

THESIS

LEADERSHIP, RESILIENCE, AND SENSEMAKING AT COLORADO STATE  
UNIVERSITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### LEADERSHIP, RESILIENCE, AND SENSEMAKING AT COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This study examines the crisis communication qualities of crisis leadership, communicative resilience, and enacted sensemaking in the case of Colorado State University's response to COVID-19 in the spring of 2020. The focus for university response is based in correspondence emailed from University President McConnell to the students. As groundwork for the study, I review crisis communication literature in general and focused studies in crisis leadership, Buzzanell's theory of constructed resilience, and Weick's enacted sensemaking. This foundation of literature informs a mixed method study comprising of a textual analysis of McConnell's correspondence and interviews with students enrolled at the time of the crisis. This methodology was used with the intention of addressing four research questions. RQ1: *In what ways did President McConnell exhibit a leadership mindset in her response to the COVID-19 pandemic?*, RQ2: *In what ways did President McConnell's messages help construct a sense of resilience for CSU students?*, RQ3A: *In what ways did students make sense of the COVID-19 health crisis in the context of their student lives?*, and RQ3B: *What role did messages from President McConnell play in their sensemaking?* These questions led to a wealth of insights about McConnell's communication in response to the pandemic and moving to virtual learning Spring 2020. Three major takeaways discussed are that the leadership role is particularly delicate in crisis situations, the practice of normalizing challenges in crisis should be paired with

adjusting expectations, and that the reflex to strive for a business-as-usual approach should be cautiously balanced with an acceptance of the new normal a crisis requires.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I remember thinking it would be like the common flu. Some people would get sick, some might even die, but most young, healthy people would be unphased. We would go about our day but, we would try to be better about covering our coughs and washing our hands. I think many, like myself, resisted the idea that the COVID-19 pandemic would change our lives monumentally. It is currently difficult to summarize this event since we are still actively living through it. However, I can describe how it began. On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization's (WHO) Country Office in the People's Republic of China announced a statement from the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission regarding cases of "viral pneumonia" in the area (WHO, 2020). On January 9, Chinese authorities reported to WHO that the illnesses were caused by a novel coronavirus (WHO, 2020), which is a family of viruses that cause symptoms ranging from those likened to the common cold to the more serious, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV) (European Lung Foundation, 2020). The novel coronavirus strain (COVID-19) rapidly began spreading as new cases were discovered in many other countries raising the situation to a pandemic level crisis.

Reynolds (2006) predicted that among all the potential crises facing the United States with voluminous scope, "the one most likely to involve directly the greatest number of persons is a major respiratory-transmitted infectious disease outbreak, such as pandemic influenza" (p. 535). She also foresaw that an emergency of this degree would require officials to communicate messages urging the public to take actions and refrain from other actions, such as engaging in cough etiquette and reducing group gatherings (Reynolds, 2006). Additionally, Reynolds (2006)

pointed out that we would face another respiratory pandemic differently from the 1918 influenza pandemic due to the fact that we live in an age of information:

An influenza pandemic of a highly pathogenic strain now that we have entered the information age—where instant and horizontal communication takes place around the clock—will severely tax the ability of crisis response officials to provide accurate, timely, consistent, and credible information to the U.S. population and the world. If response officials do not naturally, or through past crisis experience, embrace the concepts of open and empathetic crisis communication, then an intervention of crisis communication training may be necessary to help leaders adopt a more open and empathetic communication style in the crisis setting (p. 252).

The scenario Reynolds (2006) predicted has arrived and the need for open and empathetic crisis communication in the face of a pandemic crisis is apparent. This project is aimed at examining how Colorado State University (hereafter, CSU), as an organization that impacts over 30,000 students, heeded the call for this kind of crisis communication during the pandemic.

Rising cases in the United States brought concerns about transmission rates and hospital capacity to reality prompting many municipalities to place stay-at-home orders. On March 16, 2020, CSU president, Joyce McConnell announced the courses would take place virtually for a few weeks after Spring Break (CSU University Communications Staff, 2020). This was soon after adjusted to the entire remainder of the spring 2020 semester. These circumstances led to concerns beyond the physical health of the students, but also how to maintain the trust, success, and enrollment of students when asking them to drastically reduce their interaction with other students, faculty, and the campus in general. During the spring 2020 closure of campus, CSU

faced much backlash from students demanding a portion of their tuition and fees be refunded since they were not receiving the same kind of education and access to resources (Cullor, 2020).

This project explores the university's response to the global crisis, acknowledging that the steps needed to avoid further harm might be met with negative reactions from the populations that organizations are meant to serve. I also examined what we can learn about maintaining a support system for stakeholders that encourages resiliency. I did this by analyzing the communication methods used in messages sent by President McConnell and stakeholder (student) responses to these messages. This study focuses on the students at CSU and their experience with COVID-19 as a major disruption to their student life, particularly in the spring 2020 semester.

In this thesis project, I begin with a literature review that provides an overview of crisis communication, crisis leadership, communicative resilience, and enacted sensemaking. Using this literature, I propose four research questions. I then describe the method for the study and report my findings. Finally, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the study, research limitations, and possible future directions for further inquiry.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis research is fairly new but covers a wide range of concerns publics are faced with while experiencing disaster, dramatic change, and in many cases, danger to their well-being. The following literature review establishes the components of crisis, how we study crisis, and how we can apply the study of crisis to COVID-19. I discuss thinking of crisis in staged approaches, the development of the fields of crisis management, crisis communication and its subsequent concerns: crisis response strategies, the role of the crisis stakeholder, and the development of crisis communication best practices. Finally, I review the major theoretical lenses in crisis communication and the lenses I applied to the study: crisis leadership, resilience, and sensemaking.

### **The Elements of Crisis**

The study of crisis begins with the notion of risk. According to Heath (2006), risk is the chance for an occurrence that will have positive or negative consequences, which can be predicted and controlled. Thus, “a crisis is a risk manifested” (Heath, 2006, p. 245). This section summarizes how crisis can be defined for the purpose of this research, the situational factors to consider, and the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic manifests as a crisis.

The term crisis has been used to describe a large span of events in multiple disciplines, (i.e., public relations, sociology, communication studies, business management, and psychology). Crises may arise in the form of a natural disaster, such as a hurricane, or may be a disaster caused by an organization that then wreaks havoc on the surrounding environment (Coombs, 2019). The Union Carbide toxic gas release in Bhopal, India in 1984 and the crude oil spill into the Gulf of Mexico after the sinking of Deepwater Horizon in 2010 are examples of

crises that began with a problem caused by an organization that then had an impact on the environment and individuals involved in the area (Coombs, 2019). Major crises have the potential to drastically disrupt human life, property, financial earnings, and organizational reputations (Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001). A crisis may raise questions of liability for the health and safety of customers/clients/stakeholders or environmental harm and cause an organization to face financial losses or property damage (Coombs, 2019).

For the purpose of this study, I focus on one working definition for crisis acknowledging that crises are fluid and largely influenced by the perceptions of those affected by each particular crisis event. Falkheimer and Heide (2010) present a definition that recognizes the effect of crises on both organizations and the societies they exist within: “A crisis means that the normal order in a system is destabilized, which creates considerable uncertainty and requires rapid intervention. From an organizational and communicative perspective, crises mean that an organization’s symbolic position and value are put under threat” (p. 514). This definition encapsulates how the COVID-19 pandemic is conceptualized in this project as a crisis event. The rapid closures of nearly every system in the United States and many other affected countries, in addition to the high risk to human life, prompted swift and unsettling changes to every life and threatened the stability of many organizations.

When a crisis occurs, organizations must consider various situational factors. First, stakeholders might attribute a certain amount of crisis responsibility to the organization, which leads to a negative impact on the reputation of the organization if not handled carefully (Coombs, 1995). Another situational factor is the level of competence and integrity people attribute to the organization involved. Research shows people are more forgiving if they believe a violation of trust was related to competence rather than to integrity, which implies more forethought

(Coombs, 2015). In the case of COVID-19, since it is a viral disease, an organization cannot be considered responsible for the actual occurrence of the crisis. However, organizations can be evaluated for the competence and integrity they display in their response because certain policies and decisions can put stakeholders at further risk of contraction. For example, a major criticism of the United States during the pandemic is that the government was too slow in getting testing prepared and urging individuals and businesses to adhere to social distancing measures (Sommer, 2020). Finally, temporal factors must also be considered, such as the perceived term the crisis will impact society. Long-term threats require more attention and a more victim-oriented response than a short-term crisis would (Jin and Cameron, 2007; Jin, 2009). These long-term ramifications are a major site of tension in the COVID-19 pandemic. The level of uncertainty and inconsistencies with how long officials are saying we can expect to be at risk of spreading the virus created public concern and frustration (Louie, 2020; Zhang, 2020). The timing between the crisis event and the release of information that acknowledges the crisis influences stakeholder perceptions, as well (Coombs, 2015). These situational factors contribute to the actual crisis trigger to create a more complex event.

Some crises go beyond a single organization or industry and can have ripple effects on multiple facets of life and business. Coombs (2019) points to the terrorist attacks in New York City on September 11, 2001 as an example of crisis management concerns moving beyond the organizational level and impacting several levels of human well-being. COVID-19 presents a situation where a health crisis has led to heightened pressures for organizations to enact proper responses and avoid prolonging or exacerbating the situation. The virus has proved to be the kind of crisis that affects virtually every industry in nearly every community. He and Harris (2020) adopt Taleb's (2008) term "Black Swan Event" to describe the pandemic as a "shocking event

that changes the world” (p. 176). The pandemic itself is overwhelming for health care systems and the financial stability of individuals and large organizations alike; however, there are also concerns about organizations responding incorrectly or too late, profiteering, or ignoring ingrained societal inequalities magnified by the global health crisis (He & Harris, 2020).

Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education, Angie Paccione described the current situation as a “cacophony of crises” (Associated Press, 2020). Therefore, crisis managers are facing more than the medical crisis of the virus outbreak itself.

Using the definition of crisis Falkheimer and Heide (2010) provide, the COVID-19 crisis can be understood as both a natural disaster caused by the spread of a virus leading to the rapid destabilization in the normal order and also a catalyst for further problems for organizations charged with responding to, acting upon, and adjusting within the crisis situation. Public health officials, crisis managers, and business owners have faced additional challenges in the COVID-19 crisis due to resistance to the closures of businesses (Porpora, 2020; Riggins, 2020), and questions of individual responsibility in using personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks (Alund, 2020; Katz, Sanger-Katz, Quealy, 2020). News media highlighted skeptical members of the public, with dissenting opinions to preventative action even leading to protests arguing against the authority of public health officials and crisis managers (Bogel-Burroughs, 2020). University leaders, in particular, have additional issues to address, such as affording for additional safety measures, supporting students and faculty, and the ethics of re-opening campuses while enrollment and funding drop (Associated Press, 2020).

### **Staging Crises: Four Prominent Approaches**

Crisis research has adopted several staged approaches to address crisis events largely due to the variety of needs based on where a community is within the course of the crisis (Coombs,



2019). The four most prominent are Fink's four stage approach, Mitroff's five-phase approach, Coombs' three macro stages, and the regenerative approach, a modification to the macro stage approach.

