

Reacting to a Public Health Crisis

Joseph Parker

Institutional Context

Brook College is a private institution in upstate New York located approximately 100 miles from a major metropolitan area. The college primarily serves undergraduate students, but has grown its graduate program over the last two years since the new president came on board. Presently, the college has an undergraduate population of 6,448, and a graduate student population of 1,417. The college seeks a diverse population of students, in particular international students. Twelve percent of the student body, both undergraduate and graduate, is made up of international students. The international students represent 79 different nations. Domestically, the college primarily draws from the east coast states.

Basic Situation

The college is presently on winter recess, but the spring semester will be starting in another week. Most students have left the school for home or elsewhere, however a large percentage of the international students stay on campus during the break. Along with the international students, there are students attending a college workshop, and others who stay due to work obligations. This is a quiet time for the college, and both faculty and staff often use the break to travel for vacation. The exception is the Enrollment Office, which has been busy running campus tours for perspective students.

Despite being a quiet time, the Health Center has seen an increase of students with flu-like symptoms. During the winter recess, the Health Center lowers staffing levels from those scheduled during when classes are in session. The Health Center is presently running on a skeleton crew. The higher than normal volume of drop-in students with flu-like symptoms is starting to overwhelm the staff.

On Saturday, a student treated by the Health Center the previous week was taken to the hospital by ambulance. A roommate concerned about his condition called campus security, which resulted in the

ambulance being called. On Sunday, the local news reports on the student, as well as the regional increase in flu-like symptoms, and incidents of other non-student hospitalizations. On Monday, the national press picks up the story, and runs stories on the student (who remains hospitalized), the regional incidences, pandemics, and a related story on a population in New Jersey that is also seeing an unusually high incident of flu-like symptoms with hospitalizations. Meanwhile, the Heath Center continues to see a high volume of students with similar symptoms, and continues to advise rest and over the counter medications. Campus security has received an increase in calls from parents who are concerned because they have not been able to reach their on-campus son or daughter. By Tuesday, a significant portion of the on-campus student population, as well as a number of staff members, most notably in the Enrollment Office, are ill. There have been additional hospitalizations. It is clear that there is a health problem. The college is being contacted by concerned students and parents. The press is now on campus daily. Classes start in six days.

Challenges

The president has faced leadership challenges in the past two years, but this is her first with intense public scrutiny. The college relies on the Health Center to address typical student health concerns, but it is not equipped or positioned to handle a major health crisis. Being in a rural location, the available public health services support a large geographic area with limited resources. Campus security has limited communications with the Health Center, and they do not report incidences which require outside medical attention back to the Health Center. The college is working on an emergency notification system, but only limited testing has been completed. Currently, the only means of communicating directly with undergraduates is through email. The central student information system is obsolete and lacks student information, such as students' cell phone numbers, or out of school contact information. There is emergency contact information in the student information system, but it is not updated after a student first matriculates.

Your Task

The college needs to respond to this crisis. You are one of a number of senior administrative staff that has been assembled midday

to construct a response plan to deal with the safety of the students, faculty, and staff. You and the team must construct a response and communication plan by tomorrow morning for the president, with the expectation of immediate execution. Your plan must include a recommendation about whether the start of classes should be delayed.