 at the University of Oregon. Further, President Schill, in his remarks, stated the University of Oregon also had an obligation to the local community to help lessen the spread of COVID-19 early in the pandemic.

As March 2020 approached, the University of Oregon, like many other universities and colleges in the United States, began to realize the severity of the COVID-19 virus. On March 19, 2020, in a message sent to the University of Oregon community, President Schill emphasized two main priorities as the COVID-19 pandemic began to impact the United States—prioritizing

the well-being of the University of Oregon and mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on students' educational experience (Schill, 2020b). Like other campus leaders, the president needed to balance uncertainty, campus safety, and fiscal health against other competing narratives of the pandemic.

The Fall 2020 semester allowed the University of Oregon the opportunity to welcome students back to campus albeit with robust testing measures and continued COVID-19 health protocol. In a message to the University of Oregon community, dated August 26, 2020, President Schill (2020c) affirmed that instruction “will shift primarily to remote and online instruction for fall term” (para. 1) and noted that “all of our students will have access to remote and in-person services, programs, and activities in places such as the libraries, Erb Memorial Union, and Student Rec Center, where strategies are in place to keep our community safe” (para. 1). This communique from President Schill indicated that despite the obstacles COVID-19 presented during the spring of 2020, significant considerations had been deliberated by university leadership to ensure that no student would be left behind academically, and public health data would continue to guide the health and well-being of community members.

The University of Oregon, in contrast to the University of North Dakota and The University of Wyoming, opted to make vaccinations mandatory for students, faculty, and staff with approved exemptions for those who could not receive the vaccine. On May 10, 2021, President Schill, with input from University of Oregon students, faculty, and staff, notified the university community via email that vaccines would be required for all with exemptions for approved medical and non-medical reasons. In his message to the university community, President Schill affirmed “the science is clear: the COVID-19 vaccine effectively eliminates the

chances of death or serious illness in nearly all COVID-19 infections” (Schill, 2021, para 1). The rhetoric used here aligned the messaging to the science behind the virus’s epidemiology.

### **Higher Education Communication Tools**

The literature reviewed above highlights how historical crisis management helped inform the COVID-19 response in higher education. The mechanisms for sharing and receiving information has transformed how higher education communicates with various contingent groups within their community. No longer are colleges and universities hamstrung by intercampus mail or postal service. In today’s digital age, there are a variety of communicative tools at the college and university level. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat are now coupled with college and university email as platforms to convey and relay information to community members (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Carr & Hayes, 2015).

The usage of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat reflects college and universities’ acknowledgment of the ever-changing social media landscape and how that landscape is shaped by student usage of those platforms. Thus, the assumption from communication teams across higher education is that students use social media channels more readily to gain not only for personal usage, but to gather information as well. Indeed, colleges and universities are not only using social media as an admission tool, but also adding another avenue to communicate campus information to community members. Thus, a fundamental assumption by colleges and universities is that most students are use several social media platforms, daily and continuously, and that these platforms are indeed legitimate means for distributing information.

While colleges and universities acknowledge Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat as conveyors of information, email communication remains a universally accepted way for

institutions of higher education to communicate with members of their communities. What separates email from an ephemeral social media platform such as Snapchat is the perpetuity of email.

In discussing the indispensable use of email, Lagraña (2016) posited that although “some analysts predicted the end of the email” (p. 3), email remains “the most used fundamental and inevitable business communication tool of modern business (p. 3). In fact, Lagraña stated email had become “the most used mode of communication in the professional environment” (p. 3). While research has focused on the number of emails individuals receive (Jackson et al., 2001) and the information overload brought about by emails, the usage of emails as a primary quasi vis-à-vis communication is still a preferred mode of communication. Thus, the employment of emails as the source of communication during COVID-19 provided a mechanism for further research on the ways in which the discourse relayed sensemaking during the pandemic.

### **Discourse Analysis**

The use of discourse analysis provides a way to look at communications in more in-depth. Gee (2011) posited that discourse analysis is:

the analysis of language-in-use whether written or spoken. Linguistic forms of discourse analysis pay attention to the details of grammar and how they function in communication. Other forms of discourse analysis pay attention only to themes and messages (sometimes this is called “content analysis”). (p. 205)

The focus on the meaning infused in the messaging is central to discourse analysis with descriptive discourse analysts seeking “to describe how language works in order to understand it” (Gee, 2011, p. 9) and the intent “to gain deep explanations of how language or the world works and why they work in that way” (p. 9). Critical discourse analysis, conversely, takes a step



further and “seeks to engage with politics” (Gee, 2011, p. 204) relative to the language used. In noting differences among critical and descriptive analysis, Gee (2011) posited that descriptive discourse analysts “think that a critical approach is ‘unscientific’ because the critical discourse analyst is swayed by his or her interest or passion for intervening in some problem in the world” (p.9) whereas critical discourse analysts frame descriptive discourse analysts as skirting “social and political responsibility” (p. 9) in their research.

Gee (2011), in taking a paradigm stance, argues that all discourse is inherently political. In defining politics, Gee offered politics comprise “any situation where social goods or the distribution of social goods are at stake” (p. 210). Understanding the need to define social goods, Gee offered that social goods are “anything that a person or group in society wants. Some things (like status, money, love, and respect, and friendship) are taken by nearly everyone in society as social goods” (p. 211). Within this operational definition of social goods, the inclusion of health and well-being might also be construed as a social good. This inclusion helps situate COVID-19 responses on campus, as not only as a moral and ethical leadership responsibility, but as a social good according to Gee’s (2011) conceptualization.

While the scholarship of discourse analysis has grown over the years, the field of discourse analysis is not without critique. Widdowson (1995) and Fairclough (1992) argued that there that there needed to be more clarity among scholars regarding the definition of discourse analysis and the subsequent evaluation of written and spoken text. In reaching past a paradigm war of discourse analysis, Gee (2011) astutely surmised the importance of language, and subsequent discourse analysis, as not only a communication tool, but as a sensemaking tool in ambiguous situations. Gee contended:

Language is a key way humans make and break our world, our institutions, and our relationships through how we deal with social goods. Thus, discourse analysis can illuminate problems and controversies in the world. It can illuminate problems and controversies in the world. It can illuminate issues about the distribution of social goods, who gets helped, and who gets harmed. (pp. 9-10)

For the purpose of this study, language was crucial in informing the communities of William & Mary and the University of Virginia. Indeed, as Gee (2011) noted, language can inform social goods in positive and negative ways. A key social good in the pandemic response was the public health of community members. By examining the discourse contained in those emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia, we see how language shaped response and understanding in addressing a public health emergency.

### **Rhetorical Situation**

Vatz (1973), in summarizing the work of Bitzer's (1968) seminal work centering on the rhetorical situation, suggested "meaning resides in events" (p. 155). Without an event, Vatz and Bitzer argued there is no rhetorical situation. Bitzer (1968) posited:

When I ask, What is a rhetorical situation?, I want to know the nature of those contexts in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse: How should they be described?

What are their characteristics? Why and how do they result in the creation of rhetoric? (p. 1)

With those questions, Bitzer (1968) postulated rhetorical situations:

as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced in the

situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about significant modification of the situation. (p. 6)

According to Bitzer, there are three elements to a rhetorical situation: exigence, audience, and constraints. When coupled, a more nuanced understanding of the rhetorical situation emerges.

**Exigence.** Bitzer (1968) described exigence in terms of imperfections and urgency. With a broad definition of exigence, Bitzer noted that exigent situations must be modifiable. Phenomena such as death (a situation that cannot be changed) are not exigent. Rather, exigent situations become “rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and when positive modification requires discourse and can be assisted by discourse” (p. 7).

**Audience.** The philosophical debate of “if a tree falls in a forest, and no one can hear, does it make a sound?” is an apt analogy to Bitzer’s second element of a rhetorical situation—audience. For a rhetorical situation to occur, an audience must be there to receive the message. Bitzer (1968) noted, that audiences are more than just those that hear or see discourse stating that rather, the audience are “persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and being mediators of change” (p. 8).

**Constraints.** The third, and perhaps most important element of a rhetorical situation, are the constraints that potentially bound the response to the exigency. In defining constraints, Bitzer (1968) reasoned “constraints are made of persons, events, objects, and relations which are part of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (p. 8). In specifying constraints, Bitzer posited that constraints can take the form of personal beliefs, documents, traditions, and facts.

## **Framing**

When conceptualizing the word frame, typically, framing applies to structure (e.g., frame of a house). Within discourse analysis, framing, why still structural, takes a broader meaning. In discussing framing, Ensink and Sauer (2003) noted that framing in discourse analysis is spatial. They argued that “a frame gives to an object its place in space and separates it at the same time as its environment” (p. 2). Ensink and Sauer further advanced that framing “gives structure to both an object itself and to the way the object is perceived” (p. 2). Thus, we can see how important the framing of COVID-19 by campus leaders occurred in 2020 and the pandemic’s subsequent journey since early 2020.

The frame shaping COVID-19 early in the pandemic centered on social distancing, the use of a mask, and a national shutdown in the United States. In fact, it could be argued ambiguity about COVID-19 was the foundational frame of the pandemic. As the medical community conducted and gathered more research about the disease, more information about the spread and attempts to mitigate the disease trickled down to the public at large. Subsequent COVID-19 variants and vaccines also added to the framework of the disease and pandemic. With the framing of COVID-19, the “studs” of the pandemic remained salient throughout—the importance of social distance, the use of masks in public spaces, and hand washing. Additional studs to COVID-19 framing included the development and distribution of vaccines and variants of the disease. Accordingly, frames, in particular COVID-19, are not only foundational but organic as well.

Gee (2011) suggested that contextually the audience receiving a message interpret that message “and make judgements about how much of the context and what parts of it are relevant in what a speaker or writer means” (p. 206). For example, someone who is immunocompromised

may understand and react differently to COVID-19 messaging than some who is not immunocompromised. For immunocompromised individuals, messaging about COVID-19 may be seen in terms of life and death whereas some individuals might believe COVID-19 is nothing more than a head cold and fake news. Thus, social constructivist meaning (and subsequent framing) is individual to the message recipient.

Moving from the literature pertaining to communication, equally important is the literature that supports the methodology of the study. In the next section of the literature review, the emphasis switches to research frameworks and considerations.

### **Qualitative Research**

As the nature of discourse analysis is situated in qualitative inquiry, it is important to define qualitative research both broadly and more succinctly as definitions of this type of research inquiry has slight nuances depending on the scholar. Van Maanen (1979), one of the first scholars to conceptualize and define qualitative research, noted the unique qualities that separate qualitative research from quantitative inquiry. In describing qualitative research, Van Maanen (1979) suggested:

[Qualitative research] is at best an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world. (p. 520)

This broader picture of qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding as a qualitative approach is “interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). The focus on the discourse of the pandemic depends on the rhetoric of the

sender, in the case of this study the college president. With that in mind, the seminal works of Denzin and Lincoln (2011), coupled with Creswell and Poth (2018) guided the definitive structure of qualitative research used in this dissertation.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) contended qualitative research begins as an investigation into a phenomenon that places the researcher squarely within a researchable realm. They advance the notion that:

qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artifacts, and cultural texts and productions, along with observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. (pp. 3-4)

Denzin and Lincoln, in ascribing qualitative research as a valid and meaningful method of inquiry, suggested that qualitative inquiry attempts to make narrative sense of phenomena which needs context and structure to fully understand. In essence, Denzin and Lincoln proposed qualitative research offers scholarship that provides context, visibility, and meaning to problems social in nature.

Following Denzin and Lincoln's (2011) conceptualization of qualitative research, Creswell and Poth (2018), guided by Creswell's (2013) semantic interpretation of qualitative research, further suggested "qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretative/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). Although Creswell and Poth (2018) described narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory,

ethnographic, and case study research as mechanisms to conduct qualitative research, what categorically falls under each research approach differs among scholars.

Creswell and Poth (2018) advanced the idea that narrative research is more biographical. In contrast, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) expanded upon narrative research as more than the exploration of an individual's experience and argued that the canon of narrative research includes discourse analysis as a mechanism of narrative inquiry. They offered "a linguistic approach, or what Gee (2014) calls discourse analysis" (p. 35) as a qualitative methodological approach to narrative research.

### **Social Constructivism**

Regarding social constructivism, Creswell and Poth (2018) affirmed that "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (p. 24). Often, this understanding is informed by communication venues such as news networks, newspapers, or social media. At the core of all this communication is language—language that we can hear or read. The use of language is socially constructed. As Khwaja (2017) noted "language is an important aspect of the social construction of reality, because words have the power to construct and reify social phenomena" (p. 41). As language is a social construct, the use of social constructivist framework to recognize and acknowledge how language, and subsequent messaging of COVID-19, shaped the narrative and public health policies during the pandemic was essential to know more about how this narrative unfolded on college campuses.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the research has focused on how the disease was spread (Gangemi et al., 2020; Hafner, 2020; Komarova et al., 2020) and public health mitigation techniques (Hutchins et al., 2020; Rice et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2020). This research is critical in providing public health awareness and policy about the pandemic, yet understanding how

organizations, in particular institutions of higher education, made sense of this pandemic is less prolific. Furthermore, how institutions of higher education communicated to their respective campus communities to make sense and understanding the totality of the COVID-19 pandemic gave greater meaning to the efforts to protect the physical and emotional well-being of their communities. Not only were colleges and universities focused on the physical well-being of community members, but they were also trying to convey their socially constructed understanding of the pandemic that was rapidly unfolding. For example, the importance of using face masks and social distancing was a key messaging strategy for higher education institutions during COVID-19.

As the pandemic unfolded, so too did the social construction of the pandemic, in particular, the information from external sources. Understanding the importance of public health communication, especially as information from the medical community about the transmission and spread of COVID-19 began to saturate television, newspapers, and social media, a narrative began to form that provided greater clarity and understanding about the impending disruptive impact of COVID-19 on all aspects of daily life. From these narratives formed by external sources, salient information about mask-wearing and social distancing made way to everyday vernacular about the pandemic. People began making sense of an ambiguous and rapidly changing situation with the use of language. The use of language in the COVID-19 pandemic initiated the social construction of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018) about the virus and how the spread of COVID-19 fundamentally changed physical and social interaction during the initial phases of the pandemic.

Cognitively, individuals build meaning around a rhetorical situation using personally held beliefs, usually in the form of frames. As suggested by Jablin and Putnam (2001) held:



framing is both mental and social and linked to the labels of members assign to situations.

A frame encompasses figure-ground relationships, ties abstract words to concrete cues, and defines the parameters for what is included or excluded in an event. (p. 89)

Thus, we see how the frame of COVID-19 was built with traces of social constructivism.

Institutions of higher education socially constructed narratives of community well-being, public health measures, and the continued hope that COVID-19, although problematic, was not insurmountable.

With COVID-19, however, figure-ground relationships took more work discern. The COVID-19 pandemic (a distinct event) was difficult to separate from political approaches to how to handle the pandemic (political backdrop). Thus, we see framing not only shaping socially constructed views, but also how leaders disseminate information during a pandemic. Jablin and Putnam (2001), in examining leadership as a construct in discourse analysis, stated “leaders frame organizational experiences through creating and communication visions, confronting unanticipated events, and influencing others” (p. 89). Leaders who are successful in message framing use rhetorical mechanisms such as “jargon, contrast, spin, and catchphrases” (p. 89). How these vehicles of framing occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic within institutions of higher education is understudied and the focus of this dissertation research study.

## **Chapter Summary**

With the literature contained in Chapter 2, a clearer landscape emerged about historical crisis situations encountered in higher education in the United States. This historical backdrop provides a backdrop to how COVID-19 response from institution of higher education occurred and how the narrative responses were critical to the safety and well-being of their communities. Significantly, colleges and universities in the United States differentiated themselves during the

pandemic with their responses with discourse about how they would continue to strive to deal with COVID-19 head-on and with transparency. Furthermore, a discourse approach allowed the ability to see differences in COVID-19 response and rhetoric. Within these differences, the use of language by higher education leaders in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic became more important to study and analyzing their responses. COVID-19 rejoinder and rhetorical considerations aside, the literature review of Chapter 2 informed Chapter 3 of this dissertation with deliberation to methodological considerations.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

The literature review gathered and analyzed in Chapter 2 served as the foundational basis of the methodology of Chapter 3. Contained in the literature review was a multipronged approach to review the literature pertaining to how COVID-19 mirrored crisis situations encountered by institutions of higher education, how institutions of higher education communicated to community members during those crisis situations, and the communication vehicles utilized by leadership to relay information to faculty, staff, and students during the pandemic. Furthermore, the literature review focused on Gee's (2011) conceptualization of discourse analysis coupled with Bitzer's (1968) scholarship of rhetorical situations with Weick (1995) work on sensemaking added a conceptual depth in understanding to how individuals interpret historical events such as COVID-19. Finally, the role of qualitative research was explored and sets the stage for the methodology review in this chapter.

The research conducted in this dissertation focused on how two public universities, William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, and the University of Virginia located in Charlottesville, Virginia, used email to communicate their response to the COVID-19 pandemic to university community members. Not only did these emails serve to inform the communities of William & Mary and the University of Virginia, but they also served as a record of the crisis response to COVID-19. The information contained in the William & Mary and the University of Virginia's emails to students, faculty, and staff evolved as more information about COVID-19 preventative measures from the scientific community began to be disseminated in the United States. Discourse analysis of the rhetoric used in the emails sent by William & Mary and the

University of Virginia was applied to understand the contextual meanings contained in those messages. The time period for the discourse analysis was from February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021.

The selection of William & Mary and the University of Virginia was intentional and one of convenience as I had access to the emails sent. At the time of the crisis in Spring 2020, I was enrolled at both institutions as a graduate student. I continued to receive student emails from both institutions throughout the remainder of 2020 and for spring semester of 2021. Furthermore, even though I was not actively working at the University of the Virginia due pandemic restrictions from spring 2020 through spring 2021, I continued to have access to my email account and received emails from the University of Virginia pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic. Both William & Mary and the University of Virginia also have dedicated archival websites which documented COVID-19 response. William & Mary archived COVID-19 campus announcement news (<https://www.wm.edu/news/announcements/archive/index.php>). The University of Virginia also archived COVID-19 communications (<https://news.virginia.edu/content/latest-updates-uvas-response-coronavirus>). The archived messages provide a historical context for COVID-19 response measures at both institutions and serve to cross-reference collected emails used in this dissertation.

The next phase of methodology focused on the theoretical frameworks of discourse analysis (Gee, 2011) and rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968). These theoretical perspectives were undergirded by a social constructivism paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I then explained the process of gathering my sample emails for my research, the data collection process, and how those data were analyzed in this study.

## Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How did the emails distributed by William & Mary and the University of Virginia from Winter 2020 until Winter 2021 frame the COVID-19 response to community members?
2. How did this rhetoric change and evolve from Winter 2020 until Winter 2021?

In defining rhetorical mechanisms guiding the first research question, how did key university administrators from both institutions use language to inform communities about the unfolding pandemic and the resulting crisis on campus? Was the language optimistic? Did it err on the side of caution? Did emails sent by primary administrators use historical crisis markers to situate the COVID-19 pandemic? The use of a discourse analysis approach gave this dissertation a foundational depth to explore language and how the COVID-19 language changed over the course of a year. Discourse analysis also provided a means to explore the meaning and sensemaking in the sent emails by the two universities that moved beyond surface information to the underlying messaging forming the crisis response during a historical moment for both institutions.

Beyond sites of convenience, William & Mary and the University of Virginia are recognized as exceptional institutions of higher education not only in Virginia but in the United States as well. For context, William & Mary ranks as the 38th best national university in the United States according to *U.S. News & World Report* (William & Mary, 2022a) with an endowment valued at \$1.3 billion (Miller, 2021). The University of Virginia is ranked as the 25th best national university in the United States (U.S. News & World Report, n.d.) with an endowment valued at \$14.5 billion (Rosenthal & Saunders, 2021).

## **Philosophical Assumptions**

As the nature of this study was qualitative and focused on discourse analysis, philosophic assumptions that guided the interpretive framework of this research about the construction and understanding of language must be addressed as a core practice of conducting qualitative research. In keeping with the practice of conducting qualitative research, an ontological assumption about language guided the social constructivist framework of the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) advanced that as researchers conduct qualitative research, there were four possible philosophical assumptions made by researchers as they begin their study. These beliefs focused on the ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological assumptions that permeated the study.

### ***Ontological***

As qualitative researchers commence their research, “they are embracing the idea of multiple realities” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). The ontological nature of qualitative research is occupied by that notion that reality can be seen through a variety of lenses. As the focus of this study was a discourse analysis of COVID-19 emails sent by two universities, an ontological assumption was that community members of those universities might have differing viewpoints on the severity of COVID-19 and what constitutes an appropriate response by university officials. Thus, emails sent by the university can be interpreted by the audience, and by the researcher, in several different ways.

### ***Epistemological***

A hallmark of qualitative research is the immersion of the researcher in the collection of data. Creswell and Poth (2018) alluded to the fieldwork of qualitative researchers engage in to gather and explore the data and situate the fieldwork as the engagement of participants to gather

data. A more generalized understanding of epistemology is how research is gathered from a variety of sources not just the participants themselves. Becoming a researcher “insider” then becomes more about the immersion of the researcher in the data, whether gathered from personal narratives or written text, to gain evidence that is relevant to the study.

### ***Axiological***

Reflexively, qualitative researchers not only bring their intellect into their research, but also personal narratives that shape their beliefs, reactions, and motives for conducting research. Understanding that bias impedes research, qualitative researchers acknowledge personally held views or experiences that may influence their research in potentially harmful ways. Through the acknowledgment of personal narrative and how that might affect their research, greater axiological awareness is gained not only by the researcher, but by the audience reading that research as well.

### ***Methodological***

Research does not happen in a vacuum. Rather, it is crafted methodically and meticulously. Additionally, research is an organic process. As more data are collected and the researcher gains more fluidity in their study, aspects of the methodology can change. For example, “sometimes the research questions change in the middle of the study to reflect better the types of questions needed to understand the research problem” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). Moreover, the input of scholars in the field might change the data collection piece of the methodology. Thus, while the methodology serves as the blueprint of the study, the addition or subtraction of initial elements of the study are made to increase the quality of the research produced.

## Research Design

Since the nature of this research focused on understanding the rhetorical response William & Mary and the University of Virginia to the COVID-19 pandemic, a qualitative research approach gave the study a depth of analysis that was not possible with a quantitative research approach. According to Creswell (2013), “qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 44).

Empirically, Denzin and Lincoln (2012) described qualitative research as a form of scientific inquiry that employs the gathering of “empirical materials—case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artifacts, and cultural texts and productions, along with observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives” (p. 7). Furthermore, qualitative inquiry “builds toward theory from observations and intuitive understanding...from pieces of information from interviews, observations, or documents are combined and ordered into larger themes as the researcher works from the particular to the general” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 17).

By using a qualitative research design, a deeper philosophical understanding of COVID-19 and higher education response was achieved. The COVID-19 pandemic, with many unknowns in the disease’s early genesis, was not only about survival, but understanding the potential long-term epidemiological, financial, and societal effects of the disease. Qualitative research allowed for the exploration of the pandemic that goes past the surface of just the disease. Indeed, qualitative research goes beneath the surface to explore areas that might not be attainable with quantitative research.



## **Research Paradigm**

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected many facets of life in the United States. The level of impact, however, has varied based on a variety of factors. Race, geographic location, access to health care, COVID-19 testing and tracing, and other aspects of socioeconomic and medical considerations have affected individual and societal understanding of the pandemic. Thus, an interpretive framework, such as social constructivism, helped inform the paradigm of this study. Creswell and Poth (2018) posited that:

in social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they work and live. They develop subjective meaning of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. (p. 24)

Because this dissertation applied a social constructionist approach, it should be noted community members of both William & Mary and the University of Virginia had different interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic. These views are informed by personal beliefs pertaining to the genesis of COVID-19 and subsequent spread of the disease. Some community members might have the belief that COVID-19 is nothing more than the flu; others might view the disease as an unprecedented global health crisis with mitigation of COVID-19 sustained by the usage of facial masks and social distancing. A social constructivist approach allowed for a patchwork of community viewpoints and sensemaking of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

Although theoretical frameworks provide a blueprint that supports academic research, those frameworks have rigidity. This rigidity, theoretically, can limit the depth of research

methodology and subsequent data analysis. Thus, a question emerged in this social science research—how can researchers adopt an inner/interdisciplinary approach that incorporates similar, or even conflicting, theoretical underpinnings that add texture to a research canvas?

Crotty (1998) defined a theoretical perspective as “the philosophical stance informing the methodology thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria” (p. 3). In using the word “stance” as opposed to “framework,” a more organic, flowing approach to research is granted. Thus, a grounded flexibility emerges that allows a greater research tapestry to emerge in scholarship.

Abes (2009), informed by Crotty (1998), suggested that theoretical perspectives, rather than frameworks, serve as a guide for social science research. In ascribing to a theoretical perspectives approach, Abes (2009) suggested:

Theoretical perspectives bring together multiple and even seemingly conflicting theoretical perspectives to uncover new ways of understanding the data. Rather than being paralyzed by theoretical limitations or confined by rigid ideological allegiances, interdisciplinary experimentation of this nature can lead to rich new research results and possibilities (p. 141).

In keeping with Abes (2009) theoretical perspectives approach, rather than framework, this dissertation used a perspectives approach to guide research.

### **Theoretical Borderlands**

The focus of this study centered on understanding how language, in the form of email communications, was used to convey information, response, and policy of COVID-19 by leaders at William & Mary and the University of Virginia to students and university community members, a discourse analysis was used as the theoretical framework in this dissertation. Since

language is a socially constructed phenomenon with multiple interpretive understandings, this study incorporated Gee's (2011) theoretical understanding of discourse analysis informed by Bitzer's (1968) seminal work on the conceptualization of rhetorical situation. While Gee and Bitzer informed theoretical perspectives used in this dissertation, Weick (1995) and his scholarship on sensemaking added academic depth to this dissertation because of the focus on meaning-making.

Rather than subscribe to a rigid singular theoretical framework that might inhibit a deeper understanding of the data, theoretical perspectives that couple to form theoretical borderlands were used (Abes, 2009; Armstrong, 2020). Abes (2009) suggested that theoretical borderlands are connected theoretical perspectives that adjoin, yet retain, their distinctive theoretical foundations. Metaphorically, theoretical borderlands are like state lines on a map. We know, for example, that state lines separate Virginia from Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky, and North Carolina. However, without those state lines, Virginia geographically morphs into each of those states. With theoretical borderlands, we can see how theoretical concepts such as Gee's (2011) discourse analysis and Bitzer's (1968) rhetorical situation connect yet offer different approaches to the study of language. With this in mind, theoretical borderlands were a foundational component of the research design to examine email as a form of not informative communication, but crisis communication as well.

### ***Communicative Action Theory***

Habermas (1984), in articulating communicate action theory, sought to provide a theoretical perspective that situated communication acts as opportunities that ground communication via reason. Stroud (2009) in analyzing Habermas's theoretical framework offered by communicative action theory suggested that strategic and communicative action

undergird communication. Stroud situated strategic action metaphorically “for instance, building a bridge will involve a variety of interactions between humans and material objects, and skilled engineers will be able to predict what actions are necessary to construct a bridge that has certain structural virtues” (p. 142). Strategic action can be viewed as not the only solution-based response to a situation that needs resolution, but also as a bridge that recognizes the communicative interactions between those responsible for arriving at a workable solution for problematic situations. Communicative action, when compared to strategic action, uses reason to advance “some claim about the world” (Stroud, 2009, p. 142) to recipients. Communicative action is grounded in what Habermas (1984) calls regulative claims. These claims are “statement[s] asserting that some state of affairs (actual or possible) in the social world is right or desirable” (Stroud, 2009, p. 142).