Fink (1986) was the first to look at crisis beyond the single trigger event and conveniently utilized a medical illness metaphor to describe the course of the crisis. According to his four-stage approach, crises go through the prodromal, breakout, chronic, and resolution stages (Fink, 1986). The prodromal stage represents the early signs a potential crisis may emerge, the breakout begins with the triggering event that officially sets crisis in motion, the chronic stage explains when the effects linger and actors attempt to respond, and finally, the resolution marks when signs of the crisis are no longer present (Fink, 1986). Mitroff (1994) further developed these stages into a five-phase approach: signal detection, probing and prevention, damage containment, recovery, and learning. The major distinction for Mitroff's approach (1994) is the added stage for learning, where review and critique take place in order to leave a lasting memory on the community or organization (Mitroff, 1994). Coombs (2019) proposes a third approach he calls macro stages. These stages are broader and encompass Fink and Mitroff's approaches into three major categories for the crisis event. The first stage is pre-crisis, which includes prevention, signal detection, and preparation. The second stage is the crisis encompassing actions, coping, damage containment, and recovery. Finally, post-crisis involves the resolution of the crisis and learning from it. These stages of crisis are important ways of framing the crisis event and its subsequent appropriate communicative responses.

COVID-19 does not necessarily fit the linear nature of solely relying on these approaches due to the duration of the event, various perceptions on lulls and peaks in infection rates, and the need to recover as we progress through sustained disruption. Thus, another approach is helpful in

thinking about a crisis as complex as COVID-19. The regenerative approach views the crisis as merely a point in time surrounded by pre-crisis and post-crisis responses (Coombs, 2019). The regenerative approach is appropriate to apply when studying COVID-19 because it posits that once a turning point is reached, such as re-opening of businesses or an increase/decrease of reported new cases in a particular area, reframing and redefinition of the crisis occurs (Coombs, 2019). This approach urges crisis managers to “change communicative responses to reflect the new demands of evolving crisis” (Coombs, 2019, p. 39). Considering the regenerative approach, each notable change in new case rates, change in federal/state/local orders, or when new information is learned about the novel virus calls for a reevaluation of the response strategy.

### **Fields of Crisis: Management and Communication**

Coombs (2019) suggests “crisis is unpredictable but not unexpected” (p. 25). Therefore, there is a need for the study of crises to prepare for and predict future possibilities. The study of crises has largely been developed to assist organizations with handling the impact of the event. Researchers acknowledge that crises threaten the reputation and viability of any organization involved, as well as the relationship a stakeholder is able to have with the organization. “The key reputational concerns are trustworthiness and the organization’s ability to conform to the social expectations of stakeholders” (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, p. 280). Thus, crises often have the power to shake the expectations stakeholders have about an organization’s actions (Coombs, 2019). Crisis research has largely focused on guiding how organizations can manage these expectations in the midst of a crisis, potentially even growing and benefiting from a crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007; 2010; 2017). Since crisis can be expected, the effort to prevent and reduce effects emerged as crisis management.

Crisis management was developed to prevent organizational loss during a crisis when operations are reduced or absent (Coombs, 2019). The study of crisis management developed from academic studies focused on emergency and disaster management, which assessed ways to avoid, respond, and cope with events (Coombs, 2010). This development was largely influenced by Fink's 1986 book, *Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable* (Coombs, 2010). The main focus of crisis management is prevention of and preparation for crises whenever possible, and response and revision when a crisis is unavoidable (Coombs, 2019). Crisis management is most effective when managers consider the event as an ongoing process using a staged approach, rather than a developed plan to be executed in one moment (Coombs, 2019). Crisis management eventually led to the development of a field that is specifically concerned with crisis communication and the various kinds of information that can be disseminated during a crisis.

In the past 30 years, communication scholars have defined crisis communication as a rich discipline in its own right (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Inspired by Benson (1988) researchers have examined the particularities in the range of crisis situations and the appropriate accompanying range of communication crisis response strategies (Ice, 1991). The main distinction for crisis communication is the focus on the relationships between crisis situations, communication strategies, and public perceptions (van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014) and the driving goal of “restor[ing] organizational normalcy, influenc[ing] public perception, and regain[ing] and repair[ing] image and reputation” (Fearn-Banks, 2002, p. 2). Therefore, many crisis communication scholars turn their attention to stakeholders to gain insight on how they make sense of a situation (van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014).

Crisis communication is primarily viewed as taking on three functions: instructing information, adjusting information, and internalizing information (Sturges, 1994). First,

instructing information simply addresses the public need to know how to protect themselves (Sturges, 1994). Second, “[e]xpressions of sympathy, information about the crisis event, counseling, and corrective action are all variations of adjusting information” (Coombs, 2015, p. 142). Adjusting information is often in response to the anxiety (Jin & Pang, 2010) and anger (Coombs & Holladay, 2005) that crises often trigger. Providing information from an adjusting information standpoint is aimed at treating anxiety and anger by reducing the ambiguity of the event and helping stakeholders cope with uncertainty (Coombs, 2015). Finally, internalizing information supports managing organizational reputation and has generally dominated crisis communication literature (Holladay, 2010). Olsson (2014) finds this preference toward internalizing information understandable due to the influence *apologia* has had on the development of the discipline. The impact of this influence from the classical rhetorical tradition positions crisis communication to largely focus on reducing blame and returning to normal activities (Olsson, 2014). This study examines the relationship President McConnell’s correspondence has to these three functions of crisis communication. Organizations lean toward instructing information early on in the crisis, then rely on internalizing information to support their reputation (Olsson, 2014). However, adjusting information is a key element in fostering resilience in a prolonged, ambiguous crisis (Coombs, 2015). Therefore, its presence in McConnell’s emails is vital if the university aims to lead students through coping with the pandemic rather than simply keeping them subscribed to the organization.

### **Crisis Communication: Approaching Crisis**

Crisis communication is often divided into two basic types: crisis knowledge management and stakeholder reaction management (Coombs, 2010). According to Coombs (2010), crisis knowledge management occurs behind the scenes focusing on “identifying sources,

collecting information, analyzing information (knowledge creation), sharing knowledge and decision making” and stakeholder reaction management “comprises communicative efforts (words and actions) to influence how stakeholders perceive the crisis, the organization in crisis, and the organization’s crisis response” (p. 25). This study is focused on the latter, attending to the perception of students and their reaction to the university’s response to COVID-19 rather than the internal communication amongst the administration as they collect and decide how to distribute information. Focusing on the voice of students is important because their perceptions and reactions offer valuable points of reference to think about how crisis managers can make improvements to crisis knowledge management by keeping the stakeholder’s experience in mind.

The dimensions of crisis communication can be further expanded by thinking deeper about the types of communication being used and the goal of the communication in general. Olsson (2014) suggests thinking about communication as either operational or strategic. Operational information “relates to direct and event-oriented information (foremost provided by emergency management personnel), which aims at providing people with information that can enhance their ability to cope with the situation at hand,” whereas strategic information is “often pre-planned and aimed at achieving long-term organizational goals.” (Olsson, 2014, p. 114). Operational information is typically more comprehensive and geared toward making informed decisions under stressful circumstances while also attending to conveying availability and emotional investment in the event whereas strategic information is typically more concerned with the reputation and survival of an organization (Olsson, 2014). For example, a university response to the COVID-19 crisis that privileges strategic information would prioritize relaying how the university will be maintaining an inflow of funding and will continue to thrive and provide education to its students. On the other hand, a response geared toward operational

information would describe the necessary actions that must be taken to survive while urging a two-way communicative avenue and empathizing with how the crisis is emotionally affecting the community.

Communication that privileges strategic information may be more focused on the goal of maintaining reputation whereas communication focusing on operational information is more geared to support instilling resilience (Olsson, 2014). Reputation-oriented, or organizational-centered, communication aims to explain and promote “an organization’s own framing and preferences, and in doing so strengthen its credibility and legitimacy” (Olsson, 2014, p. 117). This kind of perspective is concerned with the stakeholder’s perception of the organization’s ability to continue producing goods and services, and the prominence of the organization in their minds (Olsson, 2014). On the other hand, “resilience-oriented information is receiver-centric and aims to promote self-sufficiency, networking, and renewal” and “providing information that is critical for communities and individuals to survive and revive in the event of a crisis” (Olsson, 2014, p. 117). This study focuses on any potential operational information and resilience-instilling crisis communication from the university’s outreach to students. Since resilience-instilling crisis communication represents the less dominant areas of study in the field (Holladay, 2010), more can be learned about crisis communicators’ reflex, willingness, and ability to effectively reach out to the audience’s sense of resilience, safety, and emotions.

### ***Crisis Response Strategies***

Part of the larger study of crisis communication is geared toward crisis response strategies, which are the available options for actual statements and actions taken by crisis managers (Coombs, 2007; 2015). Crisis response strategies are applied to “steer the sensemaking and opinions of stakeholders” (van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014, p. 527). The most common

categories of crisis response strategies are denial, distance, ingratiation, mortification, and suffering (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). Denial attempts to convince stakeholders there is no crisis or the connection between the crisis and the organization is non-existent, so the organization maintains no responsibility. In the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak, U.S. President Donald Trump urged citizens to think of the virus as no more serious than the flu, thus denying the presence of a serious health crisis that requires further vigilance (Lewis, 2020). Distance attempts to weaken the connection between the organization and the crisis. For example, in 2012 Lance Armstrong resigned his position as chairman for Livestrong, a charity that raises money for cancer research, to distance the organization from his doping scandal (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Ingratiation seeks to gain approval by reminding audiences of past good works, much like the 2014 Baltimore Ravens defense when running back Ray Rice was arrested for aggravated assault. The response from the organization focused on the general good deeds in Rice's past (Richards, Wilson, Boyle, & Mower, 2017). Mortification, on the other hand, attempts to gain forgiveness by suggesting corrective action or repentance is being taken perhaps in the form of counseling or volunteer work. Finally, suffering characterizes the organization as the victim of the crisis by claiming an equal or more intense loss due to the disruption of the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

In utilizing these strategies, there are outcome variables that crisis communication scholars anticipate managers caring about. "Outcome variables represent the different factors that crisis communication strategies can influence, and reflect efforts to manage meaning" (Coombs, 2015, p. 143). According to Coombs (2015), the five most common are reputation, emotion, purchase intention, stock prices, and word of mouth. Coombs (2015) recognizes reputation as the most studied outcome in crisis literature because the perception of the organization is considered

vital. Anger and anxiety, which increase the likelihood of negative word of mouth, are the dominant emotions that emerge in the research (Coombs, 2015). In this study, reputation, emotion, and words of mouth are valuable to Colorado State University as a public institution and first year enrollment intention, as well as intention to continue with the university, can be considered purchase intention since these are sources of revenue for the university.

### ***Crisis Communication Warnings: Double Crisis and Traditional Concepts***

The study of crisis communication is often concerned with actions that can benefit organizations and stakeholders during a crisis. However, it can also heed warnings about actions that could lead to further damage. Coombs and Holladay (2014) warn against scapegoating, even if there is shared responsibility in a crisis, and to understand the major risk involved in denial. “If any evidence emerges linking an organization to the crisis after a denial strategy is used, damage will be intensified” (Coombs, 2015, p. 146). In the case of COVID-19, the virus itself cannot be blamed on universities. However, improper or irresponsible response to the pandemic might add stressors to the situation at hand. For example, CSU reached the attention of national news due to accusations that its athletes had been pressured to disregard preventative measures and protocol in order to benefit the return of the football season (Medcalf, 2020). Researchers have classified further damage after a denial or additional mistrust as a double crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010; Grebe, 2013).

Falkheimer and Heide (2010) also have warnings about the way we conceptualize crisis communication encouraging researchers to think about the limitations of traditional crisis communication. “[T]raditional crisis communication is based on an obsolete view of organization, communication, and society” (Falkheimer & Heide, 2010, p. 512). They argue that traditional crisis communication expects a view of organizations as unshakeable in a crisis as



long as the proper regulations and plans are in place (Ashcroft, 1997; Heath & Gay, 1997).

Additionally, traditional crisis communication holds a transmission view of communication as a one-way flow of information without interpretation differences (Fearn-Banks, 2001) and a classical view of society, which posits homogeneity (Falkheimer & Heide, 2010). Thus, Falkheimer and Heide (2010) challenge crisis managers and scholars of crisis communication to think about organizations as irrational and flexible (Brunsson, 1988), communication as an active, non-linear process where interpretation is critical (Carey, 1988; Putnam, 1983), and society as increasingly heterogeneous, multicultural, fluid, and changeable (Giddens, 1991).

These nuances to crisis communication consider the effect on a diverse and wide population of stakeholders. Thinking of organizations as irrational and flexible may inform a more changeable and fluid response to a pandemic situation that has been ambiguous and contentious.

Additionally, it is helpful to think about the ways students may interpret and react to information regarding the university's choices during the COVID-19 pandemic while constructing their own responses.

### ***Stakeholder Perceptions in Studying Crisis Communication***

Crisis communication research aims at understanding how organizations can manage information and meaning in chaotic, unanticipated, and challenging times. Research in this field is necessary because communicating well in the midst of a crisis is a daunting task even for the most experienced communicators. "The ability to communicate well with people who have a stake in the event may determine whether lives are saved and the organization emerges with its good reputation intact" (Reynolds, 2006, p. 249). There are multiple objectives when responding to crisis, including preventing further illness, injury, or death; restoring and maintaining calm; and inspiring confidence in the management of the crisis (Reynolds, 2006). People affected by

the crisis desire facts to guide them in protecting themselves and their loved ones, making well-informed decisions, participating in recovery, managing resources, and preserving or recovering a sense of normalcy (Reynolds, Galdo, & Sokler, 2002; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003).

Amongst all of these directives and the added sense of immediacy and uncertainty, crisis events are highly interpretive (Coombs & Holladay, 1996) and therefore, thoughtful communication in these events are vital and worthy of research. Crisis communication works toward understanding the needs of a society so we can continue to get each other through crisis in more efficient, effective, and empathic ways.

Benoit (1997) argues that “the perceptions stakeholders form of an organization’s role in a crisis are more important than the reality” (van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014, p. 527).

Communication largely effects the shaping of perceptions and interpretations of organizations’ performance in crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). The way individuals interpret and process information may change in a crisis and the opportunity for miscommunication increases (DiGiovanni, 1999; Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 2005; Reynolds, 2006). “The way people take in information, process it, and act on it can change when under the threat of illness or death” (Reynolds, 2006, p. 251). Additionally, organizations may prepare for certain possibilities but, crises are inherently unpredictable so, they often highlight communication problems within an organization in the precise moment when stakeholders are most sensitive to any shortcomings (Pyle, 2018). The official response through organizational communication carries much weight and directs how others react to the crisis (Williams & Ishak, 2018).

Crisis communication research strives to learn how strategies can be used to have a positive effect on crisis publics and as a result, a positive effect on the organizations involved (Coombs & Holladay, 2014), as well as avoiding negative secondary communication, such as

negative word-of-mouth (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; 2009; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). This can be incredibly challenging due to the many paradoxes of crises. The expectations of communicators in crisis situations are often to immediately disseminate information to all parties and to make the messages intelligible, eloquent, and hopeful (Falkheimer & Heide, 2010). These aspirations sound simple on paper, but in practice conflict almost always arises and they are only achievable if they are considered deeply by the communicator. Under crisis situations, it is incredibly easy to fall into the one-way communication dynamic (Falkheimer & Heide, 2010).

Due to the high expectations and equally high challenges, much crisis communication research has focused on using case studies to build guides on best practices for crisis communication preparation and reference (e.g., Fearn-Banks, 2001; Heath, 2006; Seeger, 2006; Reynolds, 2006; Sellnow & Vidoloff, 2009; Veil & Husted, 2012; Steelman & McCaffrey, 2013). “The best practices give crisis communicators a framework not only to plan for and respond to crises but also to evaluate their response post-crisis” (Veil & Husted, 2012, p. 134). In her overview of best practices, Reynolds (2006) highlights the need for awareness and willingness to communicate openly and empathetically to the affected populations, particularly if the communication is coming from scientific experts or government officials where suspicion is typically high. These types of sources for information can lead to publics experiencing more conflicting information, a reduction in the use of scientific reasoning in decision making, or political infighting (Peter, Covello, McCallum, 1997; Seeger et. al, 2003; Reynolds, 2006). “All of these tensions were present at the time of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak” (Reynolds, 2006, p. 250). Much like COVID-19, the SARS outbreak that began in Asia in February 2003 and was caused by coronavirus (CDC, 2017). In the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, we experienced a tension between government officials, scientific experts, and the

public, many of which led to protests against social distancing mandates (Griffin & Quasem, 2020) and the defiance of city ordinances to limit in-person services (Sallinger, 2020). Reynolds (2006) argues the best practices that were most impactful in the SARS outbreak, such as open communication and communication with empathy also make an effective playbook for similar crisis situations.

Despite the utility of documented best practices, Coombs (2015) warns against getting too detailed and comfortable with the idea of “best practices” in crisis communication research. He resists the label because it could imply simply benchmarking and uniformity to the process of crisis communication (Coombs, 2015):

While we can identify crisis types and similarities between crises, it is misleading to assume uniformity. Each crisis has the potential to create unique communication demands. What we can identify are lessons from the strategic communication analyses of crisis that produce consistent results. The evidence-based crisis communication research provides guidance that can help crisis managers make informed decisions about the strategic use of communication during their own crises (p. 142).

Crisis communication research should be considered the collection of further particularities about types of crises, types of organizations, and types of audiences to contribute to a collective knowledge of how to act and make difficult, impossible situations. Amidst a major interruption to life as we know it due to the COVID-19 crisis, this study examines what could be learned about encouraging a sense of resilience and trust in organizations, such as universities, while also avoiding a double crisis in order to withstand the longevity of the crisis and the hopeful return to daily functions.

## **Theoretical Lenses in Crisis Communication**

In the past 30 years of crisis communication research, several different lenses have been applied as effective tools for learning about crisis to improve communication for the future. Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) provide a detailed summary of the varied concepts, research contributions and themes in the study of crisis communication. More recently, An and Cheng (2012) provide a robust overview of trends and paradigm shifts in crisis communication research, largely stemming from public relations research, but also rhetoric, psychology, and sociology. Overall, Liu and Fraustino (2014) argue the majority of crisis communication theories can be categorized in the following major conceptual groupings: image-making, complexity-understanding, and resilience generating.

Regarding image-making, image repair theory was developed by Benoit (1995) to explain how individuals and organizations respond to crises based on the process of blaming an organization or individual for offensive actions related to the crisis. Image repair theory presents a typology of strategies rooted in the rhetorical tradition ranging from denial to apology (Benoit, 1995). The rhetorical approach is related to image repair theory and is typically applied to analyze crisis response strategies of an organization. The rhetorical approach began with the work of speeches of self-defense and focuses on the style of speech a spokesperson uses and the rhetoric provided in organization's messages, which are aimed at absolving the organization of responsibility for the crisis (An & Cheng, 2012). Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), another image-making theory, includes an emphasis on stakeholders in crisis by providing instructing information for physical coping and adjusting information for psychological coping (Coombs, 2019). SCCT posits that only after the organization has provided

these coping resources can an organization begin mending its reputation through denying, diminishing, rebuilding and/or reinforcing strategies (Coombs, 2019).

Complexity-understanding theories originate with chaos theory, which “seeks to advance understanding of systems that are nonlinear, complex, and unpredictable (Liu & Fraustino, 2014, p. 544). Chaos theory recognizes that minute differences in the initial conditions of an event may result in drastically different outcomes (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2002) and when applied to crisis communication, “chaos theory points to communication as potentially facilitating a point of system bifurcation as well as acting as a stranger attractor prompting organizations to respond to and recover from crisis” (Liu & Fraustino, 2014, p. 554). Gilpin and Murphy (2008) adapted complexity theory from chaos theory for the crisis management context (Liu & Fraustino, 2014).

Liu and Fraustino (2014) define resilience-generating theories as research that goes beyond concerns for the organization and focuses on “how publics can best cope and move forward after crises” (p. 544). One resilience-generating theory is the discourse of renewal, a commonly used theory in crisis communication research (Liu & Fraustino, 2014). Discourse of renewal focuses on communication strategies that encourage communities to rebuild and recover by recognizing the opportunities inherent in crisis (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002; Veil, Sellnow, & Heald, 2011). Though the theory aims to move beyond problems of image for the organization, it still focuses on organizational communication in crisis (Liu & Fraustino, 2014). Resilience is a main focus of this study because it is beneficial for the university to help students cope with the disruption of their normal educational setting and gear them toward thinking about pressing forward to continue. Resilience also places the needs of the stakeholder at the center of the crisis response strategy, which is a contrast to the more frequently seen centering of the organization’s image.

## **The Case of COVID-19: Leadership, Resilience, and Sensemaking in Crisis**

### **Communication**

This project references the global outbreak of COVID-19 as a crisis triggering event. Students enrolled at CSU were asked to endure a major disruption, which called for resilience. As the following sections develop further, resilience when conceptualized as a communicative process involves sensemaking, which is enacted by actions taken by individuals and leaders. First, I consider the importance of leadership in a crisis (James & Wooten, 2011). Second, I will explore Buzzanell's (2010) understanding of resilience as a communicative process. Finally, I will focus on Weick's (1988) concept of enacted sensemaking as a way of framing how students experienced the pandemic.

### ***Crisis Leadership***

Studies in crisis leadership are fairly new and less frequently studied in the field of crisis communication. According to Northouse (1997), general leadership is “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). Leadership research blossomed in the 1940s beginning with a quest to identify the defining physical traits shared by leaders, such as height; however, these studies led to little insight about what makes a leader successful (Muffet-Willett & Kruse, 2009). The main goal was to examine what characteristics a leader held that effectively motivated others. When it became apparent that motivation and inspiration are not derived from the physical traits of a leader, research shifted focus to behavior (Muffet-Willet & Kruse, 2009). The theory of transformational leadership emphasized the emotions and values of an organization and how a leader could influence them (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Rather than working within the existing culture, like a transactional leader, Bass and Avolio (1993) theorized that transformational leaders first understand the

existing culture, then realign it under a vision and a new set of shared assumptions and values. Research in transformational leadership focuses on the leader's capitalizing on the workers' sense of connection to the task and organization and harnessing energy by engaging in the pursuit of a shared goal (Muffet-Willet & Kruse, 2009).

As leadership research expanded to acknowledge a more robust definition of workplace setting, researchers examined situations where there is less of a presence of a traditional leader and the organization is more reliant on members acting collaboratively. Collaborative leadership relies on members within the organization sharing commonly agreed beliefs on appropriate strategy allowing them to make decisions that are appropriate for the organization even without explicit direction (Muffet-Willet & Kruse, 2009). The general premise of collaborative leadership is "if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing concerns of the organization or community" (Chrislip & Larson, 1994, p. 14). These insights on general leadership theories provide the groundwork for understanding the crisis leadership subgenre of crisis communication research valuable to this study.

For crisis leaders in particular, Boin and McConnell (2007) suggest paying attention to "what public leaders can and cannot do to create conditions under which resilience is likely to emerge" (p. 54). Wu, Connors, and Everly (2020) commented on the importance of leaders in fostering resilience during the wake of COVID-19 based on their experiences with severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), H1N1 influenza, and medical response to the 9/11 World Trade Center disaster. Their perspective as medical professionals focused on the healthcare workers experiencing COVID-19 and they urge that lack of emotional support leads to symptoms of distress and burnout, which leads to a decrease in their ability to function effectively (Wu,



Connors, & Everly, 2020). “Leaders should make extra efforts to thank workers and express gratitude for the extra burden being imposed on them” (Wu, Connors, & Everly, 2020, p. 882). They suggest crisis communication should empower individuals as well as provide information. To provide this kind of communication, leaders update information often to avoid individuals’ imaginations filling the absence of information with worse-case scenarios that can lead to anxiety, and to anticipate questions to answer them before they are asked as often as possible (Wu, Connors, & Everly, 2020).