### ***Framing Theory***

Goffman (1974), although using the term framing analysis in scholarship, is attributed to modern-day framing theory. Goffman, a noted sociologist, attributed framing to meaning — the context in which understanding is developed about amorphous situations. Framing, in a literal and metaphoric sense, is the construction of understanding surrounding a sociological situation of meaning (in the instance of this dissertation, COVID-19). Frames are formed not only by personal beliefs, but also by external influences such as government, media, and organizational leadership. In describing framing theory, Volkmer (2009), a media and communications scholar, suggested “frames help to reduce the complexity of information but serve as a two-way process: Frames help interpret and reconstruct reality” (p. 407). Thus, how we frame a situation is how we view a situation. Volkmer astutely asserted that issues pertaining to the environment “can be quite different in conservative or liberal media outlets” (p. 408). With Goffman’s (1974) framing

theory as a theoretical backdrop, the frame of COVID-19 was viewed contentious political issue that manifested in questions about even the validity of the scientific community research on COVID-19. By understanding COVID-19 as a framed situation, it is possible to gain greater insights into how William & Mary and the University of Virginia framed their response to COVID-19 to community members.

### ***Sensemaking***

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no shortage of information about the virus. From where the virus originated to the efficacy of vaccinations to inoculate variants of COVID-19, new information about the virus continues to dominate news cycles across the world in 2022. With an influx of continuous information about COVID-19, how do organizations, and subsequently the people who comprise those organizations, understand the entirety of COVID-19 when there is so much to digest about the virus?

Weick (1995) suggested that people create understanding through sensemaking. In addressing sensemaking, he posited “sensemaking is about such things as placement of items into frameworks, comprehending, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in the pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning” (p. 8). For COVID-19, the sensemaking process of the totality of the disease, in relation to the pandemic, was situated by personal beliefs that were updated by information received from a variety of governmental sources or media.

While rhetoric lays the concrete foundation for dealing with crisis situations, sensemaking is an essential ingredient in the making of that foundation. How words help shape meaning is critical to this discourse analysis. Weick (1988) in a seminal crisis management piece, *Enacted Sensemaking in Crisis Situations*, discussed how crisis situations arise from enactment. Enactment, Weick (1988) argued:

is used to preserve the central point that when people act, they bring events and structures into inexistence and set them in motion. People who act in organizations often produce structures, constraints, and opportunities that were not there before they took action. (p. 306)

With enactment, organizations in crisis mode, produce a physical and historical record of action mechanisms used to address crisis situations (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Weick,1988).

### **Language Building and Discourse Analysis**

Gee (2011) described discourse analysis as “the study of language in use” (p. 8). The analysis of language happens in two distinct ways. One focus of discourse analysis centers on “the ‘content’ of the language being used, the themes or issues being discussed in a conversation or a newspaper, for example” (p. 8). Gee referred to this type of research as content discourse analysis. A second approach to discourse analysis is more linguistic in nature and focuses specifically on language and grammar usage (Gee, 2011).

Gee (2011) discussed seven building components of language. In building language using these seven components, “a discourse analyst can ask seven different questions about any piece of language-in-use” (p.17). The seven building components of language include:

1. *Significance*. Events or moments that have a high personal or societal value that “requires language to render them significant or to lessen their significance.” (p. 17)
2. *Practices (Activities)*. Practice is defined as “a socially recognized and institutionally or culturally supported endeavor that usually involves sequencing or combining actions in certain specified ways. (p. 17)
3. *Identities*. Individuals occupy multiple identities. In terms of rhetorical delivery, the identity of the sender is crucial for conveying meaning. For example, the president of

- a college or university writing to university community members is perceived differently than perhaps a message from an undergraduate student body president.
4. *Relationships*. Language is used to “signal what sort of relationship we have, want to have, or are trying to have with our listener(s), reader(s), or other people, groups, or institutions about whom we are communicating” (p. 18). How we address a professor publicly (e.g., Dr. Smith) might differ from how we address a professor in an informal setting (e.g., Bob). The language used in these relationships can vary based on formal or informal settings in which discourse is used.
  5. *Politics (the distribution of social goods)*. In discussing politics and the distribution of social goods, Gee stated “we use language to convey a perspective on the nature of the distribution of social goods” (p. 19). Using the example of the COVID-19 public health response, I might say the response from the federal government has been abysmal” thus denying our federal government a social good. Conversely, I might say, “all things considered, the federal government has saved many lives with a pandemic that is in a constant state of flux” which I impart a social good on federal response.
  6. *Connection*. Language is used to impart connections (whether stated or implied) or break connections. Politically, I might specify “far-right” or “far-left” political devotees. While on the surface, I appear to be comparing two different political ideologies, the use of the term “devotees” connects the different political views.
  7. *Sign Systems and Knowledge*. Gee situated sign systems as the use of language in different contexts. While English might be the official language of the United States, there are variations of that language in the country. Academics might speak in a

jargon that only other academics might understand. The same is true of medical doctors, lawyers, and other professions with specific ways of communicating in a particular way. Furthermore, the knowledge contained within language specific communities is used to “build privilege or prestige for one sign system or way of knowing over another” (p. 20). Thus, language is privileged (known only to people in a particular sign system) to the detriment of the those with limited understanding of jargon amongst select groups of academics and professionals.

In beginning a discourse analysis, Gee (2011) offered a warning. He wrote:

the method I developed in this book is not intended as a set of “rules” to be followed “step-by-step.” In turn, the examples...are not meant as “recipes” or “how to” manuals. Rather, they are meant merely to show some of the tools we have some of the tools we have discussed in this book put to use, not in and for themselves, but to speak to themes, points, and issues. (p. 125)

### **Rhetorical Situation**

Bitzer (1968) conceptualized the rhetorical situation as “discourse that comes into existence as a response to a situation” (p. 5). Furthermore, a:

rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence. (p. 6)

In discussing the rhetorical situation, Bitzer (1968) described three elements needed before the initiation of discourse. The first element of the rhetorical situation is the *exigence* need for discourse. Bitzer described these situations as “imperfection marked by urgency” (p. 6). These



imperfect situations can be thought of as crisis situations that require immediate attention. The second element of Bitzer's rhetorical situation is the audience. According to Bitzer, "a rhetorical audience consists of only those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and being mediators of change" (p. 8). The final element needed to initiate rhetorical discourse is a set of *constraints* "that is made up of persons, events, objects, and relations, which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence" (p. 8). In this study, rhetorical analysis provided a conceptual framework that guided the initial analysis of the COVID-19-related emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia.

### **Connection of Rhetorical Situation and Discourse Analysis**

Bitzer's (1968) conceptualization of a rhetorical situation, coupled with Gee's (2011) application of discourse analysis, provides foundational support for the study design of this dissertation. Framing COVID-19 emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia as characteristic of a rhetorical situation, elements that shape a rhetorical situation emerged. Exigently, COVID-19 required an immediate response from the two universities. Administrative failure to respond to COVID-19 would be viewed as an abject dereliction of duty. This exigence prompted leadership at both institutions to address what Bitzer (1968) situated as the rhetorical audience—community members of William & Mary and the University of Virginia who looked to university leadership for a guidance and direction during the initial uncertainty of COVID-19.

Bitzer (1968), in piecing together elements of exigence and rhetorical audience, posited that the final piece of the rhetorical situation connecting both exigency and audience are the constraints of the situation. COVID-19, unpredictable in nature, was the most pronounced constraint impacting the William & Mary and the University of Virginia campus community and

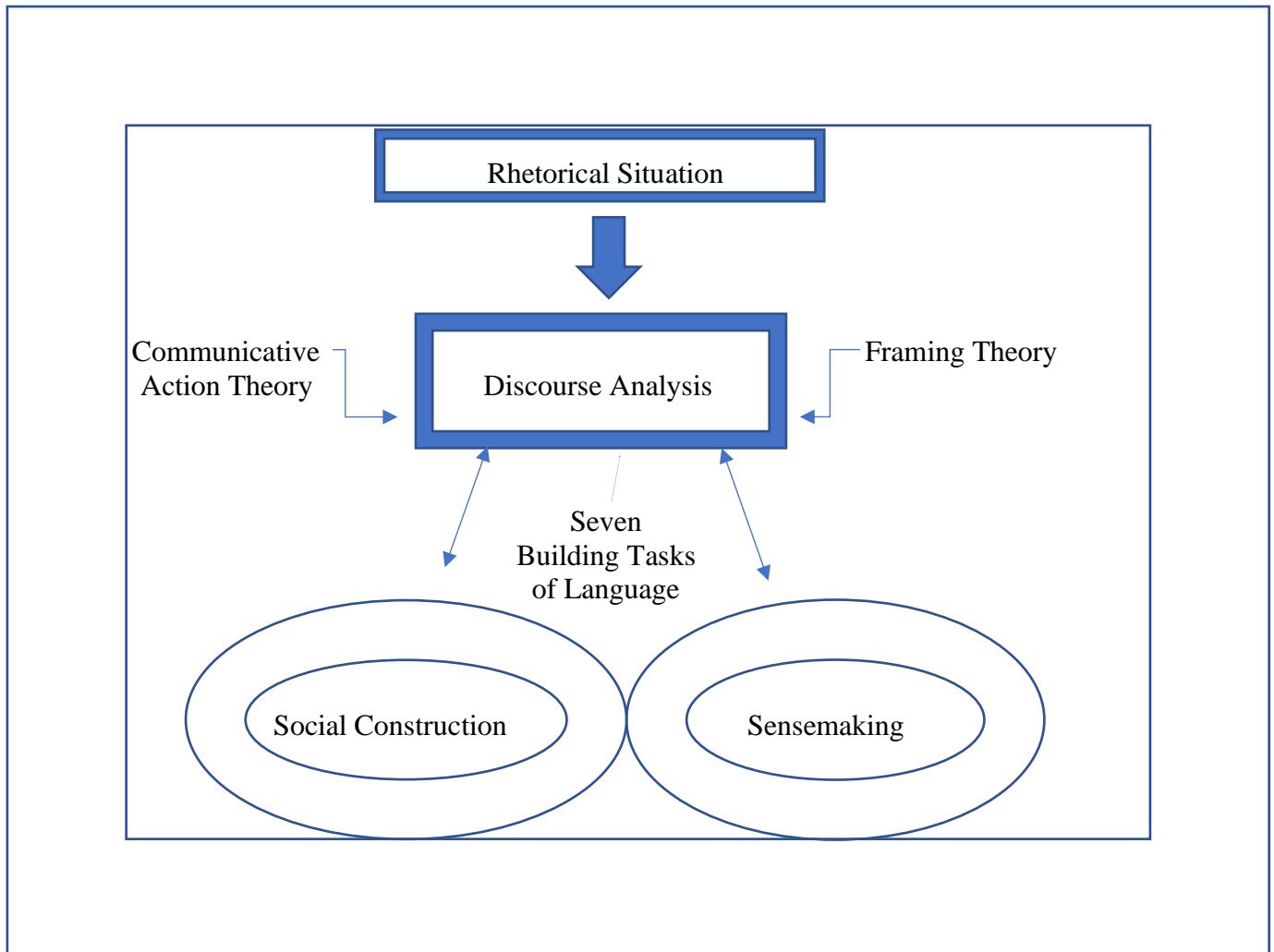
the response to this generational pandemic. University leadership, and subsequent financial and personnel resources, also constrained the COVID-19 rhetorical situation.

While Bitzer (1968) described the connective tissue of a rhetorical situation, the actual response to a rhetorical situation is the proverbial rubber hitting the road. Identifying a rhetorical situation is much different from addressing the situation. The method of communication and language used by leadership at William & Mary and the University of Virginia was crucial in addressing, and assuring, community members of the universities' response to COVID-19. Thus, Gee's (2011) discourse analysis approach paves the roadwork for understanding the language, and subsequent actions, initiated in response to the COVID-19 rhetorical situation. In particular, practices and activities utilized in emails sent by the William & Mary and the University of Virginia served as discourse units analyzed in this dissertation.

In summary, the study design of this dissertation used a qualitative research approach centered on theoretical perspectives (Crotty, 1998) derived from Gee's (2011) scholarship on discourse analysis, Bitzer's (1968) conceptualization of a rhetorical situation, and Weick's (1998) understanding of organizational sensemaking. These theoretical perspectives couple to form a theoretical borderland (Abes, 2009) that informs a discourse analysis of emails sent by William & Mary and the University of Virginia. This discourse analysis was informed by a social constructivist approach that situates the COVID-19 pandemic as an organically changing and evolving global health crisis.

**Figure 1**

*Connective Theoretical Mapping*



**Data Collection**

I collected email data from two mid-Atlantic Universities, William & Mary and the University of Virginia, from February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021. The selection of this timeframe was twofold—it signifies a period in which both institutions began contemplating the

initial unfolding of the pandemic that framed COVID-19 as a looming public health crisis, and a year later when COVID-19 continued to have ramifications for both institutions. Additionally, analyzing the emails over the course of a year provided the opportunity to see how the understanding of the pandemic changed over time coupled with how language pertaining to the pandemic from the two institutions evolved during this period.

The emails included in this dissertation came from the presidents, provosts, executive vice presidents, vice president of student affairs, executive director, and the dean of students at William & Mary and the University of Virginia. Emails authored by deans of individual colleges, undergraduate, and graduate student leaders from both institutions were excluded as the scope and reach of their leadership was eclipsed by the primary administrative authors listed in this dissertation. Emails sent by those key university officials from February 26, 2020, until March 1, 2020, were analyzed and emails that did not explicitly contain the word “COVID-19” were not included in this study. Tables 1 and 2 demarcate the administrators of William & Mary and the University of Virginia who authored emails during the above timeframe.

**Table 1**

*William & Mary Email Authorship and Audience Members*

Author	Role	Audience	Emails Analyzed
Ginger Ambler	VP for Student Affairs	Students	19
Sam Jones	Emergency Management Chair	Students, Faculty, and Staff	26
Katherine Rowe	President	Students, Faculty, and Staff	22
Peggy Agouris	Provost	Students, Faculty, and Staff	5
Amy Sebring	Chief Operating Officer	Students, Faculty, and Staff	9
S. Marjorie Thompson	Dean of Students	Students	2

**Table 2***University of Virginia Email Authorship and Audience Members*

Author	Role	Audience	Emails Analyzed
J. J. Davis	Executive Vice President	Students, Faculty, and Staff	25
Allen Groves	Dean of Students	Students	15
Liz Magill	Provost	Students, Faculty, and Staff	44
K. Craig Kent	Executive Vice President	Students, Faculty, and Staff	13
Jim Ryan	President	Students, Faculty, and Staff	30
Christopher Holstege	Executive Director	Students, Faculty, and Staff	3
Mitch Rosner	Chair of Medicine Department	Students, Faculty, and Staff	10

From February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021, the University of Virginia sent 378 COVID-19-related emails to students, faculty, and staff. William & Mary, during the same timeframe, sent 132 COVID-19 to campus community members. Comparing the institutions at various points during this period, William & Mary sent three COVID-19 emails and the University of Virginia sent two emails from February 14, 2020, until February 29, 2020. In March of 2020, William & Mary sent 24 COVID-19-related emails and the University of Virginia sent 32 emails. March 2020 was a significant marker of this dissertation as both institutions were keenly aware that COVID-19 had crept to both campuses and needed to begin the evacuation of their respective campuses.

Moving this timeline to the months of August and September of 2020, yet another critical juncture emerged as William & Mary and the University of Virginia began the move-in process for students and prepared for an in-person academic year albeit with modifications to instruction

and campus gatherings. During August of 2020, William & Mary sent 15 emails pertaining to COVID-19 and the University of Virginia sending 47. In September of 2020, William & Mary administrators sent out 23 COVID-19-related emails to students, faculty, and staff and the University of Virginia sending out 46 emails pertaining to COVID-19.

### **Data Analysis**

The emails gathered from February 26, 2020, until March 1, 2021, were and reread several times as Agar (1980) suggested that qualitative researchers read transcripts several times to gain a better sense of the data. After examining the text from the emails, the rhetoric included were coded using Gee's (2011) seven building tasks of language. These tasks included: significance, practices (activities), identities, relationships, and politics (the distribution of social good, connection, sign systems, and knowledge). The robustness of using Gee's (2011) building tasks of language allowed greater contextual meaning to be extrapolated from the email text and gave the coding a breadth and depth of understanding.

In looking for emerging themes embedded in the COVID-19-related emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia, coding was used to gather themes that emerged as emails were analyzed. Saldaña (2013) in his seminal work on coding, described codes as "most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). Coding affords qualitative researchers the ability to summarize language included in documents in units rather than phrases or sentences. Coding, however, takes place in a continuum. Quality coding emerges after the researcher immerses themselves within the document. The recurrent complexion of coding allows for a meaningful engagement of the language contained in documents that enhances data analysis.

This data analysis is enhanced by adopting a more formalized methodological process. Creswell (2014), in his seminal work *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, suggested a multi-step process of organically conducting data analysis in qualitative research. His linear conceptualization of data analysis suggested qualitative researchers engage in a hierarchical process with data and use the sequencing of that process to advance data analysis.

### ***Organizing the Data based on Data Type***

The arrangement of the data allows a qualitative researcher to group data according to data type (interviews, speeches, field notes, etc.). The emails included in this dissertation came from the president, provost, vice president of student affairs, and the dean of students at William & Mary and the University of Virginia. Emails sent by those officials from February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2020, were analyzed and emails that did not explicitly contain the word “COVID-19” were not included in this study.

### ***Review, Read, and Exam the Data***

The emails gathered from February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021, were read and reread several times as Agar (1980) suggested that qualitative researchers read transcripts several times to gain a better sense of the data. While reading and rereading the data offered a better understanding of the data, not all the data reviewed can be included for analysis in research. Thus, this dissertation also included a process that involves what Creswell refers to as data winnowing. The winnowing of data, Creswell (2014) suggested, is “a process of focusing in on some of the data and disregarding other parts” (p. 195) due the density and quantity of data sources. The application of winnowing can be applied to redundant data and data that does not advance narrative in the study. For this dissertation, data winnowing of emails that recapitulate

messaging, and keeps narrative flow at a standstill, was utilized. Furthermore, COVID-19 emails sent by academic division deans, undergraduate and graduate student leaders, Blackboard and Canvas announcements, alumni departments, and faculty emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia were winnowed from the data.

### ***Coding***

Once data have been organized, reviewed, and read, Creswell (2003) posited that qualitative researchers begin coding all the data. After examining the text from the emails, the rhetoric included in those communiques were coded using Gee's (2011) seven building tasks of language. These tasks included: significance, practices (activities), identities, relationships, and politics (the distribution of social good, connection, sign systems, and knowledge). The robustness of using Gee's (2011) seven buildings tasks of language allowed for greater contextual meaning to be extrapolated from the email text and gave the coding a breadth and depth of understanding. In looking for emerging themes embedded in the COVID-19-related emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia, coding allowed the generation of themes that emerged as the emails were analyzed. Coding affords qualitative researchers the ability to summarize language included in documents in units rather than phrases or sentences. Coding, however, takes place within perpetuity. Quality coding emerges after significant engagement with a document. The cyclical nature of coding allows for a deeper extrapolation of language within in documents that enhances data analysis.

As a dissertation focused on the use of actual language used by university leaders of William & Mary and The University of Virginia, an in vivo approach was utilized due to the unique and historical nature of COVID-19. Manning (2017), in articulating the value of in vivo coding, stated "in vivo coding is a form of qualitative data analysis that places emphasis on the



actual spoken words of participants” (p. 1). By using the actual language of the university leaders during this time, a more authentic representation of language occurred and language specific to a particular timeframe.

### ***Coding Leading to Themes***

Creswell offered that the coding process should advance five to seven themes in qualitative research. These themes situate themselves in the research as significant findings. From Gee’s (2011) seven building task of language, codes leading to the classification of themes were recorded. These themes advanced the narrative of COVID-19 email responses by William & Mary and the University of Virginia from February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021.

### ***Theme Representation***

The discussion of themes, as suggested by Creswell (2014), are conveyed by a narrative approach that “mentions a chronology of events, the detailed discussion of several themes...or a discussion of with interconnecting themes” (p. 200). This dissertation, in aligning with theme representation, included a chronology of events from February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021. This chronology was captured by the emails sent by William & Mary and the University of Virginia. Furthermore, direct quotes from university leadership mails added to the thematic representation of the mails and gave this research historical narrative during a time of chaos and uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic. This stage of Creswell’s suggested data analysis ultimately leads to an interpretation of the researcher’s findings.

### **Data Validity and Trustworthiness**

Although Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested “qualitative researchers can never capture an objective ‘truth’ or ‘reality’” (p. 244), this does not mean qualitative research lacks validity. While qualitative research might not employ quantitative research design confidence

intervals or alpha coefficient to reject or accept the null hypothesis, there are validation techniques that can add to the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research. One process involves triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation, in the instance of this dissertation, included verification from archived news websites containing COVID-19 messages sent to community members from William & Mary and the University of Virginia. By using archived news websites from the institutions, I was able to cross-reference emails gathered in this dissertation and those included in archival messages. Furthermore, the use of presidential videos and COVID-19-related videos (institutional and YouTube) also provided additional triangulation stability in this study.

To establish data validity and safeguard my bias during the study, I procured the assistance of two peer debriefers to examine email data from a variety of administrators for this discourse analysis and to ensure that coding conducted by me was accurate (Creswell, 2003) and minimize my personal beliefs during data analysis of emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia. The peer debriefers for this study included a William & Mary Ph.D. student who had completed their qualitative research course and a Ph.D. graduate in the field of educational leadership. Their expertise in qualitative data analysis helped enhance the quality and validity of the data analysis.

Four emails were sent to each debriefer. Each debriefer selected two of the four emails to code using Gee's (2011) seven building tasks of language codebook developed by the researcher. The debriefers used the codebook to code their selected emails. Debriefers were encouraged to contact me with any questions about the coding process. A comparison of the two emails selected and coded by each debriefer were then compared to the emails coded by me. In the

event of any discrepancies, I reached out to my peer debriefers to discuss my coding and their coding analysis. The two peer debriefers were compensated financially for their assistance.

The use of peer debriefers enhanced the credibility of the dissertation as well. Peer debriefers offered a fresh perspective to data analysis. Their critical and analytical lens was crucial in ensuring coding was accurate and less subjective.

### **Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions**

In 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to be a global health crisis as variants of COVID-19 emerged globally (Rubin, 2021; Vasireddy et al., 2021). While COVID-19 vaccines continued to serve as preventive measures against hospitalization and death (Forman et al., 2021), the disease still had serious health consequences for those unwilling or unable to vaccinate against the disease. During the period of February 14, 2020, until March of 2021, while a crucial time in the initial COVID-19 universities' responses, many variables were still unknown about the disease and community spread. As scientific research about COVID-19 epidemiology expanded, so too did university decision making and subsequent course of action regarding closing and opening of their campuses.

This dissertation study was delimited to only two universities—William & Mary and the University of Virginia. This delimitation was due to the vast number of colleges and universities in the United States. Generalizability to other state institutions, for example, would be difficult to infer. Financially, both institutions were better able to weather the initial pandemic disruption due to their financial endowments and crisis forecasting and planning by leadership from William & Mary and the University of Virginia.

A limitation of my dissertation was my focus on email narrative rather than other forms of communication such as YouTube videos or Facebook. Discourse analysis was most

appropriate for emails rather than other forms of rhetorical response given the possibilities to acquire all the emails sent to community members from February 26, 2020, until March 1, 2021. Emails were examples of written rhetoric which could be analyzed according to Gee's (2011) seven building tasks of language.

Furthermore, contextual discourse analysis "is indefinitely large, ranging...through people's beliefs, to historical, institutional, and cultural settings" (Gee, 2011, p. 67). Thus, there could be multiple ways to interpret written language through social construction. Some may view university response to COVID-19 as insufficient whereas others might find that same response restrictive.

William & Mary and the University of Virginia, collectively, were responsible for communicating COVID-19 response to many constituents. Thus, an assumption guiding this dissertation was that email was the most efficient way to communicate and reach a large audience. This assumption begs the question if there was a more efficient way to deliver COVID-19 information to community members at both institutions.

Furthermore, this study assumed that William & Mary and the University of Virginia placed community health and well-being as paramount in the response to COVID-19. The assumption that both institutions relied on scientific information to inform their response guided this dissertation. Thus, framing COVID-19 as a public health emergency was crucial for both institutions to act responsibly and rationally.

### **Researcher Positionality**

The research design for conducting discourse analysis of emails sent by William & Mary and the University of Virginia first began with stating my researcher positionality. My positionality as a researcher guided the site selection for this research study. During the spring

semester of 2020, I was a student concurrently enrolled at William & Mary and University of Virginia. My enrollment at both institutions provided the email data incorporated into this dissertation. Furthermore, I was a furloughed worker at the University of Virginia during the pandemic. My furlough meant I was temporarily laid off for over a year from my administrative position within intramural sports at the University of Virginia. This furlough resulted in financial implications personally.

My experience as both a student at both site universities and as an employee at the University of Virginia gave me a unique insight into the pandemic. I was able to see both universities pandemic rhetorical response evolved throughout the data collection period. Although no identity was less or more significant than the other, my identity as a higher education professional and doctoral student guided my understanding of both universities' pandemic responses.

Understanding the values and experiences I bring to my research is critical to understanding my researcher positionality. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), researcher positionality is the process by which researchers “admit the value-laden nature of the study and actively report their values and biases as well as the value-laden nature of the information gathered in the field” (p. 21). Axiologically, this entails the discussion of my position as it relates to my social status, personal beliefs, political viewpoints, and other experiences that shape my understanding of the research I will conduct (Berger, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Since my matriculation as a graduate student in the college student personal program at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, in 1999, my academic and professional experience has centered on higher education. Professionally, my experiences have ranged from student activities, administering an academic support program, and directing a federally funded TRIO

program serving first-generation and low-income students. As a doctoral student at William & Mary, I was employed as a doctoral graduate assistant in the Dean of Students office. While in the Dean of Students office, I worked in the care support services area where I gained experience assisting students returning to the university after medical leave of absences making sure they were complying with wellness agreements devised by care support services office. Additionally, I aided students in crisis. These student situations ranged from dropping courses after the add/drop period to students in psychological distress. Thus, my professional practice has been one of putting students as the center of university life and serving them in a variety of capacities.

My personal views on health care in the United States are informed by my upbringing. I was raised in an Appalachian area of Ohio by a single mother. This impacted many aspects of my life. Financially, my mother worked a minimum wage job to provide for me. Due to financial limitations, I never had health insurance which meant doctor's visits were limited for me. I believe that health care in our country is not a privilege, but a right. Politically, I believe in the Affordable Care Act and that our tax base should support universal health care.

While my personal and political views shape my beliefs about health care, they also shape my understanding of COVID-19. The political landscape of our country has shaped individual state response to COVID-19. According to the American Association of Retired People (AARP), as of November 13, 2020, prior to the availability of vaccination options, the following states did not have mandatory face coverings in public: Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Wyoming (Markowitz, 2020). Each of the states listed has a Republican governor. While there are states with Republican governors enacting mandatory face mask policy, every state with a Democratic governor (except for North

Carolina) implemented mandatory face mask coverings at some point during the pandemic. Thus, there were political implications as well.

As an enrolled student during the COVID-19 pandemic, I had firsthand experience of the impact of COVID-19 both academically and personally. The disruption and uncertainty the pandemic inflicted on my student experience cannot be minimized. I had to navigate the transition from in-person instruction to synchronous and asynchronous instructional delivery.

Professionally, I believe that the priorities of colleges and universities are undergirded by the public health and safety of their community members during COVID-19. While the implementation and delivery of those university health policies have varied among institutions of higher education, community health safety is a vital priority to ensure the well-being of community members.