Leaders can empower individuals by providing them with information on how they can help themselves and restore any level of a sense of control that they can manage (Wu, Connors, & Everly, 2020). Furthermore, a continuum of support should be provided within the organization anticipating a surge of mental health concerns caused by the crisis and normalizing feelings of stress and anxiety to encourage expressing their experiences and advocating for their wellness (Wu, Connors, & Everly, 2020). Medical professionals place the need for resilience and support in a pandemic alongside treating the actual symptoms of COVID-19:

We [at Johns Hopkins Medicine] know that if workers feel they will be supported in a disaster, they will be more resilient; therefore, staff support has been included alongside other essential services, such as infection control and supply chain management....Response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a marathon, not a sprint (Wu, Connors, & Everly, 2020, p. 823).

The same can be assumed for any group experiencing the stresses of the pandemic and are faced with carrying on with their work, such as the students who were expected to complete the spring semester virtually. This study will primarily examine crisis communication through a significant primary crisis leader for CSU: President McConnell, as the spokesperson for the university’s

response to COVID-19. The remainder of this section discusses the emergence of the study of crisis leadership in academia, the additional pressures and considerations for a leader during a crisis, and finally, the hallmarks of a good leadership mindset.

James and Wooten (2011) define crisis leadership as “the capability to lead under extreme pressure” (p. 61). The importance of studying crisis leadership is hinged on the understanding that crises are characterized by time constraints, ambiguity, unusual circumstances, limited and/or conflicting information, curious onlookers and a need for immediate and decisive action (James & Wooten, 2011). These pressures create unique demands for leaders and require a special set of abilities than typical leadership posits (James & Wooten, 2011). Additionally, leaders are being observed by the public with a greater degree of scrutiny in crises and the pressure from stakeholders to quickly resolve the crisis may cause additional damage (James & Wooten, 2010; Coombs, 2019), such as double crisis. To highlight the importance of quality crisis leadership, James and Wooten (2011) posit that:

[L]eaders of organizations and nations can make a difference in the extent to which people are affected by a crisis. Crisis leadership matters, because in its absence the stakeholders who are adversely affected by the crisis cannot truly recover from the damaging event....it is often the handling of a crisis that leads to more damage than the crisis event itself....rhetoric and positive spin alone will not resolve a crisis (p. 61).

Despite these additional pressures and the benefits of successful leadership in crisis, crisis leadership is often overlooked in crisis management and crisis communication studies (James & Wooten, 2010; Coombs, 2019). Furthermore, traditional leadership theories touch upon key qualities of good crisis leadership; however, it has been acknowledged that they often fall short on extrapolating leadership in various environmental and situational conditions (Muffet-Willet &

Kruse, 2009). Often, the assumption in traditional leadership theories is that good leadership transcends context. Crisis leadership highlights that adaptation to change and complex environments is yet another skill for leaders to hone.

The study of crisis leadership is a valuable way to expand crisis communication considerations, as well as traditional leadership theory. Coombs (2019) suggests that “[g]ood crisis leaders are willing to learn, are open to new ideas, and believe the organization will emerge stronger after the crisis” (p. 46). James and Wooten (2010) describe crisis leadership as “a frame of mind accompanied by a key set of behaviors” (p. 61). These behaviors include an openness to new experiences, willingness to learn and take risks, an assumption that all things are possible, and a positive outlook (James & Wooten, 2011). The key focus to crisis leadership competencies is the drive to achieve “a resiliency in its strategy, human capital, and other resources” (Wooten & James, 2008, p. 353). In crises, a need for dynamic and collective leadership arises in order to interpret the situation and promote sensemaking in the decision-making process (Walsh, 1995; Wieck, 1988). Communication is a key component to this kind of crisis management from a leadership perspective (Wooten & James, 2008). Leaders typically build off a code of inferences that guide their behavior; however, crises are inherently different and unusual, so the shifting in frame of mind is imperative for leaders to adjust to communicating in a crisis situation (Wooten & James, 2008).

Coombs (2019) informs us that a “propensity to reflect, learn, and adapt to the effectiveness of the crisis management effort” (p. 46) are hallmarks of the crisis leadership mindset. Similarly, James and Wooten (2011) purport that crisis leadership is comprised of scanning and seeking possibilities; quick and ethical decision making; establishing trust; and believing that opportunities can be attained. Leaders are often tasked with taking in a large

volume of information from various sources and connecting the dots in order to communicate clearly and concisely for the public and/or stakeholders (James & Wooten, 2011). Scanning allows leaders to frame things in a big picture context, so the responsibility and accountability can be appreciated and can include an exploration of all possibilities for changes to the status quo (James & Wooten, 2011). The importance of decision-making despite the inherent challenges, including time constraints, limited information, and other pressures are additionally complicated by the expectation for leaders to make decisions acknowledging the environment that surrounds them and produce information and guidance in a reasonably expedited manner (James & Wooten, 2011). James and Wooten (2011) argue that the most important qualities for leaders establishing trust are competence, openness, concern, and reliability:

Leaders need to feel competent and have the confidence that others see them as competent. Open and honest leaders are more believable in a crisis. Showing concern for both the company and for employees during a crisis is especially reassuring. Meeting expectations, or being reliable, is another component of trustworthiness that is valued by stakeholders....If that culture does not already have trust as a foundation, then there is work to be done to effectively deal with a future crisis (p. 63).

Finally, it is important that leaders remain positive and believe opportunities can be attained. Leaders are often amidst the negative aspects of the crises and can lose sight of the opportunities presented for organizational change and revitalization by highlighting issues or absences that may have been neglected prior to the crisis (James & Wooten, 2011). Thus, leaders must put aside their feelings of anger, anxiety, guilt, etc. and encourage hope. Leaders can encourage other members of the organization to participate in advocating for positivity by empowering them to readjust roles and expectations of structures (James & Wooten, 2011).

The hallmarks of a crisis leader mindset highlight the inherent challenge to crisis leadership. The constant public view on the actions of leaders cause them to feel strongly about initiatives being executed simply, which in a crisis can lead to complications, such as cover-ups, short cuts, and deception (James & Wooten, 2011). Overall, crisis leadership is much more complex than managing corporate communication and public relations. While these responsibilities are necessary, a crisis leader must also build a foundation of trust with its stakeholders to prepare, contain, and maintain resilience in a crisis situation.

Leaders are vital to shaping the experiences of the people affected by a crisis and preventing further damage. Therefore, it is equally vital to study the strategies and characteristics of leaders communicating with the community through a crisis. This study will examine the crisis leadership strategies present in CSU's response to COVID-19 and how that leadership has contributed to the experience of the students. Thus, the first research question:

**RQ1:** In what ways did President Joyce McConnell exhibit a leadership mindset in her response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

### ***Resilience in Crisis***

Resilience is a heavily studied concept and, like crisis, has been defined in numerous ways (Olsson, 2014). In general, resilience is a term used to capture a “community’s capacity to ‘bounce back’ after crises” (Olsson, 2014, p. 117) and adapt or change to new situations created by the crisis to promote long-term stability (Gunderson, 2000; Hanson & Roberts, 2005; Longstaff & Yang, 2008; Smith & Fischbacher, 2009; Wildavsky, 1998). Richardson (2002) describes resilience as “the process of reintegrating from disruptions in life” (p. 309). Buzzanell (2010) explains that a communicative take on resilience views it as a series of processes grounded in messages, a design aspect, rather than a personal trait. In other words, rather than

solely viewing a person as having the ability to be resilient, the communicative understanding of resilience acknowledges that expressions of emotions in interactional and mediated forms and organizing processes act as contributors to individual well-being and likelihood to feel resilient in crisis situations (Buzzanell, 2010; Buzzanell, 2018). Organizations should concern themselves with their stakeholders' sense of resilience because it can largely affect the outcome of the crisis. Nicholls (2012) argues "rendering communities powerless by disregarding their own agency in self-protection and resilience can be harmful to longer-term recovery" (p. 49). This disregard for the public's autonomy occurs because communities are often thought of as helpless and prone to panic (Nicholls, 2012). Thus, it is important for large organizations, such as CSU, to attend to the building of resiliency within the student population to prevent the event from prolonging the disruption to their education.

Buzzanell (2010) presents the construction of resilience in five processes: crafting normalcy, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and using communication networks, putting alternative logics to work, and legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action. However, Buzzanell (2010) described these as jumping off points for researchers to further understand different ways of discursively constructing forms of resilience. First, crafting normalcy is often an act or ritual reminiscent of life before the crisis (Buzzanell, 2010), such as sorting through belongings after a natural disaster or the virtual proms that took place in May 2020 (Fichtel, 2020). Second, affirming identity anchors involves reinforcing or reimagining the "relatively enduring cluster of identity discourses upon which individuals and their familial, collegial and/or community members rely when explaining who they are" (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 4), such as the "provider" in a familial unit or an organization reinforcing their "brand." Third, the process of maintaining and using communication networks highlights the importance of

utilizing social capital to foster resilience (Buzzanell, 2010). The fourth process, putting alternative logics or reframing to work, involves incorporating new ways of doing work and reframing the situation, even if it may seem contradictory to the status quo (Buzzanell, 2010). One common example of this process during the widespread work from home mandates is to dress for work even if you are in your bedroom, while the status quo assumption might be to stay in sweatpants if you are not physically leaving your house for work (Crawford, 2020). From an organizational standpoint, reframing might include describing the benefits to working or learning from home. Finally, legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action involves “backgrounding” negative feelings and focusing on positive possibilities in the situation (Buzzanell, 2010). Buzzanell’s (2010) concept of backgrounding is a key component to understanding this process of resilience:

[B]ackgrounding is not repression nor is it putting on a happy face....Backgrounding is a conscious decision to acknowledge that one has the legitimate right to feel anger or loss in certain ways but that these feelings are counterproductive to more important goals....engagement in this kind of emotion work and the reframing of the situation linguistically and metaphorically to one of constrained hopefulness is key (p. 9).

These five processes observed by Buzzanell (2010) led her to urge that human resilience is “constituted in and through communicative processes that enhance people’s abilities to create new normalcies” by talking and enacting (p. 9). Therefore, constructing resilience is a collaborative exchange (Buzzanell, 2010).

Promoting resilience is a conscious effort because there are several conceived barriers in a crisis (Boin & McConnell, 2007). Individual defense mechanisms often stir feelings of denial and underestimating threat importance. The mental barrier defense mechanisms erects can be

difficult for crisis leaders or stakeholders themselves to break through (Boin & McConnell, 2007). Additionally, a rigid organizational habit of rationalizing can inhibit the ability to properly prepare stakeholders and present them with resources that will promote resilience through a crisis situation. “When challenged by critical events elsewhere, organizations have a tendency towards ‘rationalizing’ towards interpreting potential threats in an ‘inside the box’ manner, which suggests that ‘it cannot happen here’ and that ‘we can deal with these events’” (Boin & McConnell, 2007, p. 56). Most organizations are not designed for the critical breakdown a crisis can lead to and thus, often do not invest the time and resources into preparation or have the proper framework to handle the event in the best way possible (Boin & McConnell, 2007). Therefore, Boin and McConnell (2007) encourage further research to examine disaster-affected communities to expand the parallels and differences in promoting resilient communities that can handle the shock associated with crisis.

As an important element to crisis recovery, resilience should be advocated for through the crisis response. In the case of CSU’s response to COVID-19, promoting resilience could affect the well-being of students, their likelihood to continue enrollment, and their academic success. Thus, my next research question:

**RQ2:** In what ways did President McConnell’s messages help construct a sense of resilience for CSU students?

### ***Sensemaking in Crisis***

Individuals and organizations face disorder, confusion, and insecurity in crisis situations, which Weick (2010) describes as the early stages of sensemaking. Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), building off Weick (1995), define sensemaking as “the process of social construction that occurs when discrepant cues interrupt individuals’ ongoing activity” (p. 551), or in other words,



“to create an account of what is going on” (p. 552). Proper sensemaking is equally as important as strong leadership in a crisis situation. Weick (1988) turned his attention to sensemaking in crises because he believed, “[t]he less adequate the sensemaking process directed at a crisis, the more likely it is that the crisis will get out of control” (Weick, 1988, p. 305). Particularly in a crisis, research suggests individual actions related to sensemaking can either exacerbate the situation or manage it (Nathan, 1998; Weick, 1988). According to Shrivastava (1987), “[w]hen a triggering event occurs, spontaneous reactions by different stakeholders solve some of the immediate problems, but they also create new problems—thus prolonging the crisis and making it worse” (p. 24). Communication has much to give to the process of sensemaking and according to Weick (2010) language is “a central issue in sensemaking” (p. 542). Thus, it is important for crisis communication researchers and managers to consider the role crisis response strategies have in fostering sensemaking.

Crisis response strategies are actions taken in reaction to the triggering event; however, the crisis continues to change and reform as we react to it. Weick (1988) suggests “initial responses do more than set the tone; they determine the trajectory of the crisis” (p. 309). Therefore, enacted sensemaking addresses the actions taken that contribute to the unfolding of the crisis itself (Weick, 1988). The importance of enacted sensemaking is harnessed by the idea that action precedes and influences cognition (Weick, 1988). In other words, the actions taken in a crisis become a part of the event, which determines how we think and feel. This influence, according to Weick (1988), is unavoidable. “Our actions are always a little further along than is our understanding of those actions, which means we can intensify crises literally before we know what we are doing” (p. 308). Understanding the influence of enacted sensemaking can help us understand the unwitting escalation of crises. Weick (1988) examines the tension between

“dangerous action which produces understanding and safe inaction which produces confusion” (p. 305). Each response presents a delicate tradeoff considering the safety and wellbeing of the stakeholders.

Enacted sensemaking decentralizes the triggering event in crises and refocuses on human action, which reveals more control in a crisis than most would presume. This perception of control through understanding the effect of our responses can reduce stress by increasing our possibilities for action and encouraging flexibility (Weick, 1988). To understand enacted sensemaking further, Weick (1988) studied how it is affected by commitment, capacity, and expectations, which all have direct impact on the severity of the crisis unfolding.

Weick (1988) described commitment as our reason for doing things, which is typically straightforward and clear; however, the liability in commitment is that it can produce blind spots: “Once a person becomes committed to an action, and then builds an explanation that justifies that action, the explanation tends to persist and become transformed into an assumption that is taken for granted” (Weick, 1988, p. 310). Once an action is taken, it is rarely examined as a potential contributor to the crisis (Weick, 1988). Furthermore, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) express the need to be cautious with overcommitting to a particular stance in response to a crisis. Crisis calls for a prompt and positive outlook of the situation at hand; however, over-confident, positive messaging can dangerously block contradictory cues for danger if misused (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). For example, Weick’s (1993) account of the Mann Gulch fire in August 1949 along the Mississippi River noted the spotters for the smokejumpers posited that “the crew would have it under control by 10:00 the next morning” (Maclean, 1992, p. 43). Weick (1993) argued that this overly optimistic imagining of the situation blinded the smokejumpers to the growing evidence that it was becoming a more dangerous fire. In the context of COVID-19 at CSU,

overly optimistic projections of returning to in-person classrooms and business-as-usual or reductions in new cases may support students' desires to abandon their precautionary behaviors. Weick (1988) also urges that commitment to action and tenacious justifications create blind spots particularly when they are public. Public assessment, explanation, and recommendation of actions in response to a crisis often make people feel bound to what is said (Cialdini, 1988; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). However, of course, optimistic sensemaking can have powerful, beneficial effects. Seeger and Ulmer (2002) studied two U.S. manufacturing plants after devastating fires and discovered the CEOs spoke about the crisis as an opportunity for renewal and possibility much more than cause and culpability. This positive focus allowed the company to recover and grow after the disaster.

Institutional contexts and perception of capacity also have a large influence on sensemaking in crisis. The perception of hierarchy, competence, and control will often guide people in their evaluations of their own role within the crisis. "If people think they can do lots of things, then they can afford to pay attention to a wider variety of inputs because, whatever they see, they will have some way to cope with it" (Weick, 1988, p. 311). Wicks (2002) examined the 1992 Westray mine disaster in Canada and discovered the miners' daily practices were shaped by the institution through organizational rules, roles, identities, particularly as "real men." The macho identity created what Wicks (2002) describes as a mindset of invulnerability and led the miners to neglect the potential dangers of the environment. Weick (1995) urges the importance of identity in the process of sensemaking, especially when identity is threatened. "In a crisis, a threatened identity constrains action as individuals and teams lose important anchors about themselves" (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 563). Weick (1993) observed this in the Mann Gulch fire when the firefighters were forced to drop their tools and collectively sensed a shift in

their identities from firefighters to endangered individuals fleeing from a fire. Thus, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) suggest identity is a key ingredient for sensemaking. Additionally, having a transparent understanding of the developing crisis increases an individual's understanding of their role in making a difference (Weick, 1988). The common early narrative that COVID-19 is not a serious danger to young, healthy individuals (Bella, 2020) was likely a challenge for students to reconcile with the news of the university requiring them to drastically adjust their lives by returning home and commence their schoolwork virtually.

Expectations is the third and final factor that should be taken into consideration when examining sensemaking. Expectations, or assumptions of how things will be, can increase or decrease the likelihood for further damage (Weick, 1988). Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) posit that overly negative expectations can be as detrimental as unwarranted optimism, such as the expectations of poor performance and sloppy procedures that affected employees at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal (Weick, 1988; Livingston, 1988; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). "As a result, top managers, through their low expectations of the plant enacted an environment which confirmed their perceptions of lower performance, as the lower performance label 'stuck' with employees" (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 564). Of course, expectations are dynamic and often crisis situations require individuals to update their expectations. This change in expectations is much harder to do as a group. The crew leader of the Mann Gulch firefighters, Wag Dodge, revised his estimation of the fire once he understood the level of impending danger (Weick, 1993; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). "Nevertheless, even though Dodge updated his expectations, he could not convince his team that he now anticipated a much more intense fire, demanding a different set of responses" (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 564). This difficulty should caution crisis leaders and inform their response strategy when communicating shared expectations of the

situation because adjusting those expectations is challenging. Crisis leaders should appreciate that “[e]xpectations are sticky and this is where the danger lies—as individuals grasp tenaciously onto familiar meanings” (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 564). Oddly, doubt has power to combat the challenge of managing expectations in a crisis situation. Locke, Golden-Biddle, and Feldman (2008) argue “the living state of doubt drives and energizes us to generate possibilities, try them out, modify, transform or abandon them” (p. 908). Doubt may preempt those experiencing a crisis to think about expectations as susceptible to change and encourage a constant imagining of new plans (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008; Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009; Weick, 2010; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

A focus of this study is the CSU students’ ability to cope with the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. As we have reviewed, enacted sensemaking has an impact on their ability to understand what action can be taken in a crisis situation. Therefore, the final research questions:

**RQ3A:** In what ways did students make sense of the COVID-19 health crisis in the context of their student lives?

**RQ3B:** What role did messages from President McConnell play in their sensemaking?

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This study examines CSU and the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study. Case studies, which concern “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 1994, p. 13), are often used when studying crisis because of their ability to focus on “analyzing various tangled real-life contexts” (An & Cheng, 2012, p. 69). Crisis case studies allow researchers to interrogate the validity of communication response strategies in real settings (Veil & Husted, 2012). To collect information in this case study, I used a mixed method approach combining a textual analysis with interviews. I began with a close textual analysis of President McConnell’s emails to the university community for the entirety of the spring 2020 semester. I then put McConnell’s response in conversation with the feedback given by students in interviews. This combination of methods allows for an investigation of the effect the response strategies had on the audience, which is valuable because an “audience orientation should provide valuable insights into how individuals understand and react to an organizational crisis” (Lee, 2004, p. 601). Furthermore, according to Coombs and Holladay (2014), it is important to include the reactions of the public to provide assessments of the effectiveness of the crisis communication strategy.

### **Textual Analysis**

To address the research questions, primarily RQ1 regarding President McConnell’s leadership mindset and the themes that can be drawn from her communication, I began this study with a textual analysis of McConnell’s email correspondence to the student body during the spring 2020 semester (January 21- May 30). This collection window includes emails that do not focus on COVID-19 to allow me to familiarize myself with her typical correspondence style. The time frame is aimed at capturing the early crisis stages of the pandemic and campus closure when

emotions were likely at their peak and the most change was taking place. Table 1. shows McConnell's correspondence from the timeline studied, the main focus of each email, the stage of crisis they were sent in, the length dedicated to the topic, and the number of links to online resources attached.

Table 1.

*University President Joyce McConnell's Email Correspondence January 21 – May 11*

<b>Crisis Stage</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Word Count</b>	<b>Links</b>	<b>Focus</b>
Pre-crisis	1.28	Welcome Back to Campus!	Returning to campus	820	7	Informative – upcoming events; COVID-19 and Chinese students
	2.4	Happy Snowy Tuesday!	Current events	481	3	Informative – upcoming events; Org. achievements; COVID-19 experts, no known cases
	2.10	Happy Monday!	Upcoming events/Fo under's Day	534	1	Informative – upcoming events; Org. achievements; no mention of COVID-19
	2.18	Our birthday is over-what's next?	Upcoming events	649	4	Org.-centered – commitment to education; COVID-19 forum; informative – recent events
	2.25	Happy Leap Year!	Leap year	454	4	Informative – upcoming events; no mention of COVID-19
	3.2	Important public health updates for the CSU campus community	COVID	914	4	Org. working with experts; legitimizing negative feelings; no known cases, other countries affected
	3.4	This week's news – fresh from the road!	Upcoming events	697	4	Org. achievements; legitimizing negative feelings; COVID-19 resources
	3.5	Important message for the	Racial bias	258	1	Org. stance on racial bias; no mention of COVID-19

		CSU campus community				
	3.10	Spring break is coming!	Spring semester	453	11	Org. achievements; business-as-usual, COVID-19 no connection to Spring Break
Crisis	3.11	Important public health message to the CSU campus community	COVID closure	809	3	Org. committed to education; legitimizing negative feelings, COVID-19 plan of action shared
	3.13	Follow-Up on COVID communications for CSU campus community	COVID	667	1	Legitimizing negative feelings; clarifying & adjusting plan
	3.16	CSU moving to online instruction for the remainder of the Spring 2020 semester	COVID full virtual	988	0	Adjusting plan; expressing gratitude
	3.19	President McConnell's message regarding COVID-19	COVID	1348	29	Clarifying & adjusting plan
	3.26	Thank you!	COVID	171	0	Expressing gratitude; addressing identity anchors
	4.7	CSU leaders thank you all!	COVID	160	1	Express gratitude; align with leaders
Post-crisis	4.8	Wednesday night greetings from President McConnell	COVID communication	277	2	Establish communication reliance
	4.10	Friday greetings from President McConnell	COVID	744	2	Express gratitude; org. achievements in pandemic