These public health guidelines, however, are coupled with financial realities. Lederman (2020), reporting for *Inside Higher Ed*, surveyed 271 college business officers from colleges and universities across and found “Roughly a quarter or fewer of [college business officers] said their institution had already furloughed employees, reduced the pay of senior administrators or promoted earlier retirement or voluntary separation for faculty or staff members” (para. 5). Furthermore, “about a quarter of business officers said they believed their institution could ride out the current difficulties and return to more or less normal operations” within two years” (para. 6). Lederman concluded by stating “while nearly half said their institution “should use this period to make difficult but transformative changes in its core structure and operations” in the interest of long-term sustainability” (para. 6).

My positionality towards COVID-19 is layered and informed by both a personal and political understanding of the pandemic. By acknowledging any potential bias in my

positionality, I informed readers of potential research blind spots and allowed them to gain insight not only in the research conducted in this dissertation but the researcher as well.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study used university emails as the data source for this dissertation. Since no human subjects were utilized in this research, the research conducted in this dissertation was exempt from the William & Mary institutional review board ethical considerations.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 3 provided a blueprint for the methodology to be used in this dissertation. From this blueprint, a clearer understanding of research design is brought to light. Through this understanding, discourse analysis emerged as the qualitative approach best suited to understand how emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia shaped their crisis response to COVID-19. Furthermore, discourse analysis also showcased how that crisis response changed over time. By using emails as a backdrop to conduct this discourse analysis, a historical understanding emerged from the language contained in them.



## **CHAPTER 4: THE CASE UNIVERSITIES**

As this dissertation uses COVID-19 email data from William & Mary and the University of Virginia, a brief chapter giving an overview of both institutions is warranted. In addition to an overview of both institutions, the final section of Chapter 4 includes the first emails from both institutions addressing the emergence of COVID-19. This insertion provides a precursor to the emails presented in Chapter 5. These first emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia, although falling outside the initial data analysis purview date of February 14, 2020, provided both institutions a moment of perpetuity in their first acknowledgment and framing of the COVID-19 pandemic. Contextually, the initial emails from both institutions situated the early stages of COVID-19 as an opportunity to showcase vigilance.

### **William & Mary**

William & Mary is the second oldest university in the United States (William & Mary, 2022b). The university was founded in 1693 by a royal charter from King William III and Queen Mary II “for a perpetual College of Divinity, Philosophy, Languages, and other good Arts and Sciences” (William & Mary, 2022b, para. 2). Furthering the reference of the institution’s historical significance, William & Mary colloquially is known as the “Alma Mater of the Nation,” in part, due to presidential alumni who attended and graduated from the institution. Several former presidents of the United States, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Tyler, and James Monroe, were William & Mary alumni. Another institutional feature that cements the historical significance of William & Mary is the Sir Christopher Wren Building. The

Wren Building, estimated to be built between 1695 and 1700, “is the oldest college building still standing in the United States” (William and Mary, 2022c, para. 1).

In addition to being the home to the oldest college academic building in the United States, William & Mary was the first institution of higher education in the United States to sponsor a Greek organization. Phi Beta Kappa, the United States’ oldest and most distinguished honor, was founded on William & Mary’s campus 1776 (William & Mary, 2022d). Among the other “firsts” achieved by William & Mary include the first law school in the United States (William & Mary, 2022d) as well as the first collegiate student honor code (William & Mary, 2022d).

While historical context situates William & Mary among the oldest and most esteemed of institutions in the United States, the university remains at the forefront today as an institution of excellence. In 2022, *U.S. News & World Report* ranked William & Mary 13th among national public universities and “41st among all national universities” (Jay, 2022, para. 3). Echoing William & Mary’s prominence, the *Princeton Review* ranked the institution’s undergraduate students as one the happiest with an exceptional quality of both student and academic life (Jay, 2022).

A public institution in the Commonwealth of Virginia, William & Mary boasts 6797 students at the undergraduate level and 2587 professional and graduate students in 2022 (William & Mary, 2022e). Academically, William & Mary offers 54 undergraduate degrees and 30 graduate programs among four schools.

The affinity alumni carry towards William & Mary manifests not only in pride, but also monetarily benefits the institution. Among public universities in the United States, William & Mary ranks first among alumni giving rates (Jay, 2022, para. 1).

Fiscally, William & Mary's endowment is among the larger in the Commonwealth of Virginia. According to data gathered in 2019 by *Virginia Business*, William & Mary ranked seventh among all Virginia colleges and universities with an endowment valued at \$985 million (Virginia Business, 2019). At the end of 2021, despite the financial impact of COVID-19, William & Mary's endowment was valued at \$1.3 billion (Miller, 2021).

### **Vision, Mission, and Statement of Values of William & Mary**

There is an inherent assumption that during times of uncertainty or crisis, a college or university will visit the core tenets that guide the institution through challenging scenarios—one such as COVID-19. William & Mary, in articulating foundational underpinnings of the institution, declared the institution's vision, mission, and statement of values using the following operational definitions.

#### ***Vision Statement***

The vision statement of William & Mary, in articulating the institution's current and aspirational meaning in a global world stated, "William & Mary transcends the boundaries between research and teaching, teaching and learning, learning and living. People come to William & Mary wanting to understand and change the world—and together we do" (William & Mary, 2022f, para. 1). Of note in the William & Mary vision statement is the notion of "together we do." This collective approach, in which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, stresses the totality of the community in making additive contributions both civically and intellectually on a global level.

## *Mission Statement*

The mission statement of William & Mary is an intertwined collection of statements undergirding the purpose of the institution. Formally, William & Mary described their mission statement with the following:

A preeminent, public research university, grounded in the liberal arts and sciences since 1693, William & Mary is a vibrant and inclusive community. Through close mentoring and collaboration, we inspire lifelong learning, generate new knowledge, and expand understanding. We cultivate creative thinkers, principled leaders, and compassionate global citizens equipped for lives of meaning and distinction. William & Mary convenes great minds and hearts to meet the most pressing needs of our time. (William & Mary, 2022f, para. 2)

While the mission statement of William & Mary structurally centers on research, learning, and cultivating an informed citizenry that transcends the campus of William & Mary, the last sentence of the mission statement seemed most apropos during the pandemic—namely, the institution gathering individuals who are great thinkers and who have compassion to address pivotal junctures in the institution’s history.

## *Values*

Values, loosely defined, are tenets we give importance to, and subsequent worth. The values of an organization can be wide-ranging. The values espoused by an organization often showcase how decision making is influenced by those beliefs. In examining William & Mary’s core values, the institution put forth the following:

**Belonging.** We create a welcoming and caring community that embraces diverse people and perspectives.

**Curiosity.** We foster an open academic environment that champions intellectual agility and inspires creativity in the discovery, preservation, application, and advancement of knowledge.

**Excellence.** We aim for the extraordinary, recognizing that personal growth and meaningful accomplishment require bold and innovative aspirations, courageous risk-taking, and focused effort.

**Flourishing.** We create conditions that ensure William & Mary will thrive for all time coming, and we empower those who live, learn, and work here to make choices toward a healthy and fulfilling life.

**Integrity.** We are honorable, equitable, trustworthy, and committed to the highest ethical standards in all that we do.

**Respect.** We treat one another with mutual respect, recognizing and upholding each person's inherent dignity and worth.

**Service.** We engage with individuals and communities both near and far, devoting our knowledge, skills, and time to serving the greater good. (William & Mary, 2022f, para. 3)

Of note in William & Mary's statement of values was the attention to the beliefs of flourishing, integrity, and respect. Those values seemed most in line and pressing for the COVID-19 response mechanisms by William & Mary. With the value of flourishing, William & Mary noted the promotion of healthy choices. Integrity, as defined by the university, situated that value in terms of ethical standards. Perhaps most important in William & Mary's values was the belief of respect with the institution noting the importance of each community member's unique contribution to the campus.

## **William & Mary Initial COVID-19 Email**

From a historical perspective, the first email sent to the students, faculty, and staff of William & Mary pertaining to COVID-19 occurred on January 25, 2020, prior to the period of review for emails in this study. The email, sent from Vice President for Student Affairs, Ginger Ambler, and emergency management team chair, Sam Jones. The contents of that email are listed below:

Dear William & Mary community –

Given the media attention surrounding the spread of the 2019n-CoV virus, we wanted to provide you with the following information.

Information related to 2019-nCoV, its symptoms or how it can spread is available on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website. On that website the CDC says that while they consider the virus a “serious public health threat,” they see the immediate health risk to the general American public as low based on current information. The university has no reports of the virus on campus and we are aware of no cases in Virginia. The university continues to monitor this situation and is ready with its infectious disease protocol when warranted.

If you traveled in areas now impacted by the virus over the recent winter break and have any concerns about your health, please contact the Health Center at 757.221.4386.

The CDC issued a “Warning – Level 3” travel alert – the agency’s highest – for Wuhan, China on January 23 advising travelers to avoid all nonessential travel there. The agency has indicated an expansion of the travel warning could come as early as next week.

Anyone planning to travel to China in coming weeks should contact Steve Hanson, vice provost for international affairs and director of the Reves Center for International Studies,

if you have concerns related to university-affiliated travel. He may be reached at sehanson@wm.edu. The Reeves Center monitors travel alerts and advisories closely. State Department and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention resources are available from their website.

We will continue to update you as the situation warrants.

Sam Jones, emergency management team chair

Ginger Ambler, vice president for student affairs

(S. Jones & G. Ambler, personal communication, January 25, 2022).

With this email to the William & Mary community from Vice President Ambler and Chair Jones, the first acknowledgement of COVID-19 as a potential public health situation emerged. This acknowledgment was reinforced by data from the CDC situating 2019n-CoV virus as a potentially complex and problematic public health crisis. Ultimately, William & Mary, in this historic first email communication to the campus community, conveyed concerns pertaining to travel (specifically China), and coupled with the initial mitigation techniques as prescribed by the CDC, this form of discourse would come to signify many of the early email communications about COVID-19 from the university. Namely, the subsequent emails included in this study relied on information from the CDC to frame decisions and planning on campus.

### **The University of Virginia**

The University of Virginia was founded in 1819 by Thomas Jefferson (University of Virginia, 2022a). Jefferson, an alum of William & Mary, in establishing the university, stated he wanted a university “based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind” (University of Virginia, 2022a, para. 2). This vision, based on Jefferson’s belief in a more secular education, became the cornerstone of the academic experience of the University of Virginia.

Since the institution's founding over 200 years ago, the University of Virginia has established the reputation as a school of national prominence academically. According to the U.S. News and World Report, the University of Virginia ranked third among national public universities and 25th among all national universities (Kelly, 2022).

In the fall of 2022, the University of Virginia had an enrollment of 16,793 undergraduate students and 6,928 graduate students (University of Virginia, 2022b). The university is home to 12 academic schools and branch campus in Wise, Virginia (University of Virginia, 2022c).

Regarding the financial stability of the University of Virginia, the institution has one of the largest collegiate endowments in the United States. The value of the University of Virginia's endowment in 2022 was valued at \$13.6 billion which ranked first in Virginia (Kozlowski, 2022).

### **Vision, Mission, and Values Statement**

In locating the mission statement and ethical codes of the University of Virginia, the university promoted a general institutional mission statement and a university code for faculty and staff. The mission statement of the University of Virginia, revised in 2013, stated:

The University of Virginia is a public institution of higher learning guided by a founding vision of discovery, innovation, and development of the full potential of talented students from all walks of life. It serves the Commonwealth of Virginia, the nation, and the world by developing responsible citizen leaders and professionals; advancing, preserving, and disseminating knowledge; and providing world-class patient care. (University of Virginia, 2022d, para. 2)

The University of Virginia, further defining the ethical guidelines of the institution, wrote:



- Our enduring commitment to a vibrant and unique residential learning environment marked by the free and collegial exchange of ideas;
- Our unwavering support of a collaborative, diverse community bound together by distinctive foundational values of honor, integrity, trust, and respect;
- Our universal dedication to excellence and affordable access. (University of Virginia, 2022d, para. 3)

The mission statement of the University of Virginia indicated a desire by the institution to develop not only an educated citizenry in a global landscape, but to instill an appreciation of diversity, community, and ideas within the institution.

The University of Virginia, in addition to a mission statement, espoused a code of ethics for faculty and staff. The word choice of ethics is notable. While ethics can read as values, ethics also espouses a rigidity, or inability, to be shaped as they remain constant and unyielding.

In analyzing the nine ethical codes (in essence, a value system) that shaped the moral compass of the faculty and staff of the University of Virginia, three emerged as relevant to the institution's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They were:

**Compliance and Ethics:** We perform our responsibilities ethically and honestly, in compliance with all University policies and applicable federal, state, and local laws.

**Respectful Workplace:** We treat every individual with kindness, dignity, and respect, regardless of position or status. We provide a safe and healthy environment for working, living, and learning. We collaborate with others in a positive and respectful manner.

**Honesty and Integrity:** We act and communicate honestly and with integrity, upholding the University's values at all times. We do not condone dishonesty by anyone in any

form, including fraud, theft, cheating, plagiarism or lying. (University of Virginia, 2022d, para. 4)

### **University of Virginia Initial Email Response**

On January 24, 2020, University of Virginia executive vice president and Provost M. Elizabeth (Liz) Magill, executive vice president and chief operating officer Jennifer (J. J.) Wagner Davis, and Christopher P. Holestege, M.D., from the Department of Student Health & Wellness, sent the first known coronavirus email to students, faculty, and staff with the following message:

Dear UVA Students, Faculty and Staff:

In recent days, you have likely heard intensifying reports about a new coronavirus that originated in Wuhan, China. This new disease has sickened hundreds and led to the deaths of 26, according to the latest official reports. The threat to the UVA community currently is considered low, but outbreaks of new viruses in humans are always a public health concern.

UVA Health, the Department of Student Health & Wellness, and other UVA offices such as the International Studies Office are monitoring this evolving situation. We are writing today to provide a general update as well as specific instructions if you plan to visit China or recently traveled to Wuhan. Since information regarding this disease is changing quickly, we advise you to check the CDC website for the most up-to-date details and guidance.

As of today, the CDC recommends deferring travel only to Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. The U.S. Department of State has issued a “do not travel” advisory for all of Hubei Province. Other parts of China carry the CDC’s lowest level of alert and a

recommendation to “practice usual precautions.” Chinese visitors coming to the U.S. from Wuhan are now being screened at several U.S. airports, but this process does not currently apply to visitors from other parts of China.

If you are a student who has recently been to Wuhan or who has possibly come in contact with an infected individual AND you exhibit any of the following symptoms, please contact the Department of Student Health & Wellness at 434-924-5362 (call 434-297-4261 after hours):

- Fever
- Shortness of breath
- Cough

Similarly, if you are a faculty or staff member with these symptoms and you have traveled to Wuhan or may have come in contact with an infected individual, you should seek medical assistance through your primary care physician.

If you are planning travel abroad, remember to:

- Visit the Student Health Travel Clinic, UVA Health’s Traveler’s Clinic, or your primary care physician in advance for current travel health and vaccination recommendations.
- For students, register all University-related travel through the International Studies Office.
- Enroll in the State Department’s Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, or STEP, to receive current embassy alerts and messages for your destinations.

- The best preventative steps for any communicable disease include simple but important measures to practice as part of your daily routine, but especially during flu season:
- Wash your hands for 20 seconds or more with soapy water.
- Avoid sharing anything that has come in contact with saliva, whether in your living or social environments.
- Cough and sneeze into your elbow or a tissue.
- Get adequate sleep and eat well-balanced meals to ensure a healthy immune system.

Health officials and administrators throughout the University will continue to work closely with partners at the Virginia Department of Health to prepare for, screen, and prevent the spread of illness and keep our community safe. If the situation warrants, we will follow up with additional communication (L. Magill, J. Davis, & C. Holstege, personal communication, January 24, 2020).

The January 24, 2020, email sent to the University of Virginia students, faculty, and staff indicated a potential COVID-19 storm on the horizon. Although these leaders situated that storm geographically in China, concern was mounting that COVID-19 could possibly be in the United States despite no confirmed cases. As alluded to in this initial email, any students who was experiencing flu like symptoms after coming into contact with travelers from the Wuhan province should quarantine thus suggesting the possibility COVID-19 could be the cause of illness. Rather than focus on the unknown, however, Magill, Davis, and Holstege stressed factors that could be controlled and addressed the personal health precautions individuals on campus could take. The preventative measures included handwashing and coughing and sneezing into an elbow or tissue. While they situated these preventive measures in terms of cold and flu season,

Magill, Davis, and Holstege signaled, without explicitly stating it, these measures might also mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

### **Chapter Summary**

The Commonwealth of Virginia is fortunate to count two preeminent national universities among the state's higher education institutions. Not only do William & Mary and the University of Virginia boost academic excellence among undergraduate and graduate programs, but they are also among the most financially solvent universities in the United States. Data collected from the endowments of 689 institutions of higher education in the United States and Canada by the National Association of College and University Business Officers (2023) found that the University of Virginia ranked 18th and William & Mary 106th with respective endowments valued at \$9.85 billion and \$1.3 billion at the end of 2022. Further, William & Mary and the University of Virginia were guided by values that placed an emphasis on community first and on the use of ethical leadership. With those values at play, William & Mary and the University of Virginia confronted the COVID-19 pandemic in ways neither institution anticipated in the early part of 2020. Thus, a stage was set with battle lines for both institutions to barricade themselves in email discourse designed to defend their institutions from a most historic pandemic.

## **CHAPTER 5: CREATING HISTORICAL DISCOURSE AND ANALYSIS USING EMAILS**

While this dissertation focuses on the use of discourse analysis to analyze emails sent by variety of university leaders at William & Mary and the University of Virginia, the emails themselves are situated as historical texts. These texts, when coupled with the generational pandemic of COVID-19, showcase written documents that provide archival records of how William & Mary and the University of Virginia informed and led their institutions during this public health crisis. Of note, however, is that the emails used for this research were selected from a specific timeframe—February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021. While not an exhaustive account of the totality of the response by William & Mary and the University of Virginia circulated in emails, the early emails provide a time capsule of the narrative and measures used by both institutions during the initial period of campus reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the timeframe implemented in this dissertation for analyzing emails, it should be noted that William & Mary and the University of Virginia used email for COVID-19 communication prior to February 14, 2020, and after March 1, 2021.

### **Email Analysis**

William & Mary, in disseminating COVID-19 information, used email as a primary mode of communication to community members during the pandemic. Email provided not only information, but consistency. While access to other forms of communicative social media platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook, might have varied amongst various community constituents, university issued email provided access to student, faculty, and administrators.

Thus, William & Mary, in formulating how to communicate during the rapidly evolving COVID-19 crisis, adopted campus-wide email communiques as a primary communication vehicle to update and inform students, faculty, and staff. These communiques are archived at [https://www.wm.edu/about/administration/emergency/current\\_issues/coronavirus/response-team-updates/](https://www.wm.edu/about/administration/emergency/current_issues/coronavirus/response-team-updates/).

Likewise, the University of Virginia used email as a primary communication tool to disseminate emerging COVID-19 information and response to students, faculty, and staff. The use of email not only provided a quick and efficient way to reach constituents, but it also gave the university an opportunity, if needed, to follow-up in an ever-evolving COVID-19 landscape. Similarly, William & Mary and the University of Virginia, as the pandemic progressed, created websites devoted to information sharing and official communication about COVID-19 ([https://www.wm.edu/about/administration/emergency/current\\_issues/coronavirus/students/index.php](https://www.wm.edu/about/administration/emergency/current_issues/coronavirus/students/index.php) and <https://coronavirus.virginia.edu/updates>).

In analyzing the discourse used in COVID-19-related emails sent by William & Mary and the University of Virginia leadership, emergent themes come to light. These themes center on traversing with an invisible enemy, mitigation of infectious agents, the community rises or falls, compassion for the affected and afflicted, and an abundance of gratitude. With these themes in my mind, the following sections of this dissertation address each theme with corresponding emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia. In addition to the structuring of emails in each themes section, the date of the email is also included to provide historical context for the audience. The emergent themes across the emails from both institutions reflects the similarities in how William & Mary and the University of Virginia leadership responded to the pandemic in terms of language and linguistical choices. The selection of theme

titles showcases how the messaging and response of both institutions changed over the course of a year.

### **Traversing With an Invisible Enemy**

In addressing the initial emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, William & Mary and the University of Virginia stressed the importance of restricting of travel. Initially, these travel restrictions focused on the country of China. But as the disease became more widespread, additional travel restrictions became more common. By being preemptive with travel, the universities wanted to minimize an opportunity for disease to spread to their respective communities. While cautionary at first, William & Mary and the University of Virginia adopted a much more aggressive approach as the COVID-19 made way to the United States.

Additionally, the timing of spring break also presented additional challenges for both institutions. With confirmed cases of COVID-19 across the United States, William & Mary and the University of Virginia could potentially bring COVID-19 back to campus. This heightened the concern about what would happen if cases of COVID-19 were to break out on their campuses.

The following emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia capture the theme of traversing. Either by request or directive, both institutions included discourse that contributed to the theme of traversing with an invisible enemy.

#### ***The Situation Overseas***

The earliest reports of COVID-19 situated the disease location in China, specifically the Wuhan province of the country. While there was an awareness of the disease in media coverage, the threat to the United States at that time, was not fully understood and potentially minimized due the geographical distance from the country.



William & Mary, in exercising awareness of the disease, felt compelled to inform their constituents about the disease. The authors of the first COVID-19-related email were Vice President for Student Affairs Ginger Ambler and emergency management team chair Sam Jones. Updating the community on February 14, 2020, Sam Jones, William & Mary's emergency management chair, and Vice President of Student Affairs, Ginger Ambler, sent a health advisory email detailing William & Mary's awareness of the "rising number of novel coronavirus COVID-19 cases, particularly overseas" (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, February 14, 2020). In addressing the growing number of cases of overseas COVID-19 infections and William & Mary's impending spring break starting March 7, 2020, Ambler and Jones notified the William & Mary community that university-sponsored undergraduate travel to China was cancelled.

The country of China had clearly become a focal point of early COVID-19 emails from William & Mary. This concern advanced with restrictive language from Ambler and Jones about traveling to China by adding "All university-sponsored faculty, staff and graduate student travel to that country must be reviewed and approved by its International Travel Review Committee" (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, February 14). Traveling to China, based upon policies put in place by William & Mary, would be difficult for the next several months.

### ***Caution Emerges***

As the time for spring break 2020 approached, Vice President Ambler and emergency management team chair Jones reaffirmed student travel restrictions to China and now South Korea. Additionally, Ambler and Jones indicated "all university-sponsored faculty, staff, and graduate student travel to those countries must be reviewed and approved by the university's International Travel Review Committee" (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication,

February 26, 2020). Furthermore, Ambler and Jones advised community members to “consider postponing nonessential travel to Iran, Italy, and Japan due to the growing number of cases in those countries” (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, February 26, 2020). Ambler and Jones also reiterated that there were no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Virginia nor William & Mary.

The addition of more countries for travel advisory and caution showcased the beginning of the closing off from the outside and the beginning of isolation for the campus. Furthermore, we the travel situation concern heighten with a travel review committee now approving travel for university-sponsored travel. While not directly impinging on personal choice, Ambler and Jones, with their ask of postponing nonessential travel to various countries, signify the growing concern that the COVID-19 was trekking across the globe potentially to the United States and subsequently Williamsburg, Virginia.

The discourse used by Ambler and Jones in the February 26, 2020, email affirmed the travel restrictions to China and now South Korea. While travels to those two countries were restricted, the discourse then shifts to countries that could potentially become hotbeds of potential COVID-19 transmission. Again, William & Mary, in addition to centering the discourse on travel, also demonstrates vigilance in showing the campus community awareness in areas of the world in which COVID-19 are becoming potentially problematic. In essence, Ambler and Jones convey to the William & Mary community that university leadership is monitoring the situation and, by monitoring the situation, is ready to act in the event COVID-19 impacted the William & Mary campus.

What we also see in the discourse from Ambler and Jones was the shifting of the framing of the exigency in their February 26, 2020, email. They begin with the “bad news” in addressing

the travel restrictions to China and South Korea but balance with “good news”—there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Virginia. They assuaged the discourse by providing a “ying” to a “yang” or a balanced duality in discourse.

### ***Spring Bleak***

Typically, there is excitement in the air as spring break approaches on campuses across the United States. However, spring break 2020 would be one with historical meaning and one that would be remembered for a long time.

Preemptively, with William & Mary’s spring break set to begin on March 7, 2020, Vice President Ambler and emergency management team chair Jones messaged the university community on March 4, 2020, with updates on the spread of COVID-19 and institutional plans for when students returned from spring break. Ambler and Jones informed the university community that “COVID-19 is now reported in 13 states and more than 75 other countries worldwide” (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, March 4, 2020). Regarding possible travel by William & Mary community member, Ambler and Jones suggested:

if you are planning personal travel abroad over the break, please be advised that travel warning and restrictions are very fluid. Leaving the country at this time includes the risk of potentially not being able to leave the country you visit and/or delays or quarantines in returning to the United States (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, March 4, 2020).

In addition to COVID-19 and travel updates, Ambler and Jones impressed upon the William & Mary community:

all official information on COVID-19 and the university’s response to it will continue to come from the W&M Emergency Management Team (Sam Jones in your Inbox). The

information we share is important and we ask that you review each of these messages carefully. (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, March 4, 2020)

The shift in discourse tone in the March 4, 2020, email by Ambler and Jones was the awareness that it was only a matter of time before COVID-19 affected the William & Mary community. Concern now emerged in this email as not only was COVID-19 confirmed in the United States, but students, faculty, and staff would be leaving for spring break potentially to parts of the United States with confirmed COVID-19 cases. Furthermore, the possibility that students would travel despite William & Mary's efforts to discourage such actions provided an opportunity for the disease to make way to campus.

Ambler and Jones, in emailing faculty, students, and staff, reiterated travel precautions for the William & Mary, especially abroad. Rather than issue directives, Ambler and Jones impressed upon the community the possibility that those that do travel abroad may jeopardize their ability to come back to United States. Although not explicitly stating "do not travel," their messaging indicated "travel at your peril."

While the theme of limiting travel is central in the March 4, 2020, email to the William & Mary community, Ambler and Jones stressed the importance of personal responsibility in the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Stressing that information disseminated pertaining to COVID-19 was important, Ambler and Jones heightened community members' responsibility in acknowledging William & Mary's response to COVID-19. The cognitive, and subsequent public health expectations of community members suggested William & Mary's leadership would not tolerate an "ignorance is bliss" mentality, but rather the expectation William & Mary community members be active and responsive to discourse contained in emails about reducing the possible spread of COVID-19.

## *The Final Departure*

Spring break for William & Mary, prior to the COVID-19, was a restorative time. It marked a passage of time that indicated the first half of the semester was almost over at the University. Upon their arrival after spring break, students, faculty, and staff would continue to watch the lawn of Sunken Garden turn greener, the trees surrounding the Wren building blossom, and colorful tulips dotting the ancient campus of William & Mary. However, in early March of 2020, the tone just before spring break began was decidedly bleaker.

In the final email before spring break advising the students, faculty, and staff, vice resident Ginger Ambler and emergency management chair Sam Jones stressed:

Many of you have had questions regarding campus events. At this time, the only changes announced by the university involve study abroad and university-sponsored international travel.

Anyone taking a personal trip over the break is reminded to follow CDC guidelines regarding restricted travel locations and, in the case of international travel, protocols and requirements for reentry into the United States. Links to those resources are available at [www.wm.edu/coronavirus](http://www.wm.edu/coronavirus). This website remains the best source for information and updates related to our campus community and COVID-19. (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, March 6, 2020)

Realizing they had done all they could do to inform the community about travel and implications of traveling during an emerging public health crisis, Ambler and Jones anxiously waited for what was to come after spring break. And that wait was perhaps the longest of their career.