	4.13	Monday greetings from President Joyce McConnell	COVID	1233	10	Align with leaders; legitimize negative feelings; address identity anchors; org. achievements
	4.14	Public Statement from Colorado State University	Blackface	418	3	University stance on blackface; no mention of COVID-19
	4.15	Wednesday evening message from President McConnell	COVID	809	0	Org. achievements; financial need of org.
	4.17	Friday greetings from President McConnell	Virtual events	391	5	Crafting normalcy
	4.20	Monday message from President McConnell	COVID higher ed.	432	4	Crafting normalcy; leader ethos
	4.22	Important COVID-19 update regarding Colorado Safer-at-Home status	COVID Stay at home order	370	1	Acknowledging change to situation; adjusting plan
	4.24	An Earth Week message from President Joyce McConnell	Earth Week	740	7	Addressing identity anchors; no mention of COVID-19
	4.27	Monday evening message from President McConnell	COVID	493	4	Org. achievements; expressing gratitude
	4.29	President Joyce McConnell outline COVID-19 Recovery Plan	COVID Recovery Plan	2116	2	Presenting plans and possible adjustments to that plan; emphasize org. identity; plan for next cycle
	5.1	Friday greetings from President McConnell	Achievements	449	3	Org. achievements; open two-way line of communication

	5.4	Important message for students from President McConnell	CARES Act	413	3	Org. facilitated financial support for students
	5.4	Tomorrow is Giving Tuesday Now!	Giving Tuesday Now	558	3	Emphasize org. identity; ask for donations
	5.6	Wednesday message from President McConnell	Achievements	539	1	Crafting normalcy; org. achievements
	5.8	Weekend greetings from President McConnell	COVID Old Main	707	0	Emphasize org. identity; connect history to COVID-19
	5.11	Monday evening message from President Joyce McConnell	CARES Act	486	1	Org. achievements
	5.13	What's next? President McConnell answers COVID-19 recovery questions	COVID Plan	448	8	Plan for next cycle, needs of org.
	5.18	Monday evening message from President McConnell	COVID	623	2	Craft normalcy; emphasize university identity; self-sufficiency
	5.21	Thursday evening message from President McConnell	COVID Research	467	4	Org. achievements
	5.25	Memorial Day message from President McConnell	Memorial Day	357	0	Commemorative; address identity anchors
	5.29	CSU condemns Floyd killing stands with community	George Floyd	302	1	University stance on racial injustice; no mention of COVID-19

		against hate and violence				
	5.29	Important news about Fall 2020 from President McConnell	COVID	681	2	Plan for next cycle; express gratitude; financial needs

To analyze these texts, I followed the advice of Black (1994) by allowing the texts to speak without rigid constriction to a particular method:

How does one examine a prism? By looking at it through one facet after another, in no particular order. That will be the method here. It is a method without system and therefore, scarcely a method at all, at least not a predetermined one. But sometimes—maybe even all the time – a subject deserves to supersede a method, and to receive its own forms of disclosure.

Thus, I immersed myself into the texts to seek the meaning students may have drawn from them without parsing the information apart to follow a particular method.

Burke's (1950) definition of rhetoric as "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (p. 41) also informs the textual analysis. A basic motive for rhetoric, according to Burke, is to create a sense of unity amongst the audience (Burke, 1950). Rhetoric as equipment for living serves as a tool to guide individuals (Burke, 1941). In other words, rhetoric "provides an orientation in some way to a situation and provides assistance in adjusting to it" (Foss, 2009, p. 64). Therefore, I examined McConnell's rhetoric as a source of insight on her mindset as a leader during this crisis and any other messages she prioritized as symbols representing the kinds of outcomes and actions she expected students to use to equip their lives. To do this, I began with an initial reading of all the email correspondence within my time frame to get a basic overview of the topics she covered. I then reread the emails

three more times, each time coding for subjects and language related to what I learned about crisis leadership (James & Wooten, 2011), resilience (Buzzanell, 2010), and sensemaking (Weick, 1988).

## **Student Interviews**

### ***Participants***

Sixteen CSU students were interviewed for the study. Participants were gathered until there was a saturation of responses. However, one was disqualified because they were not enrolled as an undergraduate during the spring 2020 semester. This study focused on the experience of undergraduates and excluded graduate students because they often have a more complex relationship to the university due to teaching or research assistantships, which require them to use different lenses. The remaining 15 participants were between the ages of 19 to 22 and represented five colleges. In the spring 2020 semester, three were freshmen, six were sophomores, three were juniors, and three were seniors. Eight self-identified as women using she/her pronouns, six self-identified as men using he/his pronouns, and one self-identified as gender non-binary using they/them pronouns. Twelve participants self-identified as white, two self-identified as Hispanic/white, and one self-identified as Asian. Thirteen of the participants were student employees working on-campus in some capacity at the time of the pandemic. Participants were given pseudonyms to keep their identities confidential. Table 2. provides the participants' demographics.

Table 2.

*Participant Demographics*

<b>Name (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age at time of interview</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Year in School (Spring 2020)</b>	<b>Gender Identity</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Student Employee?</b>
Max	22	Sociology – Criminal Justice	Junior	M	Hispanic/ White	Yes
Mary	22	Sociology – Criminal Justice	Senior	W	White	Yes
Lucy	21	Psychology	Junior	W	White	Yes
Alice	20	Psychology/So ciology	Sophomore	W	White	Yes
Kate	20	Business Administration	Sophomore	W	Asian	No
Robert	22	Business Administration	Senior	M	White	Yes
Helen	22	Sociology – Criminal Justice	Senior	W	White	Yes
Anita	20	Agriculture Education	Sophomore	W	White	Yes
James	21	Sociology	Junior	M	White	Yes
Virginia	21	Biology	Sophomore	W	White	Yes
Beth	19	Sociology – Criminal Justice	Freshman	W	White	Yes
Raphael	20	Forest Range Land Stewardship	Sophomore	M	White	Yes
Chad	20	Communicatio n Studies	Freshman	M	White	No
John	21	Fish and Wildlife	Sophomore	M	White	Yes
Taylor	19	Fish Wildlife and Conservation Biology	Freshman	Non- binary	Hispanic/ White	Yes

The sample was collected through snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) stemming from several initial sources. The first source was by email through my personal network, which consists of several different majors and ages. The second was derived from recruitment assistance from academic departments. Recruitment material was placed in the Department of Communication Studies newsletter. Additionally, four instructors, three from the Department of Communication Studies and one from the Department of Journalism and Media Communication, announced the opportunity to participate in their undergraduate classes. The initial sample of students were asked to refer the project to other students either by emailing three friends or posting a blurb on their social media. All recruitment material can be found in appendices A-C. The primary object in snowball sampling for this study was to build on established trust through participants since the pandemic and attitudes toward the university may be a sensitive topic for many students. Pyle (2019) recalls relying on “the support of individuals [he] had previously interviewed to establish a platform of trust with future interview participants” (p. 394). Additionally, students were likely oversaturated with automated mass emails concerning COVID-19 that had been sent since the pandemic began. Therefore, having a personal connection to participants in the study increased the chance for response.

### ***Procedures***

The interviews in this study were semi-structured and lasted between 17-47 minutes long. Conducting the interview with a semi-structured guide allowed the participants to “hear the same questions in roughly the same way—although spontaneous follow-up probes [were] allowed to clarify remarks or encourage elaboration” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 194). Therefore, the interviews examined the same topics with participants, but did not stifle different interpretations of the case. Interviews often encourage participants to share stories and anecdotes, which gives

insight into the experiences of the interviewee during an incident, event, or crisis (Foss & Griffin, 1995; Pyle, 2018). The interview protocol can be found in Appendix D. The questions in the interview protocol touch on RQ1 by inquiring about the students' experiences with the university during the spring 2020 semester. However, the interview questions are primarily focused on addressing RQ2 regarding the messages that were valuable to CSU students and their construction of a sense of resilience and RQ3A and B, which inquire about the students' sensemaking and the role the university's messages might have played in their sensemaking.

Due to the continued public health concern at the time of the study, interviews were conducted using video chat, although participants were given the option to do an interview by phone only if they were uncomfortable for any reason with a video chat. All interviews were audio recorded only. A consent form (Appendix E) was sent to each participant by email before the scheduled interview.

During the interview, I presented the participants with an email written by McConnell (Appendix F). This email was sent to students, faculty, and staff on March 11, 2020, during the peak of the crisis stage pertaining to their academic routines. In this email, McConnell explained a major disruption to student life by announcing moving classes to virtual learning until April 10, changes to building operations, suspension of university travel, and suspension of on- and off-campus events. This email allowed participants to think about communication from McConnell during the initial crisis stage from the perspective of their student routines and resources. The email also closed with reflections that echo crisis communication literature, such as acknowledging negative emotions, presenting resources, and urging resiliency. Every email previous to this one mentioned COVID-19 as a news headline and leads up to this moment of action. Every email after represented products of the decisions made in this correspondence.

Thus, this email is robust with the themes present in crisis communication literature and represents the height of change during the crisis for the university. Introducing this email to the participants allowed for discussion about their impressions of the university when action began to take place in response to COVID-19.

### ***Interview Analysis***

After reaching saturation with the interviews, I began the process of analyzing the data provided. Once the interviews concluded, I used an audio-to-text transcription service called Temi to convert the recordings to paper transcripts. This resulted in a total of 102 pages of interview material for analysis. After receiving the transcripts, I read each one to correct any misheard dialogue or grammatical errors. I used thematic analysis as a model for analyzing the interview material. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a “method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 6). On the surface, thematic analysis organizes and describes data deeply; however, it often goes further by interpreting various aspects of the topic (Boyatzis, 1998). Specifically, a theoretical thematic analysis is driven by an interest in specific areas, such as the key concepts attached to the research questions (leadership, resilience, and sensemaking).

In a thematic analysis, the researcher is charged with looking for patterns of meaning that are of potential interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For theoretical thematic analysis, the potential interest is driven by the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) direct researchers to first immerse themselves in the data by reading the materials more than once and reading in an active way by searching for meaning and patterns. After the initial reading of the entire data set, I searched for recurring patterns, themes, or instances within the responses and placed them into groups that “represent activities directed toward a similar process” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p.



420). “[C]odes identify a feature of the data that appears interesting to the analyst” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18) and signal “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). After the initial reading, I was able to note 14 codes that appeared with frequency or with a strong connection to crisis communication literature. Then, I listened to each interview again and placed the sustaining codes into the groups that correspond to the areas of study: response or reaction to messages from CSU leadership, a derived sense of resilience, and their sensemaking processes. The initial codes when analyzed within the context of these three areas of study informed the structure for three major themes within McConnell’s correspondence. A follow-up was conducted with the participants to conduct member checks, which adds to the credibility of qualitative research by discussing the suggestion of themes and responses with the participants of the study (Pyle, 2018).

In the spirit of a mixed methods study, interview themes were then put in conversation with the themes discovered in the textual analysis. The data was examined for overlapping or contrasting points between what was privileged in the messaging and key terms of McConnell’s emails and what was deemed by the students to be important to the sensemaking process and construction of resiliency. Including both methods together allowed me to look at the key values central to the organization’s messages and the key values of the students in their processes of resilience and sensemaking.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The following section is an overview of the relationship between the rhetorical analysis of President McConnell's emails and the fifteen semi-structured interviews I conducted with CSU students and alumni who were enrolled during the spring 2020 semester. The exploration of the results of these two methods will be examined concurrently and in response to the three research questions stated in the previous section. All interviewees are referenced by pseudonym to protect their identities. To contextualize the timeline for the materials examined, I use Coombs' (2019) macro stages (pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis) when referencing the various emails sent by McConnell between January 28 to May 29, 2020. As a reminder, Table 3. displays the breaking up of crisis time I have used to reference the stage of crisis during a particular email.

Table 3.