### ***University of Virginia's Break of Spring***

About 122 miles north of William & Mary, the University of Virginia, much like other colleges and universities during the early part of 2020, was closely monitoring the evolving COVID-19 situation emerging overseas. Allen Groves, in his capacity as Dean of Students, expressed growing concern about the public health crisis surrounding COVID-19. He wrote “The virus has spread to areas of the world beyond China with an accelerating and unpredictable trajectory. This threat will likely grow” (A. Groves, personal communication, February 26, 2020). Groves’s use of the words *acceleration*, *threat framed*, and *public health crisis* established COVID-19 as a serious public health threat. In particular, the usage of the term *crisis* highlighted the gravity of the disease. His intentional usage of the word *unpredictable* suggested danger. The fact that spring break was around the corner only heightened the threat the disease could be potentially making way to Charlottesville after the break.

### ***The Concern for Employees***

While Dean Groves cautioned the student body of the University of Virginia about potential travel risks surrounding COVID-19, Executive President J. J. Davis expressed similar concerns to the employees of the university. Davis cautioned “If you are planning to travel soon, be aware that there is significant uncertainty surrounding the spread of the virus” (personal communication, February 27, 2020). Rather than say just uncertainty about the disease, Davis magnified the threat of COVID-19 by adding “significant uncertainty” thus elevating the immediacy of the threat.

### ***Winter is Coming***

By early March, there was a growing realization that COVID-19 was rapidly becoming a public health crisis that would begin to impact the United States. Sensing urgency and concern

for not only the University, but Charlottesville as well. University of Virginia Provost Liz Magill wrote the university community about the escalating COVID-19 crisis in the United States.

While Magill noted there were no reported cases of COVID-19 in Virginia at the time of writing the announcement, she stated “the safety of the UVA and Charlottesville communities is our primary concern” (L. Magill, personal communication, March 3, 2020). In addressing the students, faculty, and staff, Magill informed the community that based on guidance from the CDC, the University of Virginia was cancelling all study abroad programs taking place over the spring break. In announcing the cancellation of university sponsored spring break trips, Magill urged “faculty, staff, and students who have personal or professional plans to travel either internationally or to affected areas in the U.S. to reconsider their travel” (L. Magill, personal communication, March 3, 2020). Magill closed her March 3rd by stating:

the decisions we are making rely heavily on the guidance we are receiving from the CDC and the Virginia Department of Health and are intended to protect the health and welfare of our faculty, staff, students, and local community. We recognize the uncertainty this global health issue is creating and are committed to keep you informed and up to date as this situation evolves (L. Magill, personal communication, March 3, 2020).

With this email, a shifting in messaging from Magill begins. While travel is still a highlight of the correspondence, more concerted language emerged about well-being and hints of mitigation. Magill’s inclusion of CDC and Virginia Department of Health suggested that information gathering about the epidemiology of COVID-19 was increasing and the university “would rely heavily on the guidance” (L. Magill, personal communication, March 3, 2020).

Although she focuses much of the email on travel restriction, the initial passage of Magill’s communique to the faculty, students, and staff of university is significant rhetorically.

She begins her address to the community situated with fact—there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19. Critically thinking about the phrasing of that statement, a larger question arises, “what about unconfirmed cases?” Although semantically a question arises, the offering of “no confirmed cases” offers some comforting reassurance of safety despite growing travel restrictions implemented by the university.

### ***Winter is Here***

Five days after Magill’s emails to the university community about additional travel restrictions, University of Virginia President Jim Ryan emailed the University of Virginia community reiterating the need to limit travel. He directed:

University-related travel to countries where the CDC has enacted level 3, or the State Department has enacted levels 3 or 4 is prohibited. CDC travel guidance related to COVID-19 is available here. Faculty and staff who have exceptional reasons to travel to those countries may submit a petition to the Provost’s office via an email to [COVIDtravel@virginia.edu](mailto:COVIDtravel@virginia.edu). International travel to restricted areas without an approved petition will not be reimbursed. If you travel or have recently traveled to one of these countries, we expect you to follow CDC guidance about self-isolation: stay home for a period of 14 days upon your return and seek medical attention if you experience fever, coughs, or difficulty breathing (J. Ryan, personal communication, March 8, 2020).

President Ryan also urged the University of Virginia community to reconsider travel plans domestically. He wrote:

At this point, we are not prohibiting university-related domestic travel, but we strongly discourage all University travel (both domestic and international) for non-essential purposes, particularly that by air, to large gatherings, and to areas experiencing high



numbers of COVID-19 cases, as documented by the CDC. If you must travel, please take all possible precautions before traveling, including staying up to date on the latest spread of the virus and considering difficulties you may encounter in returning home, especially when traveling internationally. (J. Ryan, personal communication, March 8, 2020)

With President Ryan's email address to the University of Virginia community in early March, there was growing consensus that the genie was out of the bottle and the impact COVID-19 would have on the United States and subsequently Charlottesville would be significant. This concern manifested in Ryan's directive of prohibited travel to any level three or four countries. There was flexibility in this policy when Ryan added "faculty and staff who have exceptional reasons to travel to those countries may submit a petition to the Provost's office via an email" (J. Ryan, personal communication, March 8, 2020). This flexibility also manifested in domestic travel with Ryan adding "at this point, we are not prohibiting university-related domestic travel" (J. Ryan, personal communication, March 8, 2020).

### **Mitigation of Infectious Agents**

Throughout the pandemic, both William & Mary and the University of Virginia, stressed the importance of reducing transmission of COVID-19 amongst community members. In addition to community members of their respective campus communities, both intuitions conveyed an ethical obligation to protect the local communities of Williamsburg and Charlottesville, respectively. Mitigation efforts were vital to both institutions early in the pandemic as the scientific community began to gather more information about the epidemiology of the disease. The theme of mitigation was predicated on public health measures instituted by William & Mary and the University of Virginia. Early mitigation techniques, such as handwashing and facial masks, soon gave way to testing that could detect the COVID-19 virus.

COVID-19 testing served as crucial turning point for William & Mary and the University of Virginia in terms of planning for the fall 2020 academic semester. With reliable testing, both institutions could confirm positive COVID-19 cases and began isolation measures. While testing signified a major mitigation advancement, the development of a COVID-19 vaccine in spring 2021 would ultimately be the most important mitigation strategy employed by both institutions. Thus, we see how William & Mary and the University adapted mitigation efforts as scientific understanding increased about COVID-19.

As the analysis of the emails took place, mitigation quickly became a major theme to emerge in examination and re-examination of rhetoric used by both institutions. From handwashing to facial coverings, the following emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia showcased mitigation themes throughout the early part of the pandemic and then subsequent mitigation techniques that emerged later stages of the pandemic, most notably the emergency authorization of the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines.

Of note is that these mitigation strategies were also implicit during cold and flu season. Both William & Mary and the University of Virginia used mitigation techniques to stop the spread of multiple infectious agents not just COVID-19. In reviewing these practices, even basic hand washing and coughing and sneezing into tissue or elbow, could help (not guarantee) reduce the spread of disease.

### ***Some In Loco Parental Advice***

In concert with updating William & Mary community members about travel policy during the emerging COVID-19 pandemic, there was also growing awareness basic public health preventative strategies would also help to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in the event the disease became prevalent in Williamsburg. The task of relaying these suggested mitigation

techniques were delegated to Vice President of Student Affairs Ginger Ambler and emergency management chair Sam Jones. They “wash hands regularly, avoid touching public surfaces, cover nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing, seek medical care if feeling ill” (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, February 14, 2020). Furthermore, Ambler and Jones added that “based on current information the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continue to emphasize the immediate health risk from this virus to the general American public as low” (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, February 14, 2020).

Even without a concrete epidemiological understanding of COVID-19, Ambler and Jones introduced rhetoric that, in hindsight, would echo throughout the pandemic—mitigating the spread of COVID-19 through hygienic practices. Even at the earliest juncture of the COVID-19 pandemic (at this point mid-February 2020), these basic public health measures (i.e., handwashing, covering nose and mouth, limiting touching, etc.) would undergird a significant mechanisms of mitigation efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

### ***Centralized Collection of Information: COVID Website***

As February closed on the campus of William & Mary, there was an administrative awareness that the possibility existed that email, while a quick and efficient way to deliver COVID-19-related information, could also potentially be deleted or lost due to university email volume. With that key consideration in mind, university leadership decided to devote a webpage devoted entirely COVID-19-related information. With centralized website, William & Mary also elevated the significance of COVID-19 as an emerging public health crisis.

With those considerations in mind, February 28, 2020, marked the first time Vice President Ambler and emergency management team chair Jones referred to William & Mary’s own coronavirus website. In informing the community, Ambler and Jones affirmed “centralized

information and resources related to the disease are now available at <https://www.wm.edu/coronavirus>” (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, February 28, 2020). In addition to notifying students, faculty, and staff of the site of relevant amalgamated COVID-19 information, Ambler and Jones relayed containment strategies employed by William & Mary Facilities Management. These precautions included “disinfecting high-touch areas across campus including doorknobs, railings, and banisters” (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, February 28, 2020).

The February 28th email signed by Ambler and Jones suggested two things. The first, William & Mary must organize the chaotic nature of COVID-19 into a centralized location accessible to community members. This “one-stop” approach where relevant information could be found benefitted the students, faculty, and staff from searching through their emails about COVID-19 updates while also informing the community of mitigation techniques the university would use throughout the pandemic. While email was the first line in communication during the pandemic for William & Mary, the webpage dedicated to organizing that information would now compliment email communication from university leadership.

Additionally, Ambler and Jones discourse takes on a proactive tone in addressing public health measures designed to lessen the spread of germs and viruses. Once again, in affirming public health protocols, Ambler and Jones framed William & Mary as proactive in response and awareness of mitigating the spread of cold and flu viruses, and possibly COVID-19 as well.

### ***The President Acts***

On March 11, 2022, William & Mary President Katherine Rowe emailed community members a COVID-19 response update detailing the institution’s continued vigilance of the emerging global pandemic. In her email, President Rowe framed the COVID-19 response as:

guided by four key health goals: safeguarding the health of the students, faculty, and staff; ensuring students complete their classes; maintaining the university's research and other operations; and joining the national effort to slow the spread of COVID-19, to protect our communities, from Williamsburg to DC and beyond. (K. Rowe, personal communication, March 11, 2020)

In ensuring the health and well-being of the William & Mary community, President Rowe suspended in-person instruction and moved to online instruction on March 23, 2020. Rowe also requested that students not return to campus with only those students unable to leave to campus allowed to stay.

Although in-person instruction was halted, William & Mary administrators were “expected to continue working during this period, observing proper health protocols and with modifications as needed and approved by supervisors” (K. Rowe, personal communication, March 11, 2022). Realizing William & Mary’s “understanding of this pandemic is rapidly evolving” (K. Rowe, personal communication, March 11, 2020), Rowe initiated an April 1, 2020, deadline to further assess if William & Mary would continue newly initiated COVID-19 policies and procedures.

President Rowe also offered the members of the William & Mary community an opportunity to suggest ideas “to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission and mitigate disruption. Many on campus are already exploring ways to use telecommuting, virtual meetings, and buddy systems” (K. Rowe, personal communication, March 11, 2020).

Operationally, it became apparent to President Rowe that a key mitigation technique on campus would be to reduce the population density on campus when she affirmed “All in-person classes are suspended” and “students are strongly encouraged to return home or stay home” (K.

Rowe, personal communication, March 11, 2020). The fewer people on campus, the fewer who can possibly spread or catch COVID-19. With Rowe's directive that students should stay home or leave campus, a domino had fallen and one that would change the remainder of the semester.

### ***The Zoom Boom***

As the COVID-19 continued to affect the United States and Virginia, there was growing administrative awareness that if students were encouraged to leave campus, how much longer could faculty and staff avoid the same fate. Following up with President's Rowe's address on March 11, 2020, to the William & Mary community, emergency management team chair, Sam Jones, and Ginger Ambler, vice president for student affairs, emailed students, faculty, and staff on March 13, 2020, emphasizing evolving university priority responses to COVID-19. Updates in the joint Jones and Ambler email to the William & Mary community focused on remote work policy, COVID-19 emergency leave, residence hall access, grading guidance, online instruction, and COVID-19 exposure or suspected exposure. Perhaps the most significant update from Jones and Ambler was adjustments to working remotely. They noted "these adjustments—in relative order of priority—include a) utilizing telework if appropriate b) practicing social distancing in work spaces, c) using flexible scheduling of staff and d) developing creative solutions" (G. Ambler & S. Jones, personal communication, March 13, 2020). In detailing each update, Jones and Ambler acknowledged the emerging COVID-19 pandemic as a "challenging and potentially anxious time" (personal communication, March 13, 2020) adding "as we work thorough this together remember our shared goals." In this instance, the goals espoused by Ambler and Jones situated on mitigation efforts on William & Mary's behalf. By reducing the number individuals on campus ("developing creative solutions"), and allowing greater flexibility in teaching, learning, and working ("flexible scheduling"), William & Mary took proactive steps in reducing

population density on campus and, consequentially, reducing personal contact during a critical time in the early stages of the pandemic.

### ***The Great Shutdown***

By mid-March, the Commonwealth of Virginia was implementing significant stay-at-orders. Responding to a statewide directive from Governor Ralph Northam closing executive and state offices, William & Mary Vice President of Student Affairs Ambler and emergency team management chair Sam Jones emailed the campus community relaying that effective immediately “the university is closing all offices to the general public, effective noon today, for one week through March 22” (personal communication, March 16, 2020). Furthermore, Ambler and Jones instructed “employees should contact their supervisors and plan to work remotely if at all possible. Advance approval is not required for telework” (personal communication, March 16, 2020). Additionally, stressing the limited services available to students still on campus, Ambler and Jones advised “we strongly advise all students to leave campus if they can” in attempt to lessen the spread of COVID-19. Despite the escalating public health directives and real time response measures, Ambler and Jones continued to address the growing anxiety students, faculty, and staff might be experiencing during this uncertain time. In assuaging the William & Mary community’s concern about the rapidly changing public health dynamics of COVID-19, Ambler and Jones reiterated “University leadership continues to work diligently on this situation and we will provide updates as we know more” and “we appreciate everyone’s cooperation and patience as we navigate this rapidly changing situation” (personal communication, March 16, 2020).

The urgency in Ambler and Jones’s email “we strongly all students to leave” and “advanced approval is not required for telework” upped the rhetorical ante as a new phase of

COVID-19 pandemic emerged—stay at home. Mid-March was a tipping point for William & Mary as more evacuative measures appeared in communicate form the institution.

### *New Rules of Engagement*

As March blossomed in Williamsburg, many operational aspects needed to be addressed as the storm of COVID-19 finally arrived inland at William & Mary. President Rowe, realizing the need to communicate how the university was going to go forward, emailed the community with several operational updates. She reiterated:

As we move forward, the goals we shared last week remain our north star: 1) to safeguard the health of our students, faculty, and staff; 2) to ensure students complete their classes; 3) to maintain the university’s research and other operations; 4) to do everything within our power to support national and global efforts to slow the spread of the disease.

We make these decisions in conjunction with the advice of local health authorities, recognizing that the Peninsula Health District, in which our main campus resides, has a dense concentration of positive COVID-19 test results—now including individuals on our campus. Nothing is more important than the health and wellness of our community.

(personal communication, March 19, 2020)

With institutional values, coupled with public health input from the Peninsula Health District, President Rowe informed the William & Mary community of several key COVID-19 policy changes in a spring email address. Among the updates, President Rowe decreed all classes would be held virtually for the remainder of the semester. Furthermore, in closing the residence halls to students to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 no later than March 25, President Rowe offered “students partial refunds for room and board” (personal communication, March 19, 2022) while



highlighting William & Mary was “intensely aware of the financial vulnerability of so many families and employees” (personal communication, March 19, 2022).

Rowe’s mention of a North Star, a metaphor for purpose and values, highlighted how she would lead during this historic pandemic. By leading with the commitment “to safeguard the health of our students, faculty, and staff,” (Rowe, personal communication, March 19, 2020), Rowe signaled that above all else, she would prioritize health and safety above all else. Thus, her leadership would showcase a community first approach in which public health would be the basis of all university decision making during the pandemic and utilize the guidance of public health experts to aide in how to keep the William & Mary community safe.

### ***The Lockdown Continues***

As spring quickly approached, William & Mary, like many college campuses across Virginia, was faced with a new normal in which many operational activities, such as instruction and student services, were being conducted remotely. Vice President Ambler and emergency management team chair Jones reiterated that university office would remain closed and “given the advice of federal, state, and local health officials, we are extending that restriction through at least May 1” (personal communication, March 20, 2020). In relaying this policy update, Ambler and Jones stressed “university offices will remain open and all employees who can work remotely should plan to telework until the end of the semester” (personal communication, March 20, 2020). In ending their email to the William & Mary community, Ambler and Jones suggested “we’d like to remind each of you to take care of yourself. We have all experienced a lot of change in recent weeks and we need to take care of both our physical health and mental health” (personal communication, March 20, 2020).

The uncertainty of when William & Mary would return to normal operations, if at all, permeated Ambler and Jones’s email. While they indicated a time after May 1 as a possible date of a potential reopening, “the plan to telework until the end of the semester” indicated that timeframe might be significantly longer, and reopening would be dictated on the advice of federal, state, and local health officials” (personal communication, March 8, 2020) continuing William & Mary’s commitment to a science and data based approach to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *A Glimmer of Hope*

Acknowledging William & Mary’s final weeks of the chaotic 2020 spring semester, President Katherine Rowe, and her leadership team, were diligently planning for Fall 2020. With the goal of returning to in-person instruction in the fall, Rowe remarked:

This spring has clarified much about why we value face-to-face learning at William & Mary—and why we seek to return to it with such a strong sense of purpose. Cognitively: studying together speeds and deepens learning in myriad ways. Research has shown this; the challenges of learning under quarantine prove it by direct experience. Socially: collaboration accelerates the creation of new knowledge much faster than solo effort.

Above all, working and learning in company strengthens the deep human connections we prize at William & Mary. (personal communication, May 6, 2020)

With public health critical in determining William & Mary’s path forward, Rowe offered William & Mary would not operate in a vacuum in planning the community’s return. Rather, Rowe affirmed:

It’s important to remember that W&M does not control the surrounding public health context; decisions by the federal government and by Virginia’s leadership will frame the

university's options in the months ahead. Yet much is in our control that promotes resilience: creative adaptations to the structure and rhythms of our curriculum and adaptations to our physical plant, operations and modes of work that safeguard health. (personal communication, May 6, 2020)

President Rowe, in explaining how William & Mary would implement mitigation efforts, noted that guidance on such efforts, would be shaped by local and federal agencies rather than in a vacuum by noting “decisions by the federal government and by Virginia’s leadership will frame the university’s options in the months ahead” (personal communication, May 6, 2020). Rowe, thus, lays out the groundwork for the university’s COVID-19 response in terms of guidance and subsequent response by William & Mary not only in the present but in the future as well. However, Rowe looked to balance this need to heed state and federal public health guidance with her conviction that “working and learning in company strengthens the deep human connections we prize at William & Mary” (personal communication, May 6, 2020). This balancing act would be crucial as William & Mary moved forward to plan for Fall 2020.

### ***A Path Forward Emerges***

In June of 2020, the United States was still very much in the grips of COVID-19. Despite the omnipresence of the pandemic, a glimmer of optimism emerged that perhaps an in-person experience could materialize this fall. President Katherine Rowe, sensing this optimism, emailed the students, faculty, and staff of William & Mary with a subject line entitled “The Path Forward, Fall 2020.” In her email, Rowe signaled that William & Mary would indeed return to an in-person campus experience albeit with modifications to protect against the spread of COVID-19. Rowe highlighted several bulleted points which included:

- A&S Fall Semester will start early and end before Thanksgiving, with no fall break

- The well-being of our community is paramount. We will systematically adapt campus, operations and curriculum to safeguard health
- All William & Mary employees and every student choosing to attend this fall are expected fully to commit to these safeguards, out of respect for our close community of learning and work
- We will offer flexibility for students, staff and faculty to have options – including a summer semester in 2021 – so that no student’s path through college is interrupted
- We will emphasize wellness, equity and community: focusing on the elements of learning, working and campus life that matter most
- A hallmark of the fall semester will be engaging the creativity of W&M students in pragmatic solutions to support our communities under pandemic. (personal communication, June 12, 2020)

Rowe, in highlighting key considerations for an adaptive in-person return to William & Mary, acknowledged the “robust collaboration between universities in the Virginia public higher education system, the Virginia Secretary of Education, and the Virginia Department of Health” (personal communication, June 12, 2020) situated William & Mary as having allies in the war against COVID-19 and allies the institution would count on in the pandemic. While maintaining the importance of establishing best practices amongst Virginia 4-year public institutions, Rowe ultimately acknowledged the William & Mary community. In closing statements to campus community, Rowe was candid in affirming:

Much work remains. We trust and empower our dedicated faculty and staff to realize this plan in ways consistent with their disciplines and schools, and with the best interests of our community in mind. And we trust in our students. Collaborations between staff,

faculty, students and our surrounding community are the superpowers that have made W&M successful in the spring. These partnerships will continue to be essential going forward (personal communication, June 12, 2020).

With so much uncertainty and change brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, a certain stasis fell across the United States. The opportunity to engage in the world was lessened as stay-at-home orders limited engagement outside the home. Most paths lead and stay at home for much of the early part of the pandemic. Rowe, however, in adopting a proactive stance (“forward” not backward), signaled to the William & Mary an era was emerging in the pandemic. One that offered flexibility (“We will offer flexibility for students, staff and faculty to have options – including a summer semester in 2021”), coupled most importantly with safety (“the well-being of our community is paramount”).

### ***The Masking of William & Mary***

Perhaps the most visible artifact of the entire COVID-19 pandemic was the face mask. As business and workplaces began to slowly reopen in the summer of 2020, facial masking became mandatory in many public spaces. William & Mary, in following the advice of public health officials since the beginning of the pandemic, would be no different in enforcing facial masks for community members and visitors to the campus. William & Mary emergency management team chair Sam Jones notified the campus community of guidance pertaining to the mandatory use of face coverings beginning on July 15, 2020, and continuing through December 31, 2020. Jones, in conveying these public health measures, bulleted several key points outlining the general requirements of face coverings. He relayed:

- University requirements for face coverings apply to all faculty, staff, students, contract workers, vendors and others who are on William & Mary’s various campuses or enter university owned or leased buildings.
- Indoor public spaces: when in a facility, everyone should wear a face covering over the nose and mouth including building entry areas, classrooms and labs, libraries, conference rooms, hallways, elevators, restrooms, lounges and other shared spaces that allow for public interaction or gathering. The ability to physically distance within a space does not eliminate the above requirements.
- All requirements apply to both indoor and outdoor co-curricular activities and spaces.
- You are **not required** to wear a face covering when in your room or suite in your residence hall.
- You are required to wear a face covering when in university housing hallways, other shared spaces and hall baths (except when actively washing, brushing teeth, etc.).  
(personal communication, July 14, 2020)

Of note in Jones’s email is the continual use of the word required with phrases such as “you are required,” “all requirements apply,” and “university requirements for facing coverings apply to all.” Despite the continual, and intentional use of the word required, the facial mask mitigation efforts did allow for flexibility for students “when in your room or suite in your resident hall.”

***Let the Testing Begin***

As William & Mary moved closer to the return of students, faculty, and staff to campus for Fall 2020, emergency management team chair Sam Jones emailed the campus community on detailing the implementation of COVID-19 testing protocols for students and employees. Jones, in articulating the need for testing, affirmed:

Recognizing that the health landscape continues to evolve, a robust testing effort allows us to monitor the prevalence of COVID-19 on campus among students and employees, and to track campus trends relative to those locally, within Virginia and nationally.

Testing frequency and population percentage will evolve based on campus trends and available testing methods. (S. Jones, personal communication, July 22, 2020)

Of note in Jones's July 22, 2020, email to the William & Mary community, was the testing requirements for students and faculty and staff. Students, unlike faculty and staff, would be required to be tested prior to the start of the Fall 2020 semester. Faculty and staff, conversely, would "would have access to voluntary at-will testing through [Virginia Commonwealth University Health System] for a \$15 out-of-pocket copayment, with the university covering the balance" (S. Jones, personal communication, July 22, 2020). Jones also noted that prevalence testing would occur every 2 weeks for students, faculty, and staff with 5% of students being selected and only 2% of employees sampled.

With "robust testing efforts" (S. Jones, personal communication July 22, 2020), William & Mary not only could track COVID-19 positivity rates, but also create isolation protocols as well for those testing positive. Furthermore, testing prior coming to campus aided in how the institution would help keep students from unknowingly spreading the disease on campus and the Williamsburg area thus helping mitigate the spread of the disease.

### ***The Slow Roll***

With the start of the 2020-2021 academic year quickly approaching, there a cautious excitement in the air. Welcoming students, faculty, and staff back amid global pandemic was certainly new territory for the leadership of William & Mary President Katherine Rowe, in anticipation of the upcoming Fall 2020 semester, emailed the faculty, students, and staff of

William & Mary on July 31, 2020, updating the community of a phased return to campus to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. In her email, President Rowe stressed William & Mary would “slow the pace of student return to campus through August, to Labor Day Weekend, so as to minimize density and reduce circulation on/off campus” and “delay the start of in-person undergraduate instruction until after Labor Day, so as to ensure consistent experiences for all students (on and off campus) during a more extended return to campus” (personal communication, July 31, 2020). While President Rowe’s email conveyed promise of the return of the William & Mary community to the Williamsburg campus, she stressed the importance of student accountability in the success of a COVID-19 normalized start of the semester. Rowe wrote;

At the end of the day, our students’ ability to sustain these commitments will determine our capacity to be together safely. The health and welfare of our employees, not just our students, depends on robust compliance. As I said in last week’s Town Hall, W&M students bring a special and very powerful commitment to building community. Yet understandably those at greater risk worry about how consistently young adults will be able to adhere to these guidelines, on and off campus. So it’s important to be clear that W&M will be holding student groups and individual students accountable, as appropriate, when they do not comply. Those who breach these rules repeatedly will be sanctioned and may be sent home for the semester (personal communication, July 31, 2020).

With this statement, Rowe stressed the importance of accountability referencing “robust compliance” with noncompliant students disciplined or even expelled. With so much at stake, especially the health and well-being of the entire community, Rowe’ demarcation of acceptable and nonacceptable behavior was clearly drawn. Perhaps because of the size of the population, or



perhaps their patterns of behavior, students, more so than any other campus constituency group, would be “accountable, as appropriate, when they do not comply.”

President Rowe, also aware of the anxiety brewing for an in-person fall experience, addressed the constant state of flux and uncertainty the COVID-19 pandemic still wrought on the William & Mary community. While the amorphous state of the pandemic was becoming more linear, Rowe made clear:

we continue making decisions with the best information available, adjustments like the ones announced today will be part of the semester. We are working with real-time information, assessing current conditions and predictions for future trends with expert advice – guidance from authorities in infectious disease, epidemiology and our regional public health partners (personal communication, July 31, 2020)

affirming once again science and data would dictate how the 2020-2021 academic year would play out.

### ***What’s Not Good for the Goose***

With the fall semester underway at William & Mary Sam Jones, in this role as chair of the COVID management team, emailed the William & Mary community in late summer updating the campus, that despite Governor Ralph Northam reversing some COVID-19 restrictions in the commonwealth, the university would keep key COVID-19 mitigation policies in place. Jones wrote:

- On- and off-campus gatherings continue to be limited to no more than 10 people with required masks and physical distancing.
- Programs or events sponsored by the university or student groups will continue to be limited to 50 people, with required masks and physical distancing.

- Masks must be worn indoors and outdoors on campus and off-campus, in **all** instructional and social situations.
- At least six feet of physical distance must be maintained – 10 feet for those exercising, singing or cheering – consistent with state guidelines (personal communication, September 11, 2020).

Jones, while recognizing a governmental shift in easing some COVID-19 public health protocol in Virginia, reiterated that William & Mary would still hold firm to current COVID-19 mitigation policies despite Governor Northam’s suggested directives. This adherence stemmed, in part, to the realization that the opportunity to informally gather socially, coupled with the return to campus and warm weather, might lead to an uptick in positive COVID-19 cases on William & Mary’s campus. Jones, perhaps fearing these gatherings might, metaphorically add fuel to a barely contained fire, firmly stated, in no uncertain terms, such gatherings were prohibited (“on- and off-campus gatherings continue to be limited to no more than 10 people with required masks and physical distancing”).

### ***The Infectious Agents Return***

As the start of the flu season began in October, coupled with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Sam Jones implored the William & Mary community to consider the ramification of not receiving the flu vaccination. The flu vaccine, in combination of COVID-19 public health policies (i.e., face coverings, washing hands, limited campus interactions, etc.), would help mitigate an already complicated flu season. He stressed in his October 12, 2020, email that:

The flu is dangerous enough on an annual basis, but its threat is compounded this year with the presence of COVID-19. Even if you’ve never received a flu shot before, please do it this year. Aside from benefiting the immediate William & Mary community,

vaccinating against the flu can help protect the wider community and preserve needed medical and hospital capacity.

As Jones stressed the importance a flu shot, he also urged those in supervisory positions at William & Mary to consider the importance of physical well-being of team members by using statements in the email that promoted physical and emotional well-being of employees during the pandemic. Wellness, and consequently, mitigation, emerge as discursive in this email. He declared:

If you're a supervisor, department chair or program manager, prioritize the health of faculty and staff members and the workplace under pandemic conditions. Please check in with your faculty and staff members, ideally daily, to make sure they are well. Promote a culture that encourages people to remain off campus if they don't feel well and to seek appropriate care. Encourage erring on the side of caution in health & wellness. W&M enjoys a strong work ethic; let's make sure that ethic doesn't tempt us to work when we don't feel well. Doing so delays recovery and puts others at risk (personal communication, October 12, 2020).

Jones, in some ways mirroring a human resources frame, prioritized understanding (“promote a culture that encourages people to remain off campus if they don't feel well and to seek appropriate care”) as a newer mitigation strategy coupled with a workplace culture shift during the pandemic and thereafter (“W&M enjoys a strong work ethic; let's make sure that ethic doesn't tempt us to work when we don't feel well. Doing so delays recovery and puts others at risk”).

### *Home for the Holidays*

With Thanksgiving only a few weeks away, coupled with a cold and flu season working in concert with COVID-19, concerns about proximity returned. While masking and social distancing was effective in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 during the fall semester, William & Mary, concerned about emerging COVID-19 variants, opted to err on the side of caution and encouraged remote work during the administratively slower winter break on campus. Sam Jones, in a rhetorical nod to work/life balance disguised as mitigation, stressed:

W&M faculty and staff, please plan to return as much as possible to remote work over the break, coordinating this effort with your dean, department chair or supervisor. This not only effectively de-densifies campus, but it allows facilities management the opportunity to complete deferred maintenance of our spaces. It also allows staff from facilities management, public safety and other teams that have been working without pause since last spring to schedule time off. This slowdown is a stated priority of President Rowe and is also key to our restoring and maintaining critical healthy immune systems during the coldest months (personal communication, November 11, 2020).

While Jones echoed the need to minimize the number of staff physically on campus, he also encouraged diligence (“it is important we remain vigilant and focused”) and kindness (“your care for each other during these unprecedented times is William & Mary's best defense against the virus”).

Although emotive language, while not mitigative in nature, the usage of the phrase “your care for one another” was evocative in Jones’s communique with the William & Mary community. The implication, that caring is perhaps the first element of any mitigation effort, and subsequent practice of those efforts, was telling. Jones’s nod to care framed mitigation as not

only squarely a practical application of hygienic habits, but one rooted in emotional connection as well.

### *Changes in Season and Leadership*

The end of the Fall 2020 semester marked an important change in the leadership of the COVID-19 response team. Emailing the faculty, students, and staff of William & Mary on December 17, 2020, Amy Sebring, William & Mary's chief operating officer, announced that she would be succeeding Sam Jones and would be assuming the mantle of COVID-19 response director. Updating the William & Mary community about the upcoming spring 2021 semester, Sebring's focus in this email was to provide guidance pertaining the public health measures to be utilized by the university for the spring semester. Sebring, like Jones before her, delineated the public health protocols for faculty and staff and those for students. Sebring communicated, much like Jones before her, situated language in terms of mitigation efforts with:

As in the fall semester, students, faculty and staff who work closely with others will need to self-quarantine for eight days before returning to in-person activities on campus. In addition, employees who work in positions identified by Human Resources as being in high-contact roles in which they may not be able to use mitigation strategies – such as masks, physical barriers and social distancing at all times—may be tested for COVID-19 before students return to campus (personal communication, December 17, 2020).

Addressing the student return to campus for the spring 2021 semester, Sebring repeated many of the COVID-19 mitigation strategies, expectations, and language used by William & Mary in the Fall 2020 semester. Sebring, in conveying expectations for students prior to their return in 2021, wrote:

- As with the fall semester, students are expected to quarantine eight days prior to returning to campus to minimize potential exposure to COVID-19.
- All students living in campus housing, who plan to attend in-person instruction or use university facilities, will be required to have a negative COVID-19 test before returning to campus. Students within a 30-mile radius of campus will also need to test negative.
- W&M will provide each student a free COVID-19 saliva test, mailed in advance of returning. The COVID-19 testing group will soon begin contacting students by email to coordinate test registration and shipments, based on students' anticipated arrival dates.
- The self-collected saliva test is administered through Clinical Reference Laboratory as part of the network of labs that includes VCU Health, our health care partner.
- These are the tests required for move-in and in-person instruction; W&M does not plan to accept outside test results due to the variability and efficacy of COVID-19 tests nationally and difficulties in streamlining testing results and reporting requirements from multiple sources.
- Students will not be permitted to be on campus until their negative test results have been received and verified. (personal communication, December 17, 2020).

Sebring's email repeats many of the parroted mitigation strategies used during the Fall 2020 semester. Perhaps the reiteration of these protocols provided a measure of assuredness after the successful completion of the fall semester. By transferring those successful protocols of disease mitigation to spring, William & Mary conveyed to their community that despite the

addition of cold and flu season, if community members continue to practice the same health protocols as before, spring semester could mimic that of fall in terms of operational success.

### *A New Year*

The start of a new year is often associated with promise. With the New Year, we shed the weight of the past year and look forward to creating resolutions designed to promote self-improvement. William & Mary, much like those making resolutions for the new year, hoped 2021 would find the institution, pandemically, in a different spot.

With the roll-out of emergency approved COVID-19 vaccines occurring, there was an excitement that spring semester would begin the return to pre-pandemic normalcy. William & Mary President Katherine Rowe, expressing optimism, began her January 24, 2021, email to the campus community by offering:

I write to share William & Mary's expectations for the spring semester, with planned adjustments that reflect current public health conditions. Through the break, staff and faculty have been intensively preparing for a spring semester that will be different. In early January, the United States is experiencing the fiercest spread of COVID-19 to date. At the same time, hearts are lifted by the vaccines being distributed to frontline healthcare workers and our most vulnerable community members – thanks to extraordinary efforts by scientists around the world (personal communication, January 24, 2021).

While Rowe's acknowledgement of COVID-19 vaccine distribution to healthcare workers and immunocompromised individuals indicated optimism in the scientific community's game changing vaccine, the wider distribution of the vaccine to wider swaths of groups was still a ways away. To that end, Rowe asserted:

From a successful fall, we know that campus communities can work, live and study together as long as we remain committed to protecting ourselves and others. On campus, that will mean re-creating our shared norms around mask wearing (indoors and out), physical distancing and other measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. So too, actions taken off campus have an impact on the W&M community. For those in Williamsburg, a wholehearted embrace of our shared norms is needed wherever we are, on campus and off. At the beginning of the semester, outdoor temperatures will remain low in Williamsburg; we will spend more time indoors, and need to exhibit steadfast resolve. The W&M community is known for its conscientious care, and I'm confident in our commitment to one another. (personal communication, January 4, 2020)

President Rowe's January 4, 2020, email was significant. Historically, it marked the first time she mentioned the COVID-19 vaccine to the university community. In mentioning the COVID-19 vaccine ("at the same time, hearts are lifted by the vaccines being distributed to frontline healthcare workers and our most vulnerable community members"), Rowe indicated that mitigation efforts, while still relying on traditional practices ("mask wearing [indoors and out], physical distancing and other measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19") would now also focus on vaccines to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. While the implementation of such plan was still months away, a significant path forward in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 was emerging for Rowe and her administration.

### ***The Vaccine Cometh***

With the F.D.A. authorizing the emergency use of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, an optimism fell on William & Mary's campus. A moment, long awaited by the leadership of the university, was finally happening. A hope was emerging that perhaps William & Mary could



return to normalcy after such a chaotic year. Chief Operating Officer Amy Sebring, who succeeded Sam Jones as William & Mary's director of the COVID-19 Response team in December of 2020, provided the campus community an update on COVID-19 vaccination efforts at William & Mary and surrounding locality. Rhetorically, Sebring opened her email addressing the number of actual employees who were scheduled to be vaccinated. These numbers mattered both in terms of signaling quantity, but community interest as well. Sebring wrote:

To date, we have been able to schedule vaccines for roughly 170 employees, with another 320 to be scheduled as soon as vaccines become available, potentially as early as this week. If you believe you are eligible to receive a vaccine in Phase 1A or Phase 1B due to non-work criteria (e.g., age or underlying health criteria), please go to your local health department's website to register and consult with your healthcare provider.

Some may feel they should wait or may even feel guilty about the opportunity to receive the vaccine before other community or family members. It's important to remember that anyone being vaccinated has a positive impact on the rest of the community. Each administered vaccine offers more protection to all of us. (personal communication, February 2, 2021)

Acknowledging the staggered nature of the vaccine rollout and the impact that would have community wide access to COVID-19 vaccine, Sebring was quick to point the need to maintain current health protocols implemented by William & Mary. Sebring offered:

Given current vaccine supply, it is likely that our entire community may not be vaccinated until summer or even fall. With case levels high in the surrounding communities and the emergence of new variants nationally, it is critical that we be more vigilant than ever in wearing face masks, maintaining appropriate distance and washing

our hands. We need to make sure not only that we are wearing a mask, but that we are wearing it over our mouth and nose at all times.

We also need to be cognizant of those with whom we are in close contact and limit those number of close contacts routinely. All of the actions we are taking are intended to reduce close contacts on campus – whether indoors or outside. As much as we long to share a meal with one another or gather socially, adhering strictly to our health protocols now will ensure that our care systems are not overwhelmed and speed up our ability to gather together in the future. (personal communication, February 2, 2021)

Sebring’s messaging promoted an optimistic, but pragmatic tone. By gesturing the benefits of the vaccine in terms of mitigating COVID-19 (“It’s important to remember that anyone being vaccinated has a positive impact on the rest of the community. Each administered vaccine offers more protection to all of us”). Sebring, in no uncertain terms, believes the vaccines are of tremendous benefit to the William & Mary community. Of note, she does not offer any potential concerns with the vaccine in terms of possible safety. The only downside of Sebring’s messaging of the vaccine is that there is not enough (“Given current vaccine supply, it is likely that our entire community may not be vaccinated until summer or even fall”). Sebring, to that point, continued to affirm the public health practices, used throughout the pandemic were still effective (“wearing face masks, maintaining appropriate distance and washing our hands”). In offering those suggestions, Sebring implied patience would be key to those waiting to be vaccinated.

### ***Falling Forward***

As Spring 2020 was making way for summer 2020, President Jim Ryan, Provost Liz Magill, Executive Vice President K. Craig Kent, and Chief Operating Officer J. J. Davis updated

the University of Virginia community on Fall 2020 planning. In addressing the students, faculty, and staff, Ryan, Magill, Kent, and Davis stressed the importance of flexibility as COVID-19 continued to move the goal posts in terms of long-term planning. Regarding in-person instruction at the undergraduate level, Ryan, Magill, Kent, and Davis stressed “we have designed this fall so that students can take courses from wherever they are” (J. Ryan, L. Magill, K. Kent, & J. Davis, personal communication, June 17, 2020).

The same flexibility afforded to undergraduate and graduate students trickled down to faculty and staff. President Ryan, Provost Magill, Executive Vice President Craig, and Chief Operating Officer Davis stressed:

We will make every effort to grant requests to work or teach remotely or for other reasonable accommodations or modifications in light of COVID-19. We are mindful that individual circumstances make some individuals more vulnerable than others to the effects of this disease. As always, employees entitled to reasonable accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act will receive them. Beyond that, we will prioritize requests for modifications from those who are at higher risk for severe illness, as well as anyone with a household member at higher risk. Outside of those categories, we will make every effort to grant reasonable modification requests. (personal communication, June 17, 2020)

Although flexibility marked the in-person component for the Fall 2020 semester, President Ryan, Provost Magill, Executive Vice President Craig, and Chief Operating Officer Davis espoused less flexibility and more rigidity regarding public health measures by stating “students, faculty, and staff will be required to track their symptoms daily using an app” (personal communication, June 17, 2020). They continued:

We are and will continue to offer testing to anyone who exhibits symptoms. In addition, we will make available voluntary testing for faculty, staff, contract employees, and students who are concerned and may not exhibit symptoms. These tests will be available through an online schedule. In partnership with the Virginia Department of Health (VDH), UVA will help support voluntary testing of community members. We are working closely with the Virginia Department of Health to effectively trace contacts of anyone who contracts the virus. Once classes start, we will perform testing and other monitoring to assess the prevalence of viral infections; we will be monitoring Grounds closely and respond with increased testing to detect any asymptomatic or presymptomatic cases anywhere where our examinations suggest there might be a cluster of cases. We have plans to isolate students living on Grounds who test positive for the virus, and to quarantine students who have been exposed (personal communication, June 17, 2020).

While flexibility highlighted Ryan, Magill, Kent, and Davis’s email by decreeing “we will make every effort to grant requests to work or teach remotely or for other reasonable accommodations or modifications in light of COVID-19” (personal communication, June 17, 2020), the subtext of this narrative was mitigating the spread of the COVID-19. By offering students, faculty, and staff the option to study, teach, and work remotely, population density on the University of Virginia would be reduced. This reduction in density would mean less community members on campus. Less community members meant the possibility to spread or test positive for COVID-19 was lessened thus mitigating the viral impact of COVID-19.

### ***The Delayed Start***

With the start of the Fall 2020 semester quickly approaching, University of Virginia President Jim Ryan, Provost Liz Magill, Executive Vice President K. Craig Kent, and Chief

Operating Office J. J. Davis updated the community with the following message “We are delaying the start of in-person undergraduate classes and the opening of undergraduate residence halls by two weeks” adding:

We are making this change because, in the weeks following our June 17th message, virus indicators locally and across the country have moved in the wrong direction. In Charlottesville and Albemarle County, we have seen an uptick in viral prevalence and transmission rates, and there has been some volatility in the supply-chain for testing materials. In response to these conditions, and based on the advice of UVA public health experts, we have decided to adopt a phased approach to the fall semester, which we believe will best safeguard the health and safety of our University community and our Charlottesville neighbors and give us the best chance of a successful return to Grounds. (personal communication, August 4, 2020)

Ryan, Magill, Kent, and Davis acknowledged;

the unfortunate truth is that COVID-19 is not going away anytime soon, and we must adapt to changing conditions in order to deliver on our missions of teaching, research, service, and patient care. At the same time, the health and safety of our community remain paramount (personal communication, August 4, 2020).

In concluding their email, Ryan, Magill, Kent, and Davis praised the University of Virginia community for their:

continued understanding as we navigate these difficult and uncharted waters. As much as we can plan, we must also approach this virus with humility, as its progression remains unpredictable. Rather than promise complete confidence about the future, the best we can do is create the conditions to succeed and pledge to adapt as necessary. We continue to

have faith in this extraordinary community's ability to make the year ahead a success. (personal communication, August 4, 2020).

Once again, the instability brought by COVID-19 delayed aspects of the operational calendar for the University of Virginia. This disruption required university leadership to focus on safeguarding the well-being of the faculty, students, and staff by creating "conditions to succeed." Rather than adopt a full steam approach to Fall 2020, the University of Virginia opted to err on the side of caution and be proactive, rather than reactive, in mitigating the spread of COVID-19.

There is also an element of post-traumatic stress disorder ("we must also approach this virus with humility, as its progression remains unpredictable. Rather than promise complete confidence about the future, the best we can do is create the conditions to succeed and pledge to adapt as necessary"). The discursive tone, while not pessimistic, indicates a weariness in continual upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic continued bring to the University of Virginia the past several months. This was further compounded by the delayed start of the fall 2020 semester. Hopefulness of new semester ultimately gave way to a realization nothing was certain in the pandemic ("we must approach this virus with humility, as its progression remains unpredictable").

### ***Tests of a Different Kind***

As noted in Chapter 4, the University of Virginia's financial endowment is considerable. With such resources, the opportunity to advance additive mitigation strategies, and present a clear picture of positivity rates across grounds, Provost Liz Magill, Chief Operating Officer J. J. Davis, and Mitch Rosner, Chief Medical Advisor, UVA-COVID-19 Response, promoted news testing measures for the university. This was especially notable as the start of the 2020-2021

academic year began a few weeks earlier. These new testing measures, coupled with current mitigation strategies, added even more the mitigation efforts of the University of Virginia.

Regarding asymptomatic prevalence testing, Magill, Davis, and Rosner stated groups of students would be notified:

each day that they have been selected to provide samples. Students who are selected for a test will receive an email with detailed instructions. Testing, using nasal swabs, will take place in the Student Activities Building and results will be available in 24 to 48 hours. Later this month, UVA will launch a program in which the University will use saliva samples to quickly screen large numbers of asymptomatic students over the course of the semester. There will be multiple screening locations around Grounds where students can stop by and provide a sample. We expect results to be provided rapidly (personal communication, September 4, 2020).

Magill, Davis, Rosner, perhaps realizing the testing fatigue of students, did stress the expedited process of the saliva testing measures (“we expect results to be provided rapidly”) and to some degree, tests using nasal swabs (“results will be available in 24 to 48 hours”). Furthermore, Magill, Davis, and Rosner, in promoting saliva sampling test, offered convenience as well (“there will be multiple screening locations around Grounds where students can stop by and provide a sample”).

While asymptomatic testing provided more robust mitigation measures against COVID-19, Magill, Davis, and Rosner provided yet another population testing mechanism that would an even broader landscape of understating transmission—wastewater testing. They wrote:

Working with the Virginia Department of Health, the University will analyze residence hall wastewater, which can indicate the presence of COVID. If the wastewater from a

residence hall indicates new COVID-19 infections, UVA will conduct virus testing of all of the occupants of that residence hall (personal communication, September 4, 2020).

While, conceptually, wastewater seems the most convenient of tests, Magill, Davis, and Rosner's inclusion of the passage "If the wastewater from a residence hall indicates new COVID-19 infections, UVA will conduct virus testing of all of the occupants of that residence hall" read as inconvenient. While the university stressed COVID-19 testing would comprise a large portion of mitigation efforts for the 2020-2021 academic year, one positive waste sample would mean an entire residence hall would have to be tested.

### ***Wash, Rinse, Repeat***

As autumn leaves fell across the lawn and grounds of the University of Virginia, the leadership of the university turned their attention to operational planning for Spring 2021. Magill and Davis affirmed to the community:

In Spring 2021, UVA will look and feel much like it does now. All students who wish to study on Grounds will be welcome and we will offer as many in-person experiences as we safely can. Every course will have an online component, with the exception of a small number of labs or practicums. Every person who comes to Grounds will be required to follow policies on wearing masks, avoiding large social gatherings, practicing physical distancing, and adhering to testing requirements (personal communication, October 22, 2020).

The subtext of Magill and Davis's email suggested there was no need to reinvent the wheel. Indeed, there was a calming reassurance from Magill and Davis ("In Spring 2021, UVA will look and feel much like it does now") to the students, faculty, and the staff of the University of Virginia. In a time of such uncertainty, Magill and Davis used reiterative mitigation language



from the past several months (“Every person who comes to Grounds will be required to follow policies on wearing masks, avoiding large social gatherings, practicing physical distancing, and adhering to testing requirements”). Thus, the hygienic rituals of Fall 2020 would bring a sort of predictability that could buffer possible anxiety of the upcoming semester. Furthermore, Magill and Davis, without explicitly saying it, suggest if the university could make it through fall semester relatively unscathed, the same outcome could occur in the spring.

### ***Spring 2021 Semester Interrupted***

Updating the University of Virginia community on January 15, 2021, President Jim Ryan, Provost Liz Magill, Chief Operating Office J.J. Davis, and Executive Vice President for Health Affairs Dr. K. Craig Kent wrote that in-person instruction would begin on February 1, 2021, with graduate instruction also occurring in-person on that date. Among the factors influencing this decision to resume in-person instruction, President Ryan noted:

- The University’s knowledge about the pandemic and capacity to combat it through extensive asymptomatic testing, quarantine and isolation, and other measures have grown significantly since the academic year began.
- Offering in-person experiences will better enable the University to monitor and govern compliance with public health measures for the many UVA students who live off-Grounds and will be in the area this spring.
- After completing a full semester in the fall, we have not seen any evidence of transmission within the classroom, between students and UVA faculty and staff, or from UVA students into the greater Charlottesville-Albemarle community.

- While it was challenging, this community has demonstrated that we are capable of complying with measures that limit the spread. (J. Ryan, L. Magill, J. Davis, & K. Kent, personal communication, January 15, 2021)

While President Ryan and his leadership team indicated the decision to return was impacted by the University of Virginia's adherence to COVID-19 mitigation policies, he stressed the razor thin line the pandemic continued to straddle in terms of allowing the resumption of an in-person spring semester. He noted that due to variants of COVID-19 circulating in the United States:

our margin for error is narrower than it was in the fall. A successful spring semester will require even greater adherence to UVA policies around testing, masks, physical distancing, and gatherings. This includes those who have already had COVID-19, as well as those who have received a vaccine, for reasons we explain more in depth below. If you are unsure of your own ability to abide by these measures, most students have the option to study remotely from home. (J. Ryan, L. Magill, J. Davis, and K. Kent, personal communication, January 15, 2020)

Ryan, in concert with his leadership team, once again elevated the COVID-19 pandemic ("our margin for error is narrower than the fall") situation as the Spring 2021 semester neared. While the tone was serious, Ryan and his leadership provided a balanced duality in tone with a more affirmative statement of "after completing a full semester in the fall, we have not seen any evidence of transmission within the classroom, between students and UVA faculty and staff, or from UVA students into the greater Charlottesville-Albemarle community." Despite the balancing of these two statements in the communique, Ryan and his team once again situated mitigation efforts toward the student body of the University of Virginia. Rather than be punitive

in sanctions, Ryan, with agreement from his leadership team, placed the responsibility squarely on the students for compliance and accountability (“If you are unsure of your own ability to abide by these measures, most students have the option to study remotely from home”).

### ***The Science is Working***

As Winter marched on in Charlottesville in early 2021, President Jim Ryan, Executive Vice President and Provost Liz Magill, Chief Operating Officer J. J. Davis, and Dr. K. Craig Kent, Executive Vice President for Health Affairs, emailed the students, faculty, and staff of the University of Virginia and noted mitigation efforts were once again slowing the spread of the virus by adding:

After 10 days of enhanced public health measures, we are seeing a measurable decline in the number of positive COVID cases and in the positivity rate. On the first full day of our new public health measures, we registered 229 new cases, our highest total of the year by far. Yesterday we saw just 26 new cases. Similarly, our seven-day average positivity rate has dropped from a high of 4.41 percent positivity to 2.19 percent across our community (personal communication, February 26, 2021).

As a result of these intended public health measures reducing the spread of COVID-19, President Ryan, Provost Magill, Davis, and Kent reinstated the University gathering policy allowing six individuals or less to congregate. Furthermore, President Ryan and his leadership team mandated that “effective immediately, policies requiring students to remain in their residences except for specific purposes have been lifted. Students are free to resume normal activity, while observing all health and safety guidelines” (personal communication, February 26, 2021).

With the University of Virginia nearly a year into the pandemic, this communique brought about positive (both literally and figuratively) news about mitigation efforts (“we are

seeing a measurable decline in the number of positive COVID cases and in the positivity rate”). The trickle-down effect of these mitigation efforts, implemented in January 2021 was more positive news for students of the university (“policies requiring students to remain in their residences except for specific purposes have been lifted”). Ryan et al., in the darkness of winter, brought a sliver of light to the student body and perhaps a more optimistic tone as Spring 2021 approached.

### **The Community Rises or Falls**

In analyzing COVID-19-related emails of William & Mary and the University of Virginia, a theme of community connectivity emerged for both institutions. Operationally, community can be defined as a collective of people living, learning, and working in a specific location. However, community can also be defined as the collective belief that sum of the whole is greater than the parts. This summation of this whole, especially during the pandemic, was community first. Both William & Mary and the University of Virginia were keenly aware of the disruption faced and sacrifices made by the students, faculty, and staff throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. We often saw the concept of community acknowledge at the end of emails by both institutions. However, in analyzing the emails of both institutions, we see parts of the community, especially the student component, reminded of their responsibilities as community members in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 during the pandemic and the consequences and impact of noncompliance during a crucial time in the Fall 2020 semester.

### ***Community Interrupted***

A year after her inauguration as the first female to assume the role of president at William & Mary, President Katherine Rowe could not anticipate how drastically her university would change in the second year into her presidency. COVID-19 challenged all college presidents, but

for Rowe, and her deepening connection to William & Mary, the emerging public health crisis presented an opportunity showcase the type of leader in the face of adversity. The pandemic would also allow Rowe to show her resolve and grit facing a historic threat. Rowe, however, realized that the individuals of the university would help determine how William & Mary weathered impending storm. Her language, in remarks she offered to her university, suggested community, and the care the community bestowed on one another, would be a crucial weapon in the battle with COVID-19. She offered:

William & Mary is a resilient community. I have seen this firsthand, particularly in recent weeks. We take care of each other. I am confident that will be the case in the coming days and weeks. Thanks to each of you for your creativity, understanding and commitment to this shared effort. (personal communication, March 11, 2020)

The email from President Rowe marked the first time she publicly addressed the emerging COVID-19 public health crisis to the William & Mary community. While the prior emails disseminated from Vice President Ginger Ambler and Emergency Management Team Chair Sam Jones were more informative in nature (e.g., travel restrictions, public health measures, etc.), President Rowe's first email to the William & Mary about COVID-19 showcased to the community members of William & Mary the very real threat of the disease. With William & Mary on the precipice of a generational pandemic, Rowe responded with her belief William & Mary would weather the storm ("William & Mary is a resilient community").

### ***Commencement Concern***

Regarding the Spring 2020 commencement exercises slated for May, President Rowe, in an email to faculty, students, and staff of William & Mary used time as a harbinger in

determining next steps graduation activities—a hallmark of community activity at the university. She stated:

For many of us, the ceremony of Commencement matters profoundly. This is, of course, especially true for seniors and their families. So we are deferring a decision on how or when to have Commencement. By April, we hope that the timeline of this unfolding epidemic may be clearer and that our ability to plan will be as well. We promise to bring our best thinking to this question so that we can honor and uphold William & Mary’s tradition of belonging. (personal communication, March 19, 2020)

President Rowe ended her email with a caveat pertaining to William & Mary’s inherit grace and history with a nod to community. Proclaiming “we have an obligation to one another to extend flexibility and understanding everywhere possible” (personal communication, March 19, 2020), Rowe situated the COVID-19 as significant historical event and proclaimed:

William & Mary has faced profound adversities before and flourished. Since our founding in 1693, our history has been one of creativity and resilience in the face of daunting challenges. Over the past week, we have been heartened by so many stories of students, faculty, staff, neighbors and alumni reaching out to support each other.