### *COVID-19 Pandemic Stages for Colorado State University Spring 2020 Cycle*

Pre-crisis	Crisis	Post-crisis
January 28 – March 11	March 11 – April 8	April 8 – May 29
Prevention, signal detection, preparation	Actions, coping, damage containment, recovery	Resolution of crisis, learning from it
Awareness of COVID-19, discussions about effect on university, information about CDC's preventative measures	Virtual learning, addressing fiscal implications, essential-in-person work only	Semester procedures set, preparing for summer and fall, taking stock

In this project, these categories are being used to describe the stage of crisis for the CSU community in particular, which is not entirely identical to the timeline of the pandemic holistically since the spread of the pandemic affected different parts of the country and world at different rates of time. I also consider the regenerative approach (Coombs, 2019) appropriate for

conceptualizing crisis timelines when thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic. The spring semester represents one cycle of the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis event for CSU during the pandemic; however, the post-crisis stage in this cycle does not represent the end of the pandemic as a whole. References to McConnell's emails by interviewees are primarily focused on her email sent on March 11 since it was directly referenced in the interview material.

The following sections discuss important crisis leadership qualities present and absent from McConnell's spring 2020 correspondence, the qualities in her correspondence that address the students' ability to remain resilient, and factors that relate to the audience's ability to make sense of the crisis.

### **“I Deeply Care About All of You”: Examining President McConnell's Leadership Mindset**

President McConnell began her career at CSU just a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of the Fall 2019 semester. Prior to becoming CSU's first female president, McConnell spent over 20 years as a faculty member and administrator at West Virginia University (Office of the President). McConnell's recent arrival to the CSU community likely provided an additional obstacle for her to overcome while leading in this crisis. James and Wooten (2011) suggest trust as a major hallmark in crisis leadership and simply due to her newness to the university, McConnell did not have as much time to establish a foundation of trust with the students as another university official might have. Interviewees Kate and Virginia both noted an uncertainty with the sincerity of McConnell's correspondence. Kate described feeling uncomfortable and a sense of strangeness to the non-informative qualities of McConnell's emails, such as sentiments of unity and community effort. She paired McConnell's newness with her discomfort in her response, “I know she was new and still is rather new to the community. There's like a threshold for me that if you go over that it starts to devalue the thing

you are describing.” Thus, McConnell’s attempts at expressing concern and care for the students was slightly hindered by her lack of foundation before the crisis. However, interviewee Max did express that his trust in the university did not waiver during the pandemic because he associated his pre-established trust in the university administration as a whole with McConnell’s updates, “I was trusting the university, that they were making the right decision.” This statement suggests that though McConnell was disadvantaged in establishing trust with the students, because she was early in her career at CSU, the reputation of the administration in general might have mitigated that challenge in the minds of some students.

While keeping this nuance to established trust in mind, I examined McConnell’s email correspondence with the university community during the spring 2020 semester and asked interviewees about their perceptions of McConnell’s correspondence to address the first research question: *In what ways did President McConnell exhibit a leadership mindset in her response to the COVID-19 pandemic?* I identified three major characteristics in her correspondence that I would define as central and enduring in McConnell’s crisis leadership mindset: normalizing challenges, leading with gratitude, and maintaining *ethos & pathos*. Additionally, I identified two qualities that had minor roles in McConnell’s correspondence. These two qualities are foregrounding opportunities/historical influence and framing empowerment. Finally, the rhetorical analysis and interviews suggest the reliability and intentionality of McConnell’s updates were a site for improvement. Pinpointing these characteristics as standout themes is grounded in the data, but is also influenced by the previous literature on leading in crisis discussed in the literature review (Coombs, 2019; James & Wooten, 2011; Wu, Connors, & Everly, 2020).

### *Normalizing Challenges*

A key characteristic of crisis leadership present in McConnell's correspondence is normalizing feelings of stress, anxiety, discomfort, nervousness and uncertainty. This quality is present in her non-COVID communication pre-crisis, and it resurfaces as the university enters the crisis stage. The first instance of inviting or normalizing students' negative emotions takes place in an email addressing the start of the new semester. In McConnell's first email of the spring 2020 semester, sent on January 28, she reflects, "Finally, coming back after break can be exciting, but also a little daunting. Work hard in your classes and engage in your community. It is not uncommon to find yourself struggling or a bit overwhelmed." She then urges students to reach out to resources at CSU if needed. Therefore, even though this is before she is focused on crisis communication, she established a precedent of understanding the challenges students face and encouraging them to reach out to resources, though this particular email does not reference any specific resource that may help with the transition from winter break to spring semester.

McConnell anticipated and addressed the apprehension of the community in light of news of COVID-19 ravaging other parts of the world. For example, in a general update email sent on March 4, McConnell concluded with a comment on COVID-19 stating, "This virus understandably causes nervousness for many." She then follows up with resources on sick leave for employees. These initial acknowledgements convey a sense of awareness and alertness in McConnell's leadership.

In a lengthy email signaling the university's transition to the crisis stage sent on March 11, McConnell briefly addresses the discomfort and anxiety that a public health emergency can cause. A few days later, on March 13, she opens her email with, "This is a stressful time for all. During a time like this it is important to be good to ourselves and to one another." She also

acknowledges the challenge presented by the rapid dispersal of information in the same email, “The combination of changing scientific guidance and rapid pace of communication is so challenging for all of us right now.” In these emails, McConnell maintains that it is natural to feel stressed and overwhelmed, just as she normalized the challenges that come with returning to coursework after the lengthy winter break. Wu, Connors, and Everly (2020) suggest normalizing negative feelings during a crisis situation encourages stakeholders to be more open to conveying their experience and advocating for their needs. Therefore, McConnell builds on her rapport as a leader that expresses understanding for these emotions during times of stress. Establishing this understanding suggests that students can reach out to the branches of administration to which they have access and express their needs with the expectation that the administrators will be an extension of McConnell’s understanding.

McConnell’s post-crisis correspondence for the Spring 2020 cycle normalizes the challenge of uncertainty, which had become a fact of everyday life at this point in the crisis. The uncertainty of the situation informs her communication style to emphasize her leadership values. On April 22, in boldface she emphasized, **“I know you crave certainty, and I want to provide to you whatever certainty we can, recognizing that some uncertainty will persist given the nature and scope of this pandemic.”** To acknowledge certainty as something everyone was “craving” captured the particularity of the crisis situation. Providing a clear statement on the uncertainty that surrounded the situation but not being able to provide a direct solution marks a distinction in McConnell’s correspondence that moves her away from general leadership and towards crisis leadership. Her statement urges people to trust in her ability to empathize and guide even though she does not have the solution to the crisis at hand. McConnell uses this moment to both acknowledge and validate the challenges the community faces when shrouded in

uncertainty and to assert that she would face uncertainty with the only tool she could control—transparency.

This awareness of the ever-present challenge of uncertainty continues once the semester is over and the uncertainty of the spring semester is transferred to the uncertainty of the summer and fall. Additionally, the final email of the cycle, sent on May 29, assures the community that she will remain consistent in the battle with uncertainty, “During this continually uncertain and challenging time, I know how important transparency and concrete information is to your peace of mind. Please know that providing those things is one of my top priorities, now and going forward.” This quote suggests that McConnell, as a crisis leader, is aware of the regenerative nature of a crisis like COVID-19 and that she did not expect her role to be over simply because the community had made it to the end of the semester.

### ***Leading with Gratitude and Empathy***

One characteristic of McConnell’s writing that is persistent is a sense of gratitude and empathy for the stakeholders. Leading with gratitude and empathy is important for a leader in general and in McConnell’s emails she seems to consider this to be crucial during a crisis. Gratitude and empathy for students and faculty become apparent from the first crisis-centric email and continue throughout the semester fairly consistently. Phrases like “I deeply appreciate all you are doing and know that your care, concern and commitment are what distinguish CSU as a higher education community” on March 16 and sign offs such as, “Thank you all so much for all you do to keep our community strong and vibrant, even from afar” from April 17 are a common thread woven into her correspondence. She acknowledges the sacrifices the community has made due to the pandemic in emails such as her March 26 correspondence, which was sent with the simple subject line “Thank you!”:

You are amazing. Our campus—and our nation—has experienced tremendous upheaval over the last few weeks as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of you have had to cancel planned trips for business or personal reasons, have cancelled annual leave, and have worked long hours under tremendous pressure to accommodate changes in CSU's Spring schedule and operations. I am so grateful.

This message recognizes the disappointments the community has experienced on a personal level and expresses gratitude for their endurance. Acknowledging the negative experiences of those in crisis suggests that McConnell sees and understands the community as they struggle. In another email under the subject line: "CSU leaders thank you all!" on April 7, McConnell includes a link to a video message of other members of CSU's administration expressing gratitude. The video adds a sense of uniformity to the sentiment of leading with gratitude throughout all of CSU's leadership and places McConnell at the helm of that sentiment as the conduit of the message. A few days later, on April 10, McConnell reiterates her message in boldface, "I hope that your colleagues, your supervisors, your friends and families are already telling you this: **you are doing an amazing job.**" These general messages of gratitude reveal that a main quality of McConnell's crisis leadership mindset is to express gratitude often. This consistent focus on thanking the community encourages people to remain a part of the community that is apparently handling the crisis well enough to earn gratitude and establishes a sense of action, even if that action is simply staying home.

Another video of gratitude from CSU faculty was sent in an email from McConnell on April 13 in which she expresses, "a profound sense of pride and gratitude at the start of the week" after previewing the video. Drawing attention to the pride and gratitude she feels about this video reaffirms her value in thanking members of the community during the crisis. She also



includes a second video from Vice President of Student Affairs Blanche Hughes and summarizes a key point of empathy Hughes' message expresses:

One thing I was struck by in Blanche's wonderful message was the way she framed the COVID-19 crisis for students as something that has so profoundly upended their lives that they should give themselves time and permission to grieve for what they have lost. I urge all of us to think about that framing and to acknowledge how wise it is. Already, some of us have lost loved ones to this virus, which is deeply tragic. We have also lost our social support networks, our professional identities, our sense of structure and order in our lives, and our access to many of the activities through which we define ourselves, from social activism and volunteering to exercise and self-care, to spiritual practices and cultural activities.

In this reference to Hughes' message, McConnell reaffirms her acknowledgement of the challenges the pandemic has placed upon the community to express empathy. In addition to expressing her empathy this message shows her gratitude towards the community for simply enduring loss, which in turn encourages more endurance. McConnell's empathy was addressed in my interview with Lucy:

I thought, personally, she did a good job of trying to support students and faculty and staff when we were going through that. With that email [March 11], I know her intentions were good. I think she tried to be empathetic and see that those changes were going to have a really big impact on students, not only in like, terms directly related to like our schoolwork or anything like that, but also social implications and everything like that.

McConnell's efforts to acknowledge the challenges of a crisis for the students and her candor when talking about the community impact led Lucy to feel the empathy in McConnell's messages.

McConnell also takes the time to specifically thank particular members of the community rather than sticking to general gratitude for everyone. On March 16, she explains that the university is taking the opportunity to do a deep clean while the campus is empty, "Our amazing custodial team and facilities leaders are committed to the health and safety of these frontline workers and are on top of providing appropriate protective gear training." In later emails she specifically addresses appreciating the efforts of faculty, Housing and Dining Staff, and researchers for their continued productivity and the additional support they have provided. By introducing these specific shout outs in her messages of gratitude, McConnell not only makes those particular groups feel valued in their work, but she also draws attention to how many active components are required to act in the crisis. Helen recognized the wide scope of responsibility McConnell faced and felt a mutual empathy for that weight:

I mean, looking back on it, I don't even know if I could have done it, like trying to do all those moving parts because I feel like that's a pretty big job, especially with the amount of people who work on our campus and how big it is. So, I mean she probably did the best that she could have done. So, I can't be too critical of it 'cause I don't know if I could have done it myself.

As a leader showing gratitude, McConnell prompted the community to reciprocate. Helen reflected McConnell's persistent act of giving gratitude by recognizing the loftiness of her role for the university during the pandemic.