Your goodwill, care and spirit of partnership are this university’s strength. Thank you.

With this nod to historical adversity, and subsequent triumph, President Rowe’s framed William & Mary’s success to that of community—a community of resolve, persistence, and resilience (“William & Mary has faced profound adversities before and flourished”; “resilience in the face of daunting challenges”). Rowe, while not specifying those critical junctures in William & Mary’s history, implied that resolution of turbulence during those times, was a direct result of

community cohesion and action (“your goodwill, care and spirit of partnership are this university’s strength”).

### ***Healthy Together Community Commitment***

The long days of summer presented an opportunity for William & Mary introduce a significant public health campaign designed to bring community members together as a collective front protect one another in mitigating the spread of COVID-10. This campaign would become known as the Healthy Together Community Commitment (HTCC). The rollout of the initiative was delegated to the leadership of Provost Peggy Agouris, Vice President for Student Affairs Ginger Ambler, and Chief Operating Officer Amy Sebring emailed the William & Mary community asking for “a commitment to community-wide actions” (personal communication, July 27, 2020). The makeup of the trio signaled the leadership role each administrator provided to key community constituents. Agouris represented the academic arm of the institution, Ambler constituted the student body, and Sebring the staff of the institution. This triumvirate of leadership, collectively, asked their communities to come together. To that end, Agouris, Ambler, and Sebring requested of the William & Mary community to review and abide by the HTCC. In requiring adherence to HTCC, Agouris, Ambler, and Sebring wrote community health and well-being would dictate Fall 2020 public health decision making, affirming with the statement “the health of W&M’s people must be prioritized as we prepare to welcome students and employees back to campus” (personal communication, July 27, 2020). In closing their July 27, 2020, email, the administrators stressed “may we each commit to doing our part to mitigate risk, to actively demonstrate our care for the physical and emotional well-being of others, and to complete a successful year — together” (personal communication, July 27, 2020).

Provost Agouris, Vice President Ambler, and Chief Operating Officer Sebring, in their email communique on July 27, 2020, stressed that collectively the community of William & Mary would decide how Fall 2020 would function on an operational level. A literal take from this email would note the community component in the HTCC acronym. However, the underlying message from university leadership in this email was signified community was more than alphabetical. Rather, by stressing togetherness, Agouris, Ambler, and Sebring imply a theme of a united community in making sure each member of the William & Mary community looked out for one another (“may we each commit to doing our part to mitigate risk” and “actively demonstrate our care for the physical and emotional well-being of others”).

### ***The Inmates are Not Running the Asylum***

While excitement brewing as William & Mary prepared to begin a unique Fall 2020 schedule, a darkness emerged that threatened the upend the semester before it began. With the Fall 2020 semester set to begin on August 19, there was growing concern that William & Mary students were flagrantly disregarding university directives William & Mary’s Dean of Students, S. Marjorie Thomas reiterated the consequences students faced if they violated COVID-19 mitigation measures. In affirming President Rowe’s directive reiterating student accountability during COVID-19 and potential consequences in failure to adhere to public health guidelines, Dean Thomas framed student accountability in terms of the student honor system. She announced:

Integrity is one of William & Mary’s core values and a hallmark of this community. We have always enforced violations of our codes affecting the university community, from the nation’s oldest student-led honor system to the university’s conduct system. The COVID-19 pandemic requires that we uphold our commitments to one another at all



times and locations, on campus and off. Amid pandemic, there is no place that individual choices are without consequence to the health of the William & Mary community (personal communication, August 18, 2020).

Stressing the importance of accountability in mitigating the spread of COVID-19, Dean Thomas, in acknowledging reports of students in noncompliance with limiting gathering size, wrote:

Members of our community are not expected to police one another, however, we have a shared responsibility to do everything within our power to reduce the spread of this virus. Reports – which we are actively investigating – that some of our students are gathering with no regard for their commitment to mitigate the risk of transmitting COVID-19 are disheartening. Verified disregard for mask-wearing, social distancing and other practices will not be tolerated. They constitute direct violations of the Healthy Together Community Commitment that each of us affirmed. (personal communication, August 18, 2020)

Dean Thomas's email to the student body of William & Mary, to some degree, shifted community expectations of COVID-19 largely to students. This was, in part, to the density of the student population of William & Mary when considering both undergraduate and graduate students. While mitigation is mentioned by Dean Thomas, the larger theme of the email is individual and community expectations. However, the larger messaging of Thomas indicated students must be community stewards of responsible behavior and that individual behavior could potentially impact community well-being (“shared responsibility to do everything within our power to reduce the spread of this virus” and “uphold our commitments to one another at all times and locations, on campus and off”).

Of additional interest in Dean Thomas's email is her reference to Williams & Mary's core values ("Integrity is one of William & Mary's core values and a hallmark of this community") and shared history ("the nation's oldest student-led honor system to the university's conduct system") as connective tissues of William & Mary's community and member's responsibilities and expectations within that community. Explicit in William & Mary's Honor Code is trust. Thus, Dean Thomas in expressing concern for the actions of some pockets of the student population, affirmed that trust, if broken, would have repercussions.

### ***Community Unbroken***

President Jim Ryan, much like his presidential counterpart, Katherine Rowe from William & Mary, was still a relatively new in his position at the University of Virginia. He, like Rowe, could not have forecasted the totality of the COVID-19 pandemic storm brewing on the horizon of the Blue Ridge mountains of Charlottesville. When the time came for Ryan to address the growing concern surrounding the uncertainty of COVID-19, President Ryan was certain of one thing—the collective strength and resolve of the community of the University of Virginia to rally around the university and each other in this emerging public health crisis. cautious, yet optimistic, addressing the collective unknown of the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. He offered:

This is a challenging time for our community, the nation, and the world as we respond to COVID-19 and the uncertainty surrounding it. We will do our best to stay on top of this quickly evolving situation, and to communicate with you regularly and fully as conditions change. I am grateful to all of you for your understanding and flexibility, and for your commitment to the wellbeing of our community. This is a time for our community to come together, and acting together, I remain confident in our ability to navigate this difficult and uncertain period (personal communication, March 8, 2020).

With his correspondence to the students, faculty, and staff of the University of Virginia, he uses connective language (“We will do our best,” “I am grateful to all of you for your understanding and flexibility,” “a time for our community to come together, and acting together”) to stress the importance of collective action in uniting against the uncertainty of rapidly escalating public health crisis. Ryan’s belief that the students, faculty, and staff of the university would come together against an unknown disease as a united front, framed community as a crucial piece of if the institution was to successfully navigate this situation (“I remain confident in our ability to navigate this difficult and uncertain period”).

### ***The Wahoos are Forewarned***

Colloquially, and proudly, the student body, and subsequently alumni, of the University of Virginia refer to themselves as “wahoos.” The term, although not officially defined, implies a certain level of unruliness in terms of behavior. As planning for the fall semester 2020 began on the grounds of the University of Virginia, there was a growing concern, perhaps even realization, that the student body might not heed all public health measures and engage in practices contrary to community expectations. President Ryan, and his leadership team of Provost Magill, Executive Vice President Craig, and Chief Operating Officer Davis advised, and perhaps planted a seed, with the following forewarning:

Keeping people healthy—and keeping students on Grounds—will require all of us to do our part. For that reason, and consistent with our strong tradition of student self-governance, we are working with students on a set of expectations that will govern student behavior on and off Grounds. As noted above, students will receive details about the public health requirements that will apply next year and will be asked to agree to

them as a condition of returning to and remaining on—Grounds. (personal communication, June 17, 2020)

In nodding to the student honor code at University of Virginia, Ryan, Magill, Kent, & Davis, which holds students to the highest level of accountability, establish COVID-19 as a new addition to the honor code (“will govern student behavior on and off Grounds”). The inclusion of off Grounds is also significant for two reasons—off-Grounds housing and Greek life residences. Behaviors off-Grounds would be more difficult to police. Rather than use language that suggested real consequences (i.e., sanctioned or expelled from the university). Ryan and his leadership team used a softer tone (“Keeping people healthy”) to ready students for Fall 2020 community expectations.

### **Compassion for the Affected and Afflicted**

As William & Mary and the University of Virginia began to navigate the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was growing realization that COVID-19 would at some point penetrate each institutions’ mitigation efforts and infect community members. By March of 2020, William & Mary and the University of Virginia had to address the first case of COVID-19 on their campus. Both institutions did so with transparency but also with compassion. With this compassion also came with the needs to protect the community member’s identity as well. Long term, William & Mary and the University of Virginia registered this initial case of exposure or infection was the first of many to impact the campus.

In addressing these initial possible or actual cases of COVID-19 in their physical communities, William & Mary and the University of Virginia shed light on how both intuitions would respond in those situations—with understanding highlighted by compassion.

Of note in the theme of compassion, was the extension of that sentiment towards the graduating class of Spring 2020. With commencement a vital component of any university's academic calendar, the realization that graduation exercises would not be held in 2020 weighed on the leadership of William & Mary and the University of Virginia.

This extension of compassion was also extended to faculty and staff as well. The disruption wrought by COVID-19 affected not only operational components of William & Mary and the University of Virginia. The realization that financially both institutions might have to make drastic financial decisions weighed heavily on employees of both institutions. Furthermore, how would COVID-19 affect when and how business would be conducted only added to the collective anxiety faced by employees of William & Mary and the University of Virginia. In addressing those concerns, both institutions exhibited a theme of compassion towards employees in conceding those fears.

The following emails from university leadership from William & Mary and the University of Virginia highlight the theme of compassion. This theme of compassion extended not only to the first community members testing positive for COVID-19, vulnerable community members, and those affected by the postponement of community traditions and celebrations.

### ***The Possible First Case***

Metaphorically, a clock was ticking on the campus of William & Mary. As news about the growing number of positive cases of COVID-19 in the United States was making way to Williamsburg, there was growing concern among William & Mary leadership that it was only a matter of time before Williamsburg and William & Mary had their first confirmed case of COVID-19. As spring 2020 approached the campus of William & Mary, the first possible disturbance of COVID-19 was felt by the community.

Vice President Ginger Ambler and emergency management team chair Sam Jones, the authors of many of the early COVID-19-related emails, informed the William & Mary community that a “staff member in Miller Hall has potentially been exposed to a possible case of COVID-19” (personal communication, March 12, 2020). While there was concern and uncertainty about a possible confirmed case of COVID-19, this potential first case of COVID-19 indicated that it was only a matter of time before COVID-19 infiltrated the campus of William & Mary.

Despite the possible COVID-19 exposure and the potential impact on the community as whole, Ambler and Jones ended their joint March 12, 2020, with an affirmation of well-being and community. They concluded “as always, the health and wellness of our community remains our top priority. We care about each other and we take care of each other. That will continue as we respond to a rapidly evolving situation.”

Rather than succumb to panic, Ambler and Jones opted to focus on language that was supportive and inclusive (“we care about each other” and “we take care of each other”). The usage of “we” connotated a sense of togetherness and community. Imagine if Ambler and Jones had used the phrase “I care about you and I will take care of you” in the email. Those sentences read as one individual is responsible for the for taking care of community whereas “we” places the emphasis on a community approach to take care of one another.

### ***COVID-19 Confirmed***

Ginger Ambler, in professional capacity as vice president for student affairs at William & Mary, had built a career at the university dealing with a variety of student issues. Soon, however, she would encounter something she had never dealt with professionally—a historic and impactful pandemic. Similarly, Sam Jones, much like Ambler, was no stranger crisis in his role

as emergency management team chair. Both were equipped to handle a host of crisis situations professionally, but none the ilk of COVID-19.

As winter was ending to make way for spring, a day Ambler and Jones hoped would never come finally arrived—the first confirmed case of COVID-19 at William & Mary. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 was relayed to the William & Mary campus community via email on March 14, 2020. In their update to the students, faculty, and staff, Vice President Ambler and emergency management team chair Jones stated, with language affirming privacy and dignity and the law, stated “in accordance with privacy laws and our own policy, we will not be releasing detailed information about this positive case or any subsequent cases” (personal communication, March 14, 2020).

Understanding the significance of the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on the campus of William & Mary, Ambler and Jones affirmed “William & Mary is a close-knit community and we know this message will generate both empathy and concern. Please know we are doing all we can to provide this member of community support and protect the health and wellness of our community” (personal communication, March 14, 2020).

Ambler and Jones, in reporting the first official case of COVID-19, used their email communication to not only provide time sensitive information, but to express compassion to the campus community member testing positive. Ambler and Jones’s use of the word support and empathy imply compassion (“we are doing all we can to provide this member of community support”). Rather than using the email to be entirely informational (i.e., an individual has COVID-19), they use the rhetoric in the email to acknowledge the sensitivity of situation as well as publicly support the individual who tested positive. This type of messaging established

William & Mary's COVID-19 rhetoric as one of compassion and dignity in terms of those did and would test positive at some point in the pandemic.

***Another Knock on the Door***

Ambler and Jones stated that a “resident in Old Dominion Hall showed symptoms consistent with those of COVID-19 and is being tested” (personal communication, March 17, 2020). In language nearly identical to the March 12, 2020, email to the William & Mary community concerning a possible COVID-19 infection of staff member in Miller Hall, Ambler and Jones asserted:

William & Mary is a close-knit community and we know this message will generate both empathy and concern, especially for those who live nearby.... Please know we are doing all we can to not only support this member of our community but also protect the health and wellness of our entire community. (personal communication, March 17, 2020)

Showcasing the theme of campus compassion, Vice President Ambler and Emergency Management Chair highlighted that COVID-19, despite a deep epidemiological understanding of the disease in the early part of the pandemic, would rally the institution around the those possibly symptomatic with the disease (“Please know we are doing all we can to not only support this member of our community”). This rally would include public health measures mitigating the spread of disease in the community (“You may have heard or seen that we had crews cleaning in that building. We did this out of an abundance of caution”). However, the thematic messaging from Ambler and Jones indicated William & Mary institutional response would be guided by compassion and support for those who would contract the disease (“The individual will remain under self-quarantine at another location and the university is currently providing support, including meals and healthcare”). Furthermore, Ambler and Jones situated personal privacy as a



hallmark of good community practice during the pandemic (“In accordance with privacy laws and our own policy, we will not be releasing detailed information in order to protect their privacy”) especially with stigmatization emerging with those testing positive.

### ***The Infectious Agent Arrives in Charlottesville***

As spring approached in Charlottesville, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on the University of Virginia’s campus was reported by President Jim Ryan on March 16, 2020. In addressing the campus community, President Ryan wrote “the University has a confirmed case of COVID-19 within our community” and voiced:

Given the progression of the virus, it is not a surprise to discover a local case, but we know it will heighten anxiety. We will be in further touch to announce any additional changes we are making as the situation unfolds, and we will continue to update the website. (personal communication, March 16, 2020)

As he closed his March 16, 2020, email, President Ryan, perhaps realizing that a domino had fallen with the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on grounds, stressed “now, more than ever, is the time to treat each other with kindness and compassion. We are beyond grateful to everyone who has been working so hard on behalf of our community.”

President Ryan, like his counterparts at William & Mary, when faced with the initial confirmation of positive COVID-19 case at the University of Virginia, used his platform to stress the importance of understanding and compassion in supporting current and future campus community members who tested positive for the disease (“Now, more than ever, is the time to treat each other with kindness and compassion”).

### *The Afflicted*

COVID-19 brought about many different types of storms to be weathered by the students, faculty, and staff of the University of Virginia. First, the viral storm had to be weathered. COVID-19 had silently made way to the United States, and with it, daily infection and death rates caused by the disease increased daily. Second, a financial storm was brewing. The financial impact of the pandemic could not be underscored. Business, educational settings, and local, state, and federal government agencies shut down during the height of the pandemic leaving many without jobs and subsequent compensation. Finally, there was storm of disruption. Daily life, work life, school life, and family life were all impacted tremendously by the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The University of Virginia, in displaying a high level of sensitivity to the impact COVID-19 was having on university employees, publicly addressed the situation. President Jim Ryan and Provost Liz Magill, and Executive Vice Presidents Kent and Davis, in a rhetorical act of compassion, expressed:

We are committed to our employees. We are determined to ensure that the modifications to our operations caused by the coronavirus will not impact our existing commitments to compensate and continue existing benefits for UVA employees, whether part-time or full-time. We will therefore honor all existing commitments for the foreseeable future. The length of this crisis is difficult to predict at this point, as are the economic ramifications. There may come a point where we need to reassess in light of the length of time of the crisis or significantly changed circumstances, but our hope and plan is to weather this crisis together. (personal communication, March 17, 2020)

These statements of affirmation were needed during of great uncertainty. Not to minimize one storm over another, the financial storm certainly created additional strain on employees and their families. Ryan, Magill, Kent, and Davis offer a message of reassurance (“the coronavirus will not impact our existing commitments to compensate and continue existing benefits for UVA employees, whether part-time or full-time”). However, Ryan and Magill also offer a pragmatic viewpoint as well (“There may come a point where we need to reassess in light of the length of time of the crisis”) in term of how long compensation can go on.

In affirming their compassion towards the University of Virginia, Ryan and Magill continued to stress:

As noted at the outset, as we prepare and then implement our plan, our work will focus on equitable treatment of the most vulnerable members of our larger community, including our students with financial challenges, our employees whose work exposes them to particular risks, and members of the greater Charlottesville community who are affected, deeply, by our actions and to whom we must be good neighbors and partners (J. Ryan, L. Magill, K. Kent, & J. Davis, personal communication, June 17, 2020)

Ryan, Magill, Kent, and Davis usage of the phrase “most vulnerable of our larger community” is significant. Morally, it grounds the university as cognizant of the institutions obligation to assist others that may need more assistance. For when an institution protects the most vulnerable, it signals to the rest of the community that they must do the same as well.

### **An Abundance of Gratitude**

Reflectively, the end of the abbreviated Fall 2020 semester found the presidents of William & Mary and the University of Virginia expressing a theme of gratitude for the contributions and sacrifices made by the faculty students and staff of both institutions. Perhaps

the realization that both institutions weathered, rather successfully, a Fall 2020 return to campus, or an acknowledgement of how far both institutions had come since initial emergence of pandemic, Presidents Rowe and Ryan used their end-of-the-year email address to extend a genuine admission of the work, efforts, and commitment shown by community members during much of 2020.

### *Giving Thanks*

As the holiday of thanksgiving approached, and the subsequent end of the 2020 fall semester, a reflective tone of gratitude emerged in a holiday send-off from William & Mary President Katherine Rowe, perhaps realizing the totality in the past 11 months, expressed gratitude for the collective effort and sacrifices William & Mary students, faculty, and staff made and endured during the past year. She wrote:

Every member of the William & Mary community should take pride in the way that students, faculty, and staff embraced the responsibility to protect one another's health and support one another's learning and work under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. This accomplishment is hard-earned. Yet at a time of loss and sacrifice, we have also made gains. The lessons we are learning in flexibility, humility, and generosity in the face of uncertainty will sustain William & Mary this spring and beyond.

May the coming weeks keep you and your loved ones well. May the holidays bring respite, companionship, and joy that we have reached this season together. (personal communication, November 24, 2020).

Rowe, in her final substantive email to the students, faculty, and staff of William & Mary, found gratitude emerged from the regard community members had for one another in terms of protecting and supporting one another. Rather than shying away from caring for one

another, Rowe posited community “embraced the responsibility” (personal communication, November 24, 2020). The usage of the word “embraced” is telling. Typically, to embrace someone means to hug someone. Throughout much of 2020, social distancing was a primary way to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Thus, hugging, a gesture of affection, was not as common as it was pre-pandemic. Rowe’s inclusion of the word “embraced,” whether intentional or not, created imagery of the embraces many families share during the holidays. Perhaps this, too, was Rowe’s way of giving the community of William & Mary a collective holiday hug.

### *Happy Holidays*

Holidays are often a time of reflection. As the end of the year approaches, this opportunity to reflect and plan for the new year often go together. President Jim Ryan, much like his counterpart Katherine Rowe, used the end of the 2020 fall semester at the University to express his gratitude to the students, faculty, and staff for collective effort in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 during the past year. In addressing students, Ryan noted “Every generation has its defining challenges, and this pandemic will likely be yours—which gives me enormous hope for both your future and ours” (personal communication, November 24, 2020). In acknowledging the work of the University of Virginia faculty and deans, Ryan reflected:

I’ve been incredibly impressed not only by your resilience and creativity but by your genuine concern for our students and their wellbeing. Thank you for helping us continue to deliver on our teaching and research missions despite all the challenges of the semester—and for continuing to shed light on both enduring questions and the new ones we’ve faced this year. (personal communication, November 24, 2020)

Regarding the staff of the University of Virginia, Ryan celebrated their work with the following:

Thank you to the front line workers who cleaned classrooms and residence halls, maintained our HVAC systems, staffed dining halls, and installed signs and barriers across Grounds. To Procurement for getting us the supplies we needed, including PPE, and the Emergency Management team for helping coordinate our response. To the care teams who made sure that even when our students were isolated, they never felt alone. And to the staff at Student Health, Employee Health, and the Student Activities Building who helped us ramp up testing and provide treatment—including the team at the saliva testing lab that hasn't had a break in months. (personal communication, November 24, 2020)

What is truly notable about Ryan's note of gratitude to the university is his systematic recognition approach—he addresses every key constituent of the institution. From students, to faculty, and ultimately staff, Ryan acknowledges the contribution of everyone. Of note in his expression of gratitude is the acknowledgment of staff. Once again, Ryan systematically thanks front line workers, the procurement staff, care teams, even the staff of the saliva testing lab.

Ryan's gratitude also stems from the ways in which faculty and staff cared for the students of the University of Virginia during the pandemic. He thanked the faculty their "genuine concern for our students and their wellbeing" (personal communication, November 24, 2020). It was gratitude towards the care teams at the university, however, that highlighted the desolate nature of the pandemic and our human need to connect with one another. Ryan's poignant offering of "to the care teams who made sure that even when our students were isolated, they never felt alone" (personal communication, November 24, 2020) truly indicated his gratitude and compassion for the community of the University of Virginia.

## Chapter Summary

In an effort to reach campus community members in a quick and efficient manner during the initial year of the pandemic, William & Mary and the University of Virginia used email as a primary method of communication in expressing and conveying their COVID-19 response. Throughout the first year of the pandemic, email communication was limited to a select group of administrators at both institutions. While the syntax of those emails differed between William & Mary and the University of Virginia, a coded analysis of the emails found thematic overlap connecting both universities. Initially, the theme of traversing emerged as a focal point of the early emails from both institutions. Much of the traversing theme revolved around international travel, but quickly became localized as COVID-19 spread throughout the United States.

The theme of traversing with an invisible enemy, while a core component of early email communication, soon gave way to the thematical conceptualization of mitigation of infectious agents in subsequent COVID-19 emails. Mitigation initially manifested as a core triumvirate of handwashing, covering one's mouth when coughing and sneezing, and avoidance of touching surfaces and one's face. These early mitigation techniques soon gave way to facial coverings, social distancing, and isolation if symptomatic with possible COVID-19. As scientific understanding increased, so too did mitigation techniques. COVID-19 testing became a prominent fixture as students began their return and stay at William & Mary and the University of Virginia for the Fall 2020 semester. While testing was a formidable mitigation approach in limiting the spread of COVID-19 on both campuses, the emergency approval of COVID-19 vaccines would stake their claim as the most potent *modus operandi* in the fight against COVID-19.

Despite efforts to prohibit and contain travel, coupled with disease mitigation of COVID-19, there was very much a human component to email communication during the pandemic. We see this human element in the themes of the community rises or falls, compassion for the affected and afflicted, and an abundance of gratitude. These emergent themes are noted in several emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia. From community expectation to sacrifice, the collective of both institutions put individual needs aside to come together in a time of historical significance to protect one another. These efforts engendered compassion by administration officials as the first cases of COVID-19 impacted William & Mary and the University of Virginia. Ultimately, however, the acknowledgment of community and compassion lead to deep sense of gratitude amongst leadership at both institutions.

With the thematic findings complete in Chapter 5, Chapter 6 will focus on a final discussion of dissertation findings. This discussion of findings will incorporate theoretical considerations as well as discourse analysis. The final chapter ends with conclusions and recommendations based on the research contained in the dissertation and research gaps that still exist despite the research collected in this dissertation.



## **CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS**

Two specific research questions undergirded the research contained in this dissertation.

Specifically, those questions were

1. How did the emails distributed by William & Mary and the University of Virginia from Winter 2020 until Winter 2021 frame the COVID-19 response to community members?
2. How did this rhetoric change and evolve from Winter 2020 until Winter 2021?

Chapter 6 of this dissertation addresses explicitly those questions based on the thematic analysis of the emails from Chapter 5. From directly answering those specific questions, this chapter then discusses the language used by administrators from William & Mary and the University of Virginia used to frame their COVID-19 response to community members and how the email narrative of COVID-19 shifted over time.

### **Response to Research Questions**

In response to RQ1 “How did the emails distributed by William & Mary and the University of Virginia from Winter 2020 until Winter 2021 frame the COVID-19 response to community members?” the research included in this dissertation determined that both William & Mary and the University framed their response to the COVID-19 pandemic in two ways. First, both institutions used a science-based frame to inform their community members of students, faculty, and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. References to the recommendations of the CDC and Virginia Department of Public Health were stated in emails from both universities.

Furthermore, mitigation strategies such as facial masks, social distancing, and COVID-19 testing measures indicated a science-based message framing from William & Mary and the University of Virginia. We also see in later emails from William & Mary reference COVID-19 vaccine efforts for the institution that again promote a science-based framing to the students, faculty, and staff of the university.

Furthermore, we see a unity-based frame from William & Mary and the University of Virginia in affirming the importance of a collective effort to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. William & Mary highlighted this community-based frame with the implementation of the institution's HTCC pledge between community members. While the University of Virginia did not campaign their community-based public health measures during the pandemic, the university continually emphasized the need for community members to protect themselves and others. University of Virginia President Jim Ryan, in a university produced public announcement, highlighted a community-based frame to in the university's combined effort to look out for one another. He stated:

Over the last few weeks, the vast majority of you have been following the University's health and safety guidelines in order to protect yourselves and the people around you from the waiter on the Corner, to the dining hall employees, to the professor in front of the classroom. You have been doing the right thing, not just when it's easy but when it's hard and for that we are incredibly grateful. (University of Virginia, 2021, 0:11-0:31).

In response to RQ2 "How did this rhetoric change and evolve from Winter 2020 until Winter 2021?" the research included in this dissertation found that the narrative, and subsequent language, did change and evolve from Winter 2020 until Winter 2021. We see early language from both institutions situate the emerging COVID-19 public health crisis as traversing with an

invisible enemy. Avoiding travel to China was a significant messaging device to the students, faculty, and staff at both institutions. The rhetoric then moved from travel to campus evacuation for students then faculty and staff. As spring gave way to summer, the rhetoric in emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia addressed plans to return to campus after a period of uncertainty if that would be possible. This return to campus would come with stipulations. These stipulations manifested as the mitigation of infectious agents. Mandatory testing for students, face mask requirements, social distancing, and flexibility in curriculum delivery helped move the rhetoric, and subsequent narrative, to a modified in-person experience for the 2020-2021 academic for William & Mary and the University and Virginia. Finally, the development of FDA emergency usage of the Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines provided a rhetorical bookend that evolved the pandemic response from originally devoted to travel to one that brought possibility that a return to a pre-pandemic life was in reach.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Both William & Mary and the University of Virginia's adherence to science and community-based approach were apparent throughout the timeframe of February 14, 2020, and March 1, 2021. There was a symbiotic relationship between the two frames. Science helped mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and, in turn, helped promote the importance of community members collectively abiding by COVID-19 institutional policies to keep one another safer during the pandemic. Below, a more detailed look at how emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia were framed to students, faculty, and staff of their intuitions and how the narrative surrounding COVID-19 evolved during this period.

## **Framing**

William & Mary and the University of Virginia faced an enormous task of keeping both institutions operational while protecting the health and well-being of students, faculty, and staff at both institutions. With many unknowns about COVID-19, each university offered similar email narratives and themes throughout the first year of the pandemic. And both institutions organically framed their response over the course of a year to students, faculty, and staff as one that emphasized, much like the regulative claims espoused by Haberman (1984) and Stroud (2009), community well-being above all else. In building COVID-19 response frameworks, William & Mary and the University of Virginia,

### ***Science-Based Frame***

Goffman's (1974) situated framing as a way to understand sociological events. This understanding is informed by such things as one's political views, educational attainment, or racial or ethnic background among other things. Framing is also influenced by media, politicians, or organizations such as businesses or educational entities.

**William & Mary.** In the organizational setting of higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic provided multiple opportunities for framing and reframing by university leadership as the unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 virus, both in terms of transmission and as subsequent variants of the virus emerged. Early in the pandemic, William & Mary framed their COVID-19 responses with guidance from the CDC coupled with Virginia Department of Public Health. In the earliest emails from Sam Jones and Ginger Ambler, for example, multiple mentions of the CDC emerged in the initial stages of the pandemic. As noted above, on February 14, 2020, Jones and Ambler emailed the students, faculty, and staff of William & Mary about CDC guidance

pertaining to flu vaccinations to reduce viral transmission that might mimic COVID-19 symptoms. They wrote:

This is also the time of year where we see many cases of seasonal flu virus, so the William & Mary Health Center still encourages all members of the community to follow the guidelines for prevention set by the CDC. (S. Jones & G. Ambler, personal communication, February 14, 2020)

This science-framing approach continued when emergency management team chair Jones and Vice President Ambler emailed the William & Mary community about action based public health measures the university was implementing. On February 28, 2020, Jones and Ambler communicated:

The university continues to take preventative and preparatory steps related to COVID-19 in accordance with university policy and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Virginia Department of Health guidelines. Centralized information and resources related to the disease are now available at <https://www.wm.edu/coronavirus>. You may continue to reference this site for the most up-to-date information as this situation moves forward. (personal communication, February 28, 2020)

Perhaps the most significant indication that the COVID-19 response was to be guided by data occurred in an email from President Katherine Rowe's office on August 5, 2020. In inviting the students, faculty, staff, and families of William & Mary to a townhall entitled "The Science and Decision Making Behind the Path Forward," the office of the president requested community members to:

Join President Katherine Rowe and other university leaders this evening as they discuss the decision-making process for W&M's Path Forward and how we use data to inform

those decisions. Panelists will talk through W&M's public health protocols and plans for safeguarding campus and the Williamsburg community (The President's Office of William & Mary, personal communication, August 5, 2020).

With this invitation from President Rowe, so close to the start of the Fall 2020 semester, we see confirmation that William & Mary's response to mitigating the spread of COVID-19 would be guided by the science surrounding the epidemiology of the disease and data that supported decision-making by the university. This townhall was subsequently followed by another public forum with invited guest, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease. The office of the president of William & Mary invited the William & Mary community to join a virtual conversation about the COVID-19 pandemic. The invitation from President Katherine Rowe read:

William & Mary will host Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, for a Community Conversation on January 26 at 3 p.m. ET. We will discuss pressing issues related to the pandemic, including the rollout and impact of vaccines and the future public health landscape.

I hope you will join us for this spring's opening Community Conversation. As William & Mary once again faces a spring semester that will be different, we will continue to follow the principles of data-informed and phased decision-making — adapting as the scientific understanding of COVID-19 improves and public health conditions evolve (personal communication, January 15, 2021).

As evidenced by the emails from William & Mary's executive leadership, the commitment to using a science and data-based approach to determine university public health policy emerged as a salient frame to shape institutional email communication regarding COVID-

19. At the same time, guidance from governmental sources continued to shape William & Mary's response to the pandemic. What initially emerged as travel precautions and hygienic practices typically associated with cold and flu season concluded with the President of William & Mary, Katherine Rowe, heralding the emergency approval of COVID-19 vaccinations from Pfizer and Moderna (Bok et al., 2021). The discourse Rowe used ("adapting as the understanding of COVID-19 improved") showcased how the discourse evolved from mid-February until March 2021. Travel, while still a concern even after March 2021, was no longer a core component of the William & Mary's messaging of COVID-19. Instead, the discourse included in emails changed as the science changed surrounding COVID-19.

**The University of Virginia.** The University of Virginia also used a science-based framing to guide university public health policy regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. We see this counsel from the university to students, faculty, and staff in several of the following emails related to CDC guidance. By including this counsel from the CDC in COVID-19-related emails, the University of Virginia gestured that epidemiological approach towards the disease would be guided and informed by the science and data surrounding the emerging pandemic.

On February 26, 2020, University of Virginia Dean of Students, Allen Groves, emailed the students of the institution about the CDC guidance about travel and the university's upcoming spring break. In informing the student body of the University of Virginia about the emergence of a possible pandemic, Dean Groves referenced the CDC throughout his February 26th email. Groves wrote "the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced this week that the virus is expected to impact the United States in a more severe way than it has to date" (A. Groves, personal communication, February 26, 2020).

With this statement from Dean Groves, he foreshadowed a public health crisis as suggested by the CDC. In acknowledging this impending situation, Dean Groves (in a nod to the theme of traversing with an invisible enemy), suggested students be cognizant of traveling abroad. He suggested:

Traveling abroad—whether for study or leisure—carries a number of potential risks. Even a country not currently experiencing an outbreak could suddenly be declared a high-risk area, resulting in heightened exposure to the virus, difficulty with departure, immigration barriers in returning to the U.S., and even possible restrictions on returning to Grounds. The University strongly recommends not traveling to locations with CDC or State Department Level 3 alerts or higher (personal communication, February 26, 2020).

University of Virginia Provost Liz Magill, in informing the students, faculty, and staff of the university on March 3, 2020, about travel precautions and the cancellation of university-sponsored study abroad programs, situated the university's decision-making process in alignment with CDC recommendations and Virginia Department of Health. Magill wrote:

The decisions we are making rely heavily on the guidance we are receiving from the CDC and the Virginia Department of Health and are intended to protect the health and welfare of our faculty, staff, students, and local community. We recognize the uncertainty this global health issue is creating and are committed to keep you informed and up to date as this situation evolves. You may find updates and current information on the University's website and [frequently asked questions]. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

University of Virginia President Jim Ryan, much like his leadership team of Dean Groves and Provost Magill, conveyed to faculty, students, and staff of the university that science would



guide university policy towards the COVID-19 pandemic. In an email dated March 8, 2020, President Ryan mentioned the CDC and the Virginia Department of Health throughout his email as he updated the university community about the public health situation emerging globally and now locally in the commonwealth of Virginia. He wrote;

Consistent with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the United States Department of State, and the Virginia Department of Health, we have decided to enact the following restrictions and guidelines on University-related travel in order to help to mitigate our community's risk of exposure to the virus. University-related travel to countries where the CDC has enacted level 3, or the State Department has enacted levels 3 or 4 is prohibited. CDC travel guidance related to COVID-19 is available here. (personal communication, March 8, 2020)

Despite the travel guidelines implemented by the University of Virginia, President Ryan affirmed that university sponsored programs on grounds would continue. However, President Ryan cautioned that these events were subject to change based on guidance from a variety of governmental agencies. He affirmed:

Many of our students are currently away on Spring Break, so the pace of events on Grounds has slowed for the week ahead. Unless local conditions change, University sponsored events, programs, tours, and operations will continue as planned during Spring Break. We will continue to monitor this issue carefully, relying on guidance from internal experts at UVA Health, the Virginia Department of Health, and the CDC. (personal communication, March 8, 2020)

As the landscape filled in around the COVID-19 pandemic, a clear picture emerged and with that clarity, a new frame was built upon the science—a frame of unity.

### *Unity-Based Framing*

The interconnectivity of students, faculty, and staff at William & Mary and the University of Virginia added yet another structural frame in the COVID-19 pandemic response from both institutions. Realizing the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, email messaging shifted in tone, especially in the wake of students, faculty, and staff returning in fall 2020. There was an optimism that emerged as preparations were underway to welcome back community members after the abrupt end of spring semester 2020 to remote learning. Often, unity-based framed messaging was sent from the presidents of William & Mary and the University of Virginia.

William & Mary President Katherine Rowe framed preparations for fall 2020 as an opportunity for the campus community to unite to bolster the opportunity for students, faculty, and staff to connect in-person once again albeit with public health modifications. She wrote:

Bringing our campus back together safely is an enormous task and a hopeful one because it is a key step in the path forward to a post-COVID-19 William & Mary. We will continue to share updates as new information becomes available, create opportunities for feedback and find ways to connect virtually. While planning within such an uncertain environment is stressful, the strength and creativity we can bring to that task—working together—is rewarding and sustaining. (personal communication, May 6, 2020)

Working together, Rowe stressed, was crucial to the success of fall 2020. This success was predicated on faculty, students, and staff doing their part to reimagine a new fall 2020 opening. Her reference to community strength, creativity, and the opportunity for campus feedback showcased a call to unite to address a pandemic in full flight.

University of Virginia President Jim Ryan, in a similar framing of collective campus unity to re-envision Fall 2020 offered similar sentiments to those of President Rowe. As summer 2020 approached, President Jim Ryan began the process of updating the students, faculty, and staff of the University of Virginia about fall 2020. Linguistically, Ryan’s use of language promoted the frame of unity that would permeate throughout his email to campus members. He proclaimed:

All of this will make life—and this semester—more difficult, but our hope and expectation is that we can come together in these extraordinary times and make the best of an incredibly difficult situation. Doing that will require flexibility and patience. But if the past is any indication, this year will also push us to be more creative, inspire us to be more selfless, and in many ways bring us closer together than ever before. This is a special community that has done some amazing things over the last few months, and we will need to summon that energy and spirit once again in the fall. We look forward to working with all of you to meet this moment and make this coming year a memorable and successful one. (personal communication, June 17, 2020)

Ryan’s use of the words “we,” “us,” “selfless,” and “special community” highlight a frame of unity. Indeed, Ryan asserted the pandemic “brings us closer than ever before.” This connective language foreshadows a united community front in keeping the community members safe during a crucial period in the pandemic.

## **Discussion**

Framing allowed both William & Mary and the University of Virginia to situate their pandemic response as one guided by science and unity. Science advanced not only the rhetoric in the COVID-19 response but continued to provide more favorable outcomes to the COVID-19

rhetorical situation. Initially, when COVID-19 emerged, the science surrounding the disease was limited to scientists classifying it as a pneumonia-like illness (C. Wang et al., 2020). As more scientific breakthroughs gave a better understanding of the disease, vaccines were developed and approved for emergency use in the United States (Associated Press, 2021b). Thus, a science-framed approach, and one that William & Mary and the University in Virginia adopted in understanding COVID-19, advanced narrative throughout the pandemic. This narrative, originally focusing on travel, ultimately advanced to the development of vaccines.

Unity, on the other hand, provided a frame to advance a rhetorical mechanism of connective language. William & Mary, in fact, advanced public health campaign entitled “Healthy Together,” which, to some degree, suggested the John Kennedy linguistic approach of “Ask not what William & Mary can do for you. Ask what you can do for William & Mary.” The Healthy Together campaign by William & Mary affirmed:

all members of the W&M campus community will be asked to affirm their commitment to shared actions to mitigate risk of spreading COVID-19, to show care and concern for others, and, thereby, to support the university’s ability to succeed during these most challenging of times. Affirmation of the Healthy Together Community Commitment is required for anyone who will be living, learning, and working on campus this fall.

Students will have an opportunity to review and affirm the Healthy Together Community Commitment through the Personal Information Questionnaire that is being deployed today. Employees will receive a copy of the Healthy Together Community Commitment along with their PPE kits, and they will be asked to affirm the commitment as part of the required on-line COVID-19 training that will be made available by Human Resources via

Cornerstone. (P. Agouris, G. Ambler, & A. Sebring, personal communication, July 27, 2020)

By evoking the concepts of shared action and responsibility and caring for one another, the Health Together campaign symbolized (and in some ways visualized) all William & Mary community members standing together to face the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Chapter Summary**

In analyzing the emails of William & Mary and the University of Virginia from February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021, a science and unity-based framework shaped their respective COVID-19 response to community members. The adherence to science manifested in both institutions adhering to COVID-19 policies established by the CDC and state and local health officials. The establishment of science-based policies by both institutions also promoted the importance of “we” in the collective efforts of students, faculty, and staff to safeguard the well-being of one another. With William & Mary and the University of Virginia actively acknowledging the commitment of community members to abide by mitigation policies created by both institutions, the citizenry of both campuses was made aware of their personal responsibility during an unprecedented pandemic.

While science undergirded and framed the COVID-19 response of William & Mary and the University of Virginia, it also advanced the narrative of the response by both institutions. Within the time frame of February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021, the narrative shifted from travel restrictions to, ultimately, the usage of emergency-authorized vaccines. Thus, in a year’s timeframe, the narrative from William & Mary and the University of Virginia to students, faculty, and staff transformed from evacuating their campuses in March of 2020 due to COVID-

19 to informing them of vaccination efforts in early 2021. This evolution of the COVID-19 narrative would not have been possible without the advancement of the scientific community.

## **CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This chapter provides a focused discussion of the COVID-19-related emails sent by William & Mary and the University of Virginia during the timeframe of February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021, with the goal of answering two questions that guided this dissertation. Those two questions, highlighted in Chapters 1 and 3, were

1. How did the emails distributed by William & Mary and the University of Virginia from Winter 2020 until Winter 2021 frame the COVID-19 response to community members?
2. How did this rhetoric change and evolve from Winter 2020 until Winter 2021?

With those two questions in mind, the analysis used Gee's (2011) scholarship on discourse analysis, which was augmented by a theoretical borderlands (Abes, 2009) approach utilizing Bitzer's (1968) rhetorical situation, Weick's (1995) work on organizational sensemaking, and Habermans's (1984) communicative action theory. Together, these frameworks provided mechanisms to discuss and address both research questions.

This chapter is situated first by a discussion of Gee's (2011) theoretical application of discourse analysis. Logistically, the discussion then shifts to Bitzer's (1968) rhetorical situation structured upon William & Mary and the University of Virginia's email response during the COVID-19 pandemic. The dissertation was predicated on the notion that a rhetorical situation is needed for discourse analysis to occur contextually. From the rhetorical situation, the analysis reviews Habermas's (1984) communicative action, Goffman's (1972) framing theory, and

Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework as these lenses help inform the discourse analysis of COVID-19 emails from both institutions. This chapter finishes with conclusions about the research, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

### **Discourse Analysis Discussion**

Gee (2011) offered that language “allows us to do things” (p. 2). Language, in this dissertation, allowed the campus communities of William & Mary and the University of Virginia to communicate their pandemic response, and conversely, language prohibited them from doing other things during COVID-19. For example, William & Mary provided language that provided flexibility in allowing students to take courses for a letter grade or pass/fail. Emergency management team chair Sam Jones affirmed this flexibility when stating in an email that “the Provost’s Office has announced that Pass/Fail grading will be available for undergraduate courses through the end of the semester” (personal communication, March 20, 2020). This flexibility was granted as the emerging COVID-19 pandemic washed away synchronous learning and the administration’s realization of the physical and emotional impact on student well-being and learning. In this instance, language created new policy in response to the impact of COVID-19 on academic operations.

In allowing us to do things, language also invites the opportunity for scholars to conduct discourse analysis. Gee (2011) situated discourse analysis as the study of how language is used in a variety of documents. These documents can include newspaper articles, political speeches, or even email. By nature, these documents are historical in nature and provide discourse analysts the opportunity to not only study the discourse in these documents but also examine the historic context in which they occurred. For example, historically, a discursive phrase such “social



distancing of at least six feet” is forever synonymous with the COVID-19 pandemic to mitigate the spread of the disease.

Gee (2011) argued that language is built by seven building tasks. These seven tasks allow analysts to take a deeper dive into the meaning and context of the language used in documents. Using the seven tasks of language, discourse analysis highlights how these tasks shaped COVID-19 emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia.

### *Significance*

Certainly, COVID-19 was a significant event. This significance contributed to discourse that helped create the themes of traversing with an invisible enemy, mitigation of infectious agents, the community rises and falls, and an abundance of gratitude. Discursively, what made the writing significant was the language used in emails by administrators from William & Mary and the University of Virginia. In a March 17, 2020, email from Ginger Ambler and Sam Jones, the administrators begin by saying, “we know you have received a number of messages from the university in recent days regarding COVID-19.” Ambler and Jones used quantity of messages to the William & Mary to indicate the significance of the disease. University of Virginia President Jim Ryan, rather than quantifying the number the numbers of email from institution about COVID-19, marked the significance of COVID-19 with worry stating, “I am concerned about the presence of the novel coronavirus in the United States” (personal communication, March 8, 2020).

### *Practices*

Gee (2011) positioned practices as institutionally supported actions or activities. We see practice in this dissertation most aligned with the theme of mitigation of infectious agents. Before the start of the spring 2021 semester, chief operating officer Amy Sebring stipulated “All

students living in campus housing or within a 30-mile radius of campus, who plan to attend in-person instruction or use university facilities, will be required to have a negative COVID-19 test before returning to campus (personal communication, January 8, 2021). President Jim Ryan, in addressing COVID-19 testing, offered “we are creating, in concert with the Virginia Department of Health, a comprehensive COVID-19 testing plan that will include students, faculty, staff, and members of the community” (personal communication, June 17, 2020). With language from these two emails, we see both institutions building practices using testing-specific language and required action.

### *Identities*

Institutionally, William & Mary and the University of Virginia can occupy a variety of identities. These identities can be historical, academic, or athletic in nature. We see, however, that the emerging COVID-19 pandemic gave both institutions the opportunity to define themselves. University of Virginia Dean of Students Allen Groves promoted the identity of the institution in terms of state affiliation and responsibility to the Commonwealth as COVID-19 became a public health crisis. He wrote “as a state institution with a public trust and mission, it is our duty to respond to requests for use of our facilities and resources at the local, regional, state, and national levels” (personal communication, April 5, 2020). Similarly, in updating the William & Mary community on adaptations that would take place for fall 2020, President Katherine Rowe noted how campus strategies “aligns with similar planning at Virginia’s public higher education institutions” (personal communication, May 6, 2020). Although multiple identities could be promoted, William & Mary and the University of Virginia chose to emphasize their identity as public institutions in the Commonwealth during COVID-19, emphasizing a collective action taking place in public 4-year institutions in the Commonwealth.

Gee (2011) stated “we use language to signal what sort of relationships we have, want to have, and trying to have” (p. 18) with a variety of audiences. Relationships, in emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia, fell under the themes of the community rises or falls and compassion for the affected and the afflicted. President Rowe highlighted this theme of relational compassion when she addressed William & Mary graduates who would be unable to celebrate commencement in-person. She wrote:

Our conclusion is that the Class of 2020 deserves to be celebrated fully. In the spirit of “both/and,” we will honor them in both May and October, both virtually and in person, in ways that are traditional, new, and joyful. (personal communication, April 17, 2020)

Unable to celebrate in-person (the relationship we want to have), Rowe promised the class of 2020 that they were not forgotten, and the institution was committed to giving them the sendoff they deserve (the relationship we are trying to have).

President Jim Ryan also employed interpersonal language to acknowledge the relationship between community members and the University of Virginia. To that end, Ryan used the word love to express the affinity some many had towards the institution. He avowed “we will be ready to face a new set of challenges—with confidence in each other; faith in our abilities; and a commitment, as always, to do the best we can for this University that we love” (personal communication, November 24, 2020).

### *Politics*

Gee (2011) articulated politics as language that communicates something as correct, desirable, or proper. We can tie this in with Haberman's (1984) conceptualization of regulative claims in which language is used to promote desirable outcomes. Thematically, we see politics in the themes of traversing with an invisible enemy and mitigation of infectious agents. Most visibly, we see facial masks as synonymous with politics and mitigation strategies.

President Jim Ryan, Provost Liz Magill, and Executive Vice Presidents K. Craig Kent and J. J. Davis, in adopting political language, directed "face coverings will also be required in common spaces" and adding "we will be providing all students, faculty, and staff with personal protective equipment, including masks" (personal communication, June 17, 2020) as measures designed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Similarly, William & Mary emergency management chair Sam Jones affirmed "the COVID-19 Response Team is providing guidance regarding the required use of face coverings on campus from now through the end of the calendar year" (personal communication, July 14, 2020).

### *Connections*

Language can build connections between authors and their audience. Conversely, language can also create disconnection. In reviewing COVID-19 emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia, connective language contributed to the themes of the community rises or falls and compassion for the affected and the afflicted. President Katherine Rowe, in acknowledging that connection, wrote "we are living, learning, and connecting with one another in new ways. And, in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, we are missing being physically together on our beautiful Williamsburg campus" (K. Rowe, personal communication, April 17, 2020).

Rowe emphasized that despite the campus being closed the institution was still connected (although virtually). Despite the lack of proximity (“we are missing being physically together”), William & Mary created opportunities to reimagine how community members can connect.

President Jim Ryan, Provost Liz Magill, and Executive Vice Presidents K. Craig Kent and J. J. Davis in affirming connective language, wrote:

This is a special community that has done some amazing things over the last few months, and we will need to summon that energy and spirit once again in the fall. We look forward to working with all of you to meet this moment and make this coming year a memorable and successful one. (personal communication, June 17, 2020)

### *Sign Systems and Knowledge*

Language specific to an institution makes it privileged to that community. For example, if a University of Virginia student asked a random individual from California what a wahoo is, they would not equate it as a term applied to a University of Virginia sports fan. However, ask a University Virginia student what a wahoo is, you would get a specific answer. During COVID-19, we see this sign systems and knowledge language during the pandemic. For example, President Jim Ryan, in addressing plans for graduation delayed by the COVID-19, wrote “we will be sharing more information about Final Exercises as we get closer, and we look forward to seeing you on the Lawn next spring for what will be a truly one-of-a-kind celebration” (personal communication, June 24, 2020). Instead of commencement, the University of Virginia uses the term “final exercises.” William & Mary, in creating a new COVID-19 public health policy and subsequent campaign to promote it, came up with the Healthy Together Community Commitment (HTCC) pledge for community members thus creating a sign and knowledge system specific to William & Mary that mirrors the traditional honor code in place on campus.

## **Rhetorical Situation Discussion**

Bitzer (1968) formulated a sound definition of a rhetorical situation, suggesting that a situation requiring discourse must occur first. Typically, this situation is exigent in nature. Bitzer theorized that exigence was “imperfection marked by urgency” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). Exigent moments, according to Bitzer, require an audience seeking understanding and guidance of a situation requiring discourse. This situation often needs framing to help lead to change. The audience, according to Bitzer, is the second requirement of a rhetorical situation. Without an audience, rhetorical situations are akin to blank canvases. Audiences add color, shape, and depth to a blank rhetorical situation and elevate rhetorical situations to exigency.

Adding to the final element of a rhetorical situation is constraints. Bitzer (1968) alluded to constraints around the rhetoric as a conglomeration of individuals, groups, events, history, and the like, that potentially impede the resolution, exacerbate the situation, or resolve the exigent situation. Bitzer (1968), in articulating constraints, suggested that the speaker or author responding to exigent audience members “not only harness the constraints given by the situation but also provide additional important constraints—for example his personal character, his logical proofs, and his style” (p. 8). These additional constraints include the messenger’s ability to logically address a rhetorical situation, stylistic language, and tone in using discourse, coupled with their leadership approach.

Rhetorical situations require an exigent moment to manifest. As alluded to earlier, exigent moments require imperfection. Operationally defining imperfection in this dissertation centered on COVID-19. More broadly, imperfection is articulated as a public health crisis. In reviewing the email data, it is evident that the imperfection is indeed marked by urgency,

especially the late winter of 2020 and early spring semesters of 2021 at William & Mary and the University of Virginia.

### *Exigence*

What marked the imperfection of COVID-19 was how little was known about the disease. William & Mary initially acknowledged the emerging COVID-19 on January 25, 2020. At that time, Vice President Ginger Ambler and emergency management team chair Sam Jones quoted the CDC as viewing the COVID-19 virus as “a serious public health threat” but countering with “they see the immediate health risk to the general American public as low based on current information” (personal communication, January 25, 2020). A day earlier, on January 24, 2020, University of Virginia Executive Vice President Liz Magill, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer J. J. Davis, and Christopher Holstege urged students, faculty, and staff “to check the CDC website for the most up-to-date details and guidance” while asserting “the threat to the UVA community currently is considered low, but outbreaks of new viruses in humans are always a public health concern” (personal communication). All institutions of higher education were faced with the exigency of an emerging COVID-19 public health crisis, and William & Mary and the University of Virginia, via their early email responses, set the stage for subsequent messaging throughout the pandemic.

While the analysis of rhetoric discussed in this dissertation has the benefit of hindsight in reviewing the COVID-19 response by William & Mary and the University of Virginia, the initial email response to the COVID-19 exigence, and subsequent rhetorical situation response, was to convey an awareness of the emergence of a pneumonia-like illness coming from the city of Wuhan in China (C. Wang et al., 2020). The University of Virginia, in elevating awareness, urged any community member who traveled to the Wuhan province of China or encountered

travelers from that area to monitor for signs of potential illness that included “shortness of breath, a fever, cough” (L. Magill, J. Davis, & C. Holstege, personal communication, January 25, 2020). Further elevating their initial response, the University of Virginia issued public health measures that would become standard practice during the pandemic. These measures included hand washing for twenty seconds, discouraging the sharing of items that may contain saliva, and using the crook of an elbow if the event of a sneeze or cough. The initial situation requiring rhetoric is often a precursor to subsequent follow-up communication. In this instance, however, both William & Mary and the University of Virginia, in initial emails, highlight COVID-19 as an infectious disease, but situate the disease more in-line with illnesses typically seen during cold and flu. While cold and flu season saw similar preventative strategies, William & Mary elevate the exigence (and significance) of this emerging respiratory illness by referencing protocol from the CDC.

The exigent COVID-19 situation was further boosted by the rhetor(s). For both institutions, high-level administrators were called upon to construct and deliver the email response. For William & Mary, messaging for these earlier emails came from the vice president for student and affairs and the emergency management team chair. At the University of Virginia, the provost and two executive vice presidents delivered the communique. We see that as the exigence elevates, so too does the level of leadership addressing the exigency.

### ***Audience***

Bitzer’s (1968) inclusion of the audience in the rhetorical situation stipulated that those members of the audience “must be capable of serving as mediator of the change in which the discourse functions to produce” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 8). For change to occur, there must be an audience of whom change is expected and can contribute to making such change happen.



Exclusively, the audience William & Mary and the University of Virginia address COVID-19-related emails are the students, faculty, and staff of both institutions. Other stakeholders, such as alumni, the Board of Visitors, community partners, and families (both those of students, faculty and staff), while not addressed in these emails, might also be construed as audience members. However, their ability to mediate change is suspect due to proximity (local versus visiting) and the rhetor's identification of the audience. We also understand the audience by the salutations of the emails which is clarified by the distribution list for the emails or those referenced directly in the email.

### ***Constraints***

The constraints of the rhetorical situation for William & Mary and the University of Virginia included the “persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 8). Constraints can either provide resolution to exigent situations or exacerbate tensions of the situation that limit resolutions.

Sources of constraint, according to Bitzer (1968), “include beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like” (p. 8). While Bitzer situated constraints as sourced themes, there is an implied, if not explicit, human connection to constraints. The argument could be made that the audience, while a mediator of change, is also the constraint of change as well. This point is especially valid with the alignment of personal and institutional values. Indeed, there was incongruence, at times, with the values of the institution and audience constraint, in particular, the act of social distancing. Take, for example, William & Mary's Dean of Students at the time, S. Marjorie Thomas, within her August 21, 2020, response to students unable to abide by university policy regarding large gatherings. With Dean Thomas's email, we

see institutional constraint at odds with student audience constraint. While not every William & Mary undergraduate and graduate were blatantly disregarding mitigation protocols established by the university, there was a pocket of the student population that did disregard the HTCC pledge. Because of student actions, William & Mary was constrained in adhering to an institutional commitment to the public health and well-being of the campus community. Thomas's email, in no uncertain terms, indicated swift and consequential repercussions for students disregarding their pledged commitment to not engage in behaviors that could contribute to the spread of COVID-19.

The University of Virginia, like William & Mary, also encountered a disconnect between student expectations and actions. Dean Allen Groves, much like Dean Thomas, encountered a divide between student and institutional constraints—the constraint of social distancing in this instance. Dean Groves wrote:

I've also been asked about our approach to enforcement. As I stressed in my video message to you, the University must take seriously—and act swiftly to address—flagrant and willful behavior that places others at risk. Immediate interim suspension is reserved for the most serious and flagrant violations, in particular hosting or attending a large social gathering of greater than 15 people. It is also applicable for repeated violations of masking or social distancing expectations after being counseled on the need to comply. We will impose this sanction, where appropriate. (personal communication, August 31, 2020)

Regarding constraints, both William & Mary and the University of Virginia found themselves balancing the equilibrium of institutional, community, and individual constraints. Ultimately, both institutions situated the constraints surrounding COVID-19, with a belief constraint that

community well-being was of the utmost importance during the pandemic with mitigation policies at core of most emails sent to the community members of William & Mary and the University of Virginia.

Of final note, the residents of Williamsburg, VA, and Charlottesville, VA, while not directly targeted in the addressed in emails from William & Mary and the University of Charlottesville, were undoubtedly a constraint consideration as the population densities of the institutions and the cities coincided. With such proximity between campuses and communities, indeed a consideration was made that Williamsburg and the Charlottesville communities were indirect audiences of both institutions. Thus, a sort of symbiotic relationship occurred in which, to some degree, both William & Mary and the University of Virginia were cognizant of mitigation efforts of their respective cities and vice-versa.

### **Communicative Action Theory Discussion**

What made the COVID-19 pandemic so challenging was that so little was known about the disease. Therefore, it was vital for William & Mary and the University of Virginia to convey to the students, faculty, and staff of their institutions their understanding, and subsequent, of the disease throughout the pandemic. Habermas's (1984) communicative action theory provided a communicative tool used to understand both institutions' COVID-19 pandemic response. Habermas offered that language offers an opportunity to validate situations with reason with the use of regulative claims. Regulative claims—the assertion that there is a desirable outcome with statements affirming actions that support such outcomes—are a crucial construct of communicative action theory (Habermas, 1984). For example, William & Mary and the University of Virginia conveyed in their messaging a range of mitigation strategies that were

often supported by the CDC governmental agency or locally by the Virginia Department of Health.

Applying Habermas's theory of communicative action, it becomes evident that institutional leaders from both William & Mary and the University of Virginia promoted policies that produced desired outcomes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic that benefitted community health protocol (e.g., wearing a face mask helps contain cough and sneezes that could possibly spread COVID-19). Often these regulative claims immersed themselves in mitigative language. For instance, the use of facial coverings during the pandemic was a wide-spread mitigation practice. At the University of Virginia, for example, Provost Liz Magill, Chief Operating Officer J.J. Davis, and Department of Medicine Chair, Mitch Rosner, emailed the students, faculty, and staff of the University of Virginia about mask usage on February 24, 2021. They asserted:

Wear a mask: Just about any mask is better than no mask at minimizing transmission of the virus. Evidence suggests that the quality of the mask matters, and that the proper fit of the mask is as important.

Fit: Masks should cover the mouth and nose, fit snugly against the face, and include multiple layers of fabric that permit breathing without restriction.

Cloth masks: These reduce the risk of transmission. Similarly, doubling up on cloth masks that have only a single layer is more effective than a single mask. Masks with multiple layers of cloth are better than fewer layers.

Filter inserts: Many cloth masks can accommodate a filter insert, which improves the effectiveness.

Disposable three-ply masks: Although it is not conclusive, there is some evidence that disposable, three-ply medical-grade masks (which are often blue or yellow) may be more

effective than single layer cloth masks. These masks generally fit better and for that reason alone may offer greater protection, especially when indoors and around other people.

N95 masks: These masks are primarily used in patient-care settings, and the CDC has emphasized that wearing masks in general is more important than recommending N95 masks for everyone. In addition, the supply of these masks is generally reserved for healthcare settings.

Magill, Davis, and Rosner reinforced this regulative claim with regulatory language from both the University of Virginia and the CDC. They claimed, “[University of Virginia] and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continue to emphasize the importance of consistently following the full set of safety recommendations: wearing masks, physical distancing, avoiding groups, and frequent hand-washing” (personal communication, February 4, 2021). This example of the University promoting a desirable outcome (i.e., mitigation of COVID-19) and the affirmation of this strategy by the CDC that such practices contribute to lessening the spread of COVID-19 aligns with the language choice employed in the emails (Habermas, 1984).

In comparison, William & Mary also used regulative claims in communicating desirable outcomes for mitigating the spread of COVID-19 (Habermas, 1984). Emergency management team chair Sam Jones, and Vice President for Student Affairs Ginger Ambler signaled early in the pandemic that guidance from the CDC would promote regulative claims from the university and thus more desirable outcomes. For example, early in the pandemic, Jones and Ambler, at the suggestion of the CDC, promoted the flu vaccine as public health measure designed to lessen the spread of illness during the early stages of the pandemic, but to alleviate any potential strain on the health care system (a desirable outcome). They avowed:

the Centers for Disease Control and the Virginia Department of Health are encouraging anyone who has not yet had the flu vaccine to get one. If you have not had a flu shot this year, please consider doing so. Most local pharmacies are good sources for the vaccination. (personal communication, March 3, 2020)

Analyzing the findings using communicative action theory (Habermas, 1984) highlights how the use of regulative claims offered validity to William & Mary and the University of Virginia's COVID-19 mitigation efforts. These efforts were bolstered by input from governmental agencies such as the CDC. By including CDC website information in community emails, William & Mary and the University of Virginia affirmed that regulative claims would be validated by science and data. This adherence to a scientifically backed approach to mitigation efforts showed how the institutions were guided by the emerging COVID-19 public health policy rather than organizational intuition.

### **Sensemaking Discussion**

As posited by Weick et al. (2005), sensemaking is situated as "turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (p. 409). Almost exclusively, sensemaking is applied to organizational settings, such as institutions of higher education. Typically, sensemaking occurs in times of chaos, or in terms of this dissertation, a black swan event (Taleb, 2007). Taleb (2007) argued that unanticipated events, seismic in terms of disruption and impact on a global level, alter society. COVID-19 checked all the boxes that indicate a black swan event in terms of global scale, unpredictability, and wide-spread illness and death.

With the chaos created by COVID-19, it was vital that universities such as William & Mary and the University of Virginia engage in a sensemaking process that guided their

communities through the pandemic. This sensemaking was especially vital because there was so much ambiguity about the disease early in the pandemic. To address that ambiguity, and the subsequent uncertainty wrought by COVID-19, William & Mary and the University of Virginia engaged in a vital first step of any sensemaking process—organizing through communication. A main form of communication was direct emails to students, staff, and faculty. Ultimately, both institutions also built centralized websites to house additional information.

This communication begins by a process Wieck (1988) calls enactment. Enactment is the process by which a situation, in this instance COVID-19, is taken from an amorphous shape to a more clearly defined object that is subsequently translated and addressed by organizations. As the bracketing of COVID-19 became more clearly defined as a public health crisis, communication became paramount for the leadership teams of William & Mary and the University of Virginia. The quickest, and most feasible, way to reach the organizational members, and enact a response, was email communication.

COVID-19, in the disease's earliest incantation, seemed almost peripheral to those in the United States as the assumption existed that this disease was only affecting those in the Wuhan province of China in December of 2019 (C. Wang et al., 2020). However, in late January 2020, the first COVID-19 emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia to their respective community showed the global influence of the pandemic. In fact, the process of enactment paved the way for many of the initial COVID-19 mitigation responses such as mask wearing and social distancing. With enactment, COVID-19, while still dangerous, became more manageable in that mitigation strategies were developed, and enacted, by William & Mary and the University of Virginia that helped control the spread of the disease.

## **Crisis Communication**

While theoretical considerations are essential to the research conducted in this dissertation, practical applications within this research are equally important. From the literature review conducted in chapter two, colleges and universities have relied heavily on email to communicate with students, faculty, staff and external stakeholders (Hassini, 2006; Mastrodicasa, 2008; Pignata et al., 2015; Sheer & Fung, 2007; Uddin et al., 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, William & Mary and the University of Virginia used email as their primary communication vehicle to convey information and update their campus communities about the disease.

Certainly, COVID-19 was a crisis situation for William & Mary and the University of Virginia. While mass shootings at the Virginia Tech and the University of Texas at Austin and the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina to New Orleans were localized events, COVID-19 impacted every region of the United States and thus institutions of higher education in each state. While this dissertation focused on the COVID-19 email response of William & Mary and the University of Virginia, a logical assumption would be that other colleges and universities across the United States used campus email to update their communities on COVID-19.

A component of the literature review conducted in chapter two was crisis communication. Situating COVID-19 among other historical crisis situations in higher education, the pandemic was more of simmer than a rapid boil compared to other crises such as Virginia Tech. Gow et al. (2008) posited that short-fuse situations, such as mass shootings, require immediate communication almost exclusively in the form of text messaging.

Long-fuse crises, such COVID-19 that are more “forecastable,” are afforded the opportunity for organizational leaders to be more deliberate in their response. Ultimately,



however, crisis, regardless of the length of the fuse, requires communication. Whether that crisis is a pandemic or mass violence, college and university leaders must be proactively anticipating that crisis and subsequent responses.

With the COVID-19 crisis response from William & Mary and the University of Virginia, several considerations emerge from the data. Several key administrators from each institution were the “face” of response. While the determination of who and when would author COVID-19 emails was not established in this dissertation, who responds and when during times of institutional crisis is worthy of future of research.

In addition to authorship, crisis communication tonality warrants further discussion. Tonality (whether written or implied) establishes reader perception. When Presidents Rowe and Ryan addressed their communities at the end of the Fall 2020 semester, their tone was appreciative. However, emails from senior student affairs officer from William & Mary and the University of Virginia established a different tone. When the former dean of students at William & Mary, S. Marjorie Thomas, was made aware of student willfully disobeying COVID-19 policy during the start of the fall 2020 semester, she authored a strongly worded email on August 18, 2020, detailing the violation of the HTCC pact and potential consequences students of violating COVID-19 policies that included removal from the university. Similarly, University of Virginia dean of students, Allen Groves, struck a similar when students at his institution were disregarding established mitigation policies at the university. Like Thomas, Groves stressed the importance of student adherence to university COVID-19 policy. Groves, in addressing noncompliance, emphasized “The University must enforce these mandates, including consequences for failure to comply” (personal communication, August 5, 2020). With tonality,

readers are given the opportunity to feel, rather than read, messaging from the author. As such, crisis communication must not only address written content, but what is felt as well.

### **Moving From Reactive to Proactive Messaging**

At the initial start of the pandemic, William & Mary and the University of Virginia exercised caution in approaching the emergence of COVID-19. As the theme traversing with an invisible enemy suggested, the response by both institutions during the latter part of Winter 2020 was more informative, coupled with the theme of mitigation of infectious agents' narrative. Both William & Mary and the University of Virginia opted to focus on epidemiological considerations with an emphasis focusing on where the disease was emanating from and travel considerations. Much of the email focus from both institutions was on the country of China with the city of Wuhan as the early epicenter of the disease. The ascription of COVID-19 as primarily an overseas issues populated the early emails of William & Mary and the University of Virginia.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued to entrench the disease from early spring to fall of 2020, William & Mary and the University of Virginia became more proactive in mitigating the spread of the disease. Primary mitigation strategies employed by both institutions advanced the use of facial masks, social distancing, handwashing, and covering one's mouth or nasal passage with the crook of an elbow. William & Mary and the University of Virginia, in addition to those mitigation measures, also included COVID-19 prevalence testing to enhance mitigation strategies on campus.

With mitigation efforts becoming more intentional and directive, so did campus community accountability. William & Mary highlighted this accountability with the HTCC pledge signed by the students, faculty, and staff. In signing this pledge, community members of William & Mary affirmed their personal responsibility within the campus community to act

responsibly and in accordance with university COVID-19 policy. In failing to abide by university guidelines, William & Mary community members faced potential repercussions for noncompliance.

Reactive and proactive messaging also manifested in the monthly tally of emails described in methods section of Chapter 3. For example, from the middle of February 2020 until the end of the month, William & Mary produced three emails compared to two from the University of Virginia during the same time frame. COVID-19 emails increased significantly for both institutions in March of 2020, with William & Mary sending out 24 emails during the month and the University of Virginia sending out 32 emails. This increase can be attributed to COVID-19 cases increasing throughout the United States and Virginia, as well as both institutions taking proactive measures to protect community members from catching or spreading COVID-19.

### **Implication for Practice**

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for responsive, consistent, and informative communication from institutions of higher education during a public health crisis. As referenced in the literature review, higher education is no stranger to crisis situations. While the Spanish Flu most aligns with the COVID-19 epidemiologically and similarities in public health response (e.g., handwashing and facial coverings), tragic events involving gun violence at the University of Texas (Stearns, 2008), Kent State (Lewis & Hensley, 1998), and Virginia Tech (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Flynn & Heitzmann, 2008; . Wang, & Hutchins, 2010), or natural disasters such as Hurricane Katerina (Hahn, 2018) have also left historical marks on higher education. Those incidents have shaped modern-day crisis management response by college and

universities as each of those emergencies became case studies in counteraction and aftermath considerations.

COVID-19 was unique as a modern crisis situation in that the pandemic was not localized to a particular college or university. In terms of impact, COVID-19 was found in all 50 states (Johns Hopkins, 2022). Thus, logic would dictate that almost all colleges and universities in the United States dealt with COVID-19 in some regard.

With so little known about COVID-19 initially, college and university leaders from across the United States scrambled to react and respond to the emerging pandemic. Strategic planning regarding COVID-19 would be complex. As a result, reactive planning would take place instead. Bryson's (2011), understanding the chaos of black swans, suggested that in these times when so much is in flux, organizations conduct stakeholder analysis. Understanding who your stakeholders is critical implication of practice. Imagine if college and universities only communicated to students during the pandemic and consider the impact that would have had faculty and staff health and well-being. Thus, effective communication strategies should reach all stakeholders.

As this dissertation focused on data contained in emails, considerations must be made to all the information that surrounded COVID-19. Porat et al. (2020) suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about another disease as well—the *infodemic*. The authors described the infodemic as “an over- abundance of information, of which some is accurate and some is not, making it hard for people to find trustworthy and reliable guidance to make informed decisions” (p. 2). With all the information surrounding the pandemic, both scientific and unscientific, making way into public consciousness through media and online content, what was true and what was not true about COVID-19 could be hard to discern. Therefore, it became necessary for

colleges and universities to get out in front in terms of how they situated COVID-19. The concept of addressing something “sooner rather than later” becomes vital in communication strategies and emerges as a key implication for addressing crisis.

Furthermore, in reviewing the email data for this dissertation, many different high-level administrators from the William & Mary and the University of Virginia crafted email responses to students, faculty, and staff of their respective institutions. At times, it was clear why certain administrators from each institution emailed campus community members. For example, when students were involved or affected by university policy, we see messaging come from student affairs leaders. For example, former William & Mary dean of students, S. Marjorie Taylor, sent emails to students when concern arose from students not abiding by the HTCC. Similarly, Dean of Students Allen Groves, from the University of Virginia, also emailed students about abiding by COVID-19 protocol.

However, in comparing the number of emails sent by specific William & Mary and the University of Virginia leaders, we see differences in tallies. University of Virginia Provost Liz Magill was listed as an author of 44 COVID-19 emails analyzed from February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021. In comparison, William and Mary Provost Peggy Agouris was listed as an author of five emails in the same time frame. Quantitatively, we see a large difference between the two provosts regarding tallied emails. Observationally, questions emerge as to why Provost Magill was utilized more in the COVID-19 email responses than her counterpart at William & Mary. Thus, a key consideration in terms of practice for higher education leaders is determining how key leadership roles were utilized in the COVID-19 email response and how they were selected at various points in the pandemic to address the campus community members.

### *Policy Makers*

The primary form of communication from William & Mary and the University of Virginia to their respective campus communities during the COVID-19 pandemic was email. What was especially beneficial for using email during this time was the immediacy of sending an email. Within moments of hitting send, William & Mary and the University of Virginia were able to send thousands of emails to the students, faculty, and staff of their universities instantaneously updating and informing them of the rapidly evolving COVID-19 spreading across the world.

Several things needed to unfold, however, before those emails could be sent. Questions of content, who would write the content, and the editing and approval process of COVID-19-related emails were some of the factors that went into crafting correspondence. Strategically and logistically, there were many moving pieces of the puzzle of emailing staff. Combine that with a very rapidly shifting and changing crisis that required, at times, daily communication with campus community members, the process of creating these communications was daunting for those tasked with the responsibility.

In the research conducted in this dissertation, I would situate policy more locally. By locally, I refer to individual college or university communication offices. Of course, this assumes every college and university has devoted the resources and staff to this administrative task. However, for the sake of offering policy recommendations, the assumption in this dissertation is that there are institutions of higher education that do not have such offices. In that event, infrastructure is a crucial policy implementation consideration for institutional communication in the event of crisis situations. Due to the black swan nature of the COVID-19 pandemic,

institutions often lost operational equilibrium at times. Imagine how COVID-19 communication affected those institutions.

### ***Leadership Next Steps***

As gleaned from this dissertation, communication during a public health crisis, or crisis in general, is crucial in not only framing the rhetorical situation, but the subsequent response and actions needed to address the dilemma. As offered historically in this dissertation, institutions of higher education have weathered significant disasters from gun violence to natural disasters. With the addition of COVID-19, every operational 2- and 4-year institution of higher education has now encountered a public health crisis that significantly altered the operational wheels of their respective institutions.

Regarding arteries for future research, I offer that there are several. First, a historical research approach comes to mind. Not to go on ad nauseam about the crippling impact COVID-19 had on institutions of higher education, but for one brief address, COVID-19 was (is) a significant historical marker in higher education. So significant, in fact, William & Mary and the University of Virginia, along with other institutions of higher education, closed their campuses. Scholars of higher education, and those outside higher education, will continue to study this pandemic for generations to come. It is my hope that this researcher contributes to that scholarship as a discursive and historical piece of scholarship of how college leaders communicated to their community members during an unprecedented pandemic.

As this dissertation focused on language drawn directly from institutional leaders from William & Mary and the University of Virginia during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are implications for crisis response scholarship. I see this as a two-pronged approach. First, as a case-study in crisis communication or management in higher education. Second, my dissertation

research also has implications for organizational public health policy. As discussed in the last chapters of my dissertation, William & Mary and the University of Virginia centered their mitigation efforts with a science-based approach (e.g., if the CDC advises social distancing of 6 feet, both institutions created policy mirroring that advice). Further, the process in which colleges and universities created COVID-19 social norming campaigns to promote the effectiveness and value of mitigation strategies to community members is also worthy of future research.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As I continuously read and reread the emails included in my dissertation, I often asked myself, “did the authors indeed write these emails?” This is not to say the leadership teams who put fourth COVID-19-related emails did not write them. Rather it begs the question of “What is the process that produces these emails?” and “Who is in charge of that process?” The information contained in those emails, at times, was intense especially as William & Mary and the University of Virginia began preparing for the 2020 fall semester during a historic pandemic. Many moving parts needed to be coordinated before those emails went out to the students, faculty, and staff of those institutions. To be privy to those conversations between university leaders would have been eye-opening. Recommendations for future research certainly situate on the selection of authors who communicated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, who has editorial rights to these emails? This ultimately leads to the concept of strategic communication in crisis situations and how leadership coalesces to create communication that is then read and absorbed by their campus communities.

Future research might include interviews with the high-level leadership during the pandemic to learn more about the behind-the-scenes decision making. Another study could focus



on student and faculty understanding of the tonality of communication in the email responses. The analysis conducted for this dissertation highlights the various forms of discourse in the email messages yet leaves unresolved how readers of the emails understood the messaging.

As this dissertation suggests, William & Mary and the University of Virginia were very similar in their approach in terms of response and linguistic choices during COVID-19. A newer take on the research might include institutions that took a different approach to the pandemic in terms of response and mitigation strategies. For example, in what ways, if any, did private colleges and universities differ from public institutions? Taking it a step further, were there differences geographically (northern institutions compared to southern institutions) in how institutions of higher education responded to COVID-19?

## **Conclusion**

COVID-19 was unlike any event encountered by higher education in the early 21st century. So impactful was the pandemic that institutions of higher education evacuated their campuses to process the totality of the situation and what their next steps would be in response to COVID-19 (Bacow, 2020; Sinatra, 2022). William & Mary and the University of Virginia, like many of their counterparts in the United States, were forced to confront a crisis the likes of which had not been seen since the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 (Greenberg, 2018). However, the institutional resolve of both universities sought to protect the collective physical and emotional well-being of the students, faculty, and staff of their communities.

Communication was crucial in articulating how William & Mary and the University of Virginia would respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19, in terms of crisis response, was like that of the Hurricane Katerina (Comfort & Haase, 2006; Hahn, 2018; DHS, 2006). While crisis events such as the Virginia Tech mass shootings demanded instantaneous text messaging

response (Barker & Yoder, 2012), there was more leeway in Hurricane Katrina and COVID-19. This was, in part, because both were more forecastable—Hurricane Katrina and COVID-19 were visible along the horizon. Thus, there was more operational breathing room in planning an organizational response to those simmering crises.

Despite the ability to forecast and preemptively respond to some aspects of COVID-19 (e.g., mitigation strategies), William & Mary and the University of Virginia still contended with variants of the disease (Katella, 2022) and mitigation noncompliance by students. COVID-19 tilted the stages of William & Mary and the University of Virginia many a time during the period of February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021. What aided both institutions during those unpredictable times was transparency in communication. If cases of COVID-19 rose significantly, William & Mary and the University of Virginia were forthcoming to students, faculty, and staff about the need to alter plans of classroom instruction and social gatherings at a moment's notice.

The ability to operationally change COVID-19 policy and procedure was the steadfastness of William & Mary and the University of Virginia to a science-based framing of their COVID-19 response to students, faculty, and staff of their institutions. Science ultimately guided the response to COVID-19 by each university. From mitigation strategies such as requiring the use of face masks in public spaces to prevalence testing measures, William & Mary and the University of Virginia adopted a science-based approach framing of the COVID-19 pandemic. By using science as a communicative backdrop throughout the pandemic, greater flexibility and transparency was given to both institutions' response to COVID-19. Furthermore, students, faculty, and staff from both universities made sense of the COVID-19 pandemic in scientific terms.

This adherence to science also gave way to a community-based framing of COVID-19 as it established accountability and structure for campus community members during the pandemic. In addition to establishing structure, a community-based approach also gave way to collective public health campaigns for William & Mary and the University of Virginia. For William & Mary, this community-based framing manifested as the HTCC campaign in which students, faculty, and staff of the institution signed a personal contract promising to adhere to COVID-19 policy and procedure. Similarly, the University of Virginia enacted a “For All of Us” campaign. The goal, according to the university, was to use:

Portraits of community members wearing masks, we created a sense of normalcy and collective buy-in. We then asked these people to explain why they were doing their part—wearing a mask, washing their hands, and distancing—to keep the community safe. (University of Virginia, 2023, para. 2)

William & Mary and the University of Virginia have weathered many storms throughout their hallowed histories. From the Civil War to World Wars I and II, to the Spanish flu and the Great Depression, the resilience of both universities to withstand historical crises is a testament to the leadership and community of those respective institutions. As William & Mary and the University of Virginia entered 2020, on the horizon was a global health crisis that harkened memories of the Bubonic Plague or the Spanish Flu—the COVID-19 pandemic. While science and communication had advanced significantly since the historical epidemiological health crisis mentioned above, the swiftness and unknown variables of COVID-19 still pushed William & Mary and the University of Virginia on their back heels in terms of understanding and response to the disease. In those early parts of the pandemic, in late winter and early spring of 2020, both

institutions had to calibrate and recalibrate continuously as the disease spread to all parts of the world and eventually the cities of Williamsburg and Charlottesville in Virginia.

Drawing from the reserves of institutional resolve and determination, William & Mary and the University of Virginia, in their third and second centennials, respectively, faced the COVID-19 pandemic with a central premise that permeated their response to the disease—protect their communities' health and well-being first and foremost. With that central premise in mind, both universities began, in earnest, communicating to their campus communities via email on how they would respond and frame their COVID-19 pandemic response.

In examining and coding the emails from February 14, 2020, until March 1, 2021, several themes emerged from the coding process. While the themes of traversing with an invisible enemy, mitigation of infectious agents, compassion for the affected and afflicted, the community rises or falls, and an abundance of gratitude emerged in analyzing the emails from William & Mary and the University of Virginia, the heart of each institution stood out above any code or theme assigned to their emails. Defining heart would entail using words such as courage (e.g., heart of a lion); openness (e.g., wear your heart on your sleeve); and wholeheartedness (e.g., heart and soul). At every juncture of the COVID-19 pandemic, the courage, openness, and wholeheartedness of William & Mary and the University of Virginia were on display in the emails crafted by each institution to their communities of students, faculty, and staff. Moreover, should a time arise when each university must showcase their resolve and determination in the face of adversity, William & Mary and the University of Virginia will fasten their institutional response to the foundational values that guided both institutions through the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## APPENDIX

### CODEBOOK

#### Gee's (2011) Seven Building Tasks of Language

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>
Significance	How is this piece of language (words/sentences) that make things significant. Additionally, how is language (words/sentences) being used that make things less significant? (Gee, 2011, p. 17)
Practices	What practice (activity) or practices (activities) is this piece of language (words or sentences) being used to enact (i.e., get others to recognize as going on)? (Gee, 2011, p. 18)
Identities	What identity or identities is this piece of language being used to (i.e., get others to recognize as operative?) What identity or identities is this piece of language attributing to others and how does this help the speaker or writer enact his or her own identity? (Gee, 2011, p. 18)
Relationships	What sort of relationship or relationships is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)? (Gee, 2011, p. 19)
Politics (the distribution of social goods)	What perspective on social goods is this piece of language (words or sentences) is this piece of language communicating (i.e., what is being communicated as to what is taken to be “normal,” “right,” “good,” “correct,” “proper,” “appropriate,” “valuable,” “the way things are,” “the way things should be,” etc.) (Gee, 2011, p. 19)
Connections	How does this piece of language (words/sentences) connect or disconnect things; how does it make things relevant or irrelevant to each other? (Gee, 2011, p. 19)
Signs Systems and Knowledge	How does this piece of language (words or sentences) privilege or deprive specific sign systems (e.g., Spanish versus English, technical language vs. everyday language, words vs. equations, etc.) or different ways of knowing and believing or claims to knowledge and belief (e.g., science versus the humanities, science vs “common sense,” biology versus “creation science”)? (Gee, 2011, p. 20)

*Adopted from Gee's (2011) book An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*

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