## **Maintaining *Ethos* & *Pathos***

The third and final key characteristic of McConnell's crisis leadership mindset—maintaining *ethos* and *pathos*—likely stems from her lack of established trust and rapport with the university prior to the pandemic due to her recent appointment. McConnell takes several opportunities to establish her *ethos* and *pathos*, or her strength of character and emotional appeal (Lanham, 1991), in her correspondence to the CSU community. Her crisis emails take on the quality of advocating for her credibility and her emotional relatability as a university president and as a leader in general that any new president would spend months expressing in non-crisis communication.

To affirm her credibility as a university leader, McConnell refers to her knowledge and experiences. These displays of non-crisis credibility would seem out of place and possibly even inappropriate if she had not started her appointment a mere few months before. In her emails, she mentions her academic approach to leadership. On April 20, she writes about how one of the things she made time for in her weekend was to read articles on leadership and higher education from which, she passes on advice:

For those of you who are in leadership and supervisory positions across our university community, I urge you to read this thought-provoking article from *Gallup*, which challenges leaders at all levels to be anchors of stability during this frightening time and to engage their employees and colleagues with compassion and understanding.

This reference to a *Gallup* article focusing on leadership during the pandemic demonstrates that she is aware of the unique demands of her position during this time and has referred to literature on how to move forward. She makes several other references to reputable sources for higher education information in the remainder of the email, such as CSU's Diversity Newsletter and

*The Chronicle of Higher Education*. However, she also asserts her suitability for the position, particularly in a crisis situation, by suggesting her literacy in social media communication. On March 10, she referred to her ability to use new media to reach the community, “I am so excited every day when I get up and see how many of you are following me on Twitter and Instagram. I love having these platforms to share good news, photos, and the occasional important update with all of you.” This assurance of proficiency in social media sharing is important for a community living within the information age; however, it is even more vital during a crisis situation that community members feel the leader will be able to reach them in the ways they most often receive their information.

McConnell also relies on her experiences to express to the community her suitability for the position. In a rare non-COVID related email sent on April 24, McConnell acknowledges the importance of sustainability to CSU’s core values and states that she was in attendance at the very first Earth Day celebration in Washington, D.C. on April 22, 1970:

I was 16 years old and already an instinctive and committed advocate for our natural world. I’ve since lived that commitment in my legal work, my administrative work at land-grant institutions, and my volunteer work with The Nature Conservancy.

This highlights her lifelong concern with environmentalism as a key quality of proficiency at an eco-conscious university, such as CSU. Similarly, she sent a non-COVID focused email in honor of Memorial Day on May 25. She starts this email with “As a child of parents who both served in the United States Armed Forces,” which is a key moment of insight into her personal experience for a university community that houses a considerable amount of ROTC/veteran students and faculty. In both instances that stray from the influx of COVID-centered information, McConnell takes the opportunity to bolster her credibility as the university’s leader.

Whereas the previous section attends to McConnell's display of empathy for the stakeholders; her appeals to *pathos* seek empathy from the stakeholders. In a typical non-crisis situation, a university president would spend months, maybe years, conveying their character and intention to the community. Due to the short period of time between McConnell's appointment as president and the COVID-19 pandemic, much of her character conveyance had to be condensed into her crisis communication. This trend does not begin until the post-crisis stage for this cycle of the university's crisis, likely because there is less pressure to disseminate information and justify the decisions of the university, which took priority in her crisis stage correspondence. On April 10, she concludes her message with a particularly personal touch, more so than previous messages, "The hyacinths are blooming in the backyard of Magnolia House right now, and I still care deeply about all of you and wish you some peace and ease this weekend." McConnell mentioned her personal experience with the pandemic to relate to the community on April 27:

I don't know if many of you know, but I'm actually sheltering-in-place at Magnolia by myself; Vince and Alexandra are back in West Virginia. So when I say that I know what some of you feel who are alone right now, I mean it—and yes, it's normal to have started talking to yourself.

Statements like these allowed the community to think of McConnell as a leader, but also as a person experiencing the pandemic much like they are: isolated and restricted. The key point of relatability in these communicative choices is to allow the community to peer into the way she was personally living in the pandemic. McConnell allows her personal life to be exposed in a professional setting, much like many working from home had their professional lives profoundly intrude upon their personal lives.

### *Areas of Growth for the Crisis Leader*

In addition to highlighting qualities of McConnell's leadership mindset that positively influenced the students, the analysis reveals qualities that were present but needed to be more enduring throughout her correspondence. Foregrounding opportunities/historical influence of the crisis at hand and framing empowerment for the stakeholders occurred in minimal ways in McConnell's emails. Communication that possess these qualities can have benefits that would have improved the effect of McConnell's leadership mindset. Additionally, the interviewees pointed to a dissatisfaction with the reliability and intentionality of McConnell's updates regarding virtual learning and the progression of the pandemic.

**Foregrounding opportunities/historical influence.** The first quality for improvement is introducing the idea of opportunity within the pandemic and drawing attention the historic nature of the crisis situation. Opportunity during crisis is key for changing the way stakeholders think about the narrative in terms of what measure of control they have and the scope of their circumstances (James and Wooten, 2011). On March 16, McConnell mentions thinking about the opportunities to be had while everyone is restricted from campus by announcing the custodial staff will take the opportunity to perform extra cleanings while the campus is empty. This statement introduces the idea of alternative thinking to take advantage of the new way of life, however; she does not extend the thought to what opportunities virtual learning might bring for students and faculty. Despite the lack of extended communication about the opportunities the crisis might introduce, some students, like interviewee Raphael, were finding them on their own:

I could just click on Zoom and go do whatever I want and so I think that definitely made it more challenging. But at the same time, I feel like I learned a little bit more to add certain parts or at certain times, like, if the professor said something and I feel like I can

pause the lecture and go look it up real quick, which is something I couldn't really do during in-person lecture.

If the beneficial nuances of virtual learning were more prominent in McConnell's correspondence, students might have been quicker to take opportunities, such as pausing lectures, rather than viewing virtual classes as a lost hope for their learning ability.

McConnell did focus on the pandemic as an opportunity to strengthen the university in messages such as this, sent on April 29, "Despite the difficult decisions and sacrifices ahead, I want to share with you my optimism that in planning for the future we can leap beyond what is being called 'the new normal.'" However, discussing McConnell's campaign for optimism in her March 11 email regarding the impact COVID-19 would be having on the semester, James' thoughts might suggest that early in the crisis stage might not be an appropriate time to urge crisis as an opportunity to demonstrate strength:

A lot of just blind optimism rather than any sense of like real direction...just going on saying like, oh, we have been strong in the past, we are strong now. Stuff like that. And I think that's not, I mean, I think that helps to a degree, but I think that can be kind of frustrating sometimes.

James' comment suggests McConnell's correspondence was not offering up opportunities as much as it was encouraging optimistically believing the university is strong simply because she believes to be so. This comment suggests McConnell's correspondence may have missed the opportunity to address a particular need. Though McConnell's messages of university strength may have been read as blind optimism, she did present ways individuals could take advantage of the situation on a smaller scale. On April 17, she lists ideas for "opportunities to do something

nice for yourself.” These opportunities for self-care do urge people to feel they can regain some sense of normalcy.

McConnell also takes a moment to describe the historical implication of the situation on May 8. In this email, she commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the Old Main fire on campus and uses the collaborative effort to fight the fire as a metaphor for the community’s response to COVID-19, “But fifty years from now, others will be looking back at this historic moment and how the CSU community came together to respond in so many different ways.” This email contains a powerful analogy by reaching back to a different piece of CSU history, the Old Main fire, referenced in every prospective student tour causing it to be a key part of CSU identity. By using the Old Main fire as an avenue to describe how COVID-19 might be remembered in CSU history, it invites the audience to believe their actions are vital to their identity as members of the CSU community, just as those involved with putting out the Old Main fire have become immortalized in the historic moment. Suggesting COVID-19 will be remembered as a historic moment and comparing it to another historic event that involved protest and unexpected disaster shines a light on the impossible nature of the situation, which warrants understanding. Interviewee Lucy expressed her understanding for McConnell and the university’s response to the pandemic:

I think it was just because it’s a completely new situation. And no one has gone through this before. Obviously, like in the past, but like, no one working there now has experienced this. So, I think it was just remembering that there should be some slack because it’s a completely new territory.

Lucy understood that the COVID-19 pandemic is a notable moment that differs from anything the university has had to respond to and that shaped how she viewed the proficiency of the



response. Therefore, if foregrounding the historical influence of the crisis was featured more in McConnell's emails, a greater sense of opportunity to be a part of defining CSU's identity for the future might have been more enduring. Additionally, foregrounding historical influence would foster more opinions to reflect Lucy's understanding of the unprecedented event.

**Framing empowerment.** Another quality seen briefly in McConnell's emails that would be beneficial to expand is framing the audience's ability to take control of the situation, especially in a crisis that leaves stakeholders feeling completely powerless. On March 11, McConnell's email includes framing empowerment for the audience by suggesting an element of control and influence in their actions in response to the pandemic and accepting virtual learning. She begins and ends the email by arguing for the university's action as an opportunity for the community to be empowered despite the pandemic. The first paragraph of the email states:

Today, we face a global health crisis in which we can play a critical role by slowing transmission of COVID-19 and freeing our local hospital to treat the critically ill. We can and must do our part to safeguard the health of our entire community.

This frames the move to virtual learning as a way the university community can play a part in alleviating the crisis. She also concludes the email with:

Please take care of yourselves, of your friends and families, and of those in our community to whom you have the capacity to reach out with compassion. We are strong. We are resilient. We are Rams. We will get through this—together.

These calls to action introduce a way for the reader to take ownership in their response to the seemingly powerless act of accepting virtual learning as an intentional act to take care of others. Presenting the university community with this option of framing the pandemic response as a choice made to benefit the broader community rather than something that is happening to them

reintroduces a sense of control over the situation. Lucy remembers the significance of the framing McConnell did around benefiting hospitals, “I think she had the right approach and was very good at communicating, like, why they were doing what, especially because at that time, it was the whole issue of having our hospitals at or over capacity.” McConnell’s reference to alleviating local hospitals legitimizes her correspondence because it aligned with information Lucy was receiving from other sources.

Near the end of this cycle, McConnell also urges the community to retake control over their schedules and the amount of time they are having to spend online in meetings. On May 18, she pledged to reduce her correspondence from three times a week to twice a week avoiding all Fridays and suggested not scheduling meetings on any Fridays. “I want to urge all of you to take care of yourselves this summer.... I hope you can all find some way to step back, take a deep breath, and put yourself first this summer.” McConnell urges people to actively work toward relieving some of their pressure by taking more control over how their time is spent, so people are able to recharge before the next crisis cycle began for the university in the fall semester.

Interviewees drew attention to the point that these efforts for encouraging empowerment fell short. McConnell expressed a push toward self-preservation to empower the community to take control back. However, it only shows up at the beginning and end of this cycle of the pandemic rather than as a consistent message throughout each stage. Particularly, students could have used more words of encouragement to guide them in harnessing their school routines while many professors were not adjusting workload expectations, many of their self-care outlets were inaccessible, and they no longer had many obvious opportunities to separate their work from their home life. This left students like Max feeling powerless to control his student life:

What did I do to stay sane? I don't know. I think I just kind of took it a day at a time. I'll be real with you, I don't think I had a solid way to cope with that or like, I don't know, I didn't really have a good stress reliever there because that's also the time I was getting laid off from work. Homie was having a bad time, but yeah. You know, and that there wasn't a lot of good things because usually for me, that would be the gym and all the gyms closed so, not to be dramatic but frankly, I was just suffering.

It seems students like Max could have used more frequent and early reminders of the ways they could take control of their lives while still living within the constraints of the pandemic.

Furthermore, more information on how their effort in staying at home and refraining from the things they typically were able to enjoy was making a difference for the community might have alleviated some of the feelings of suffering.

**Update reliability and intentionality.** The interviewees suggested a quality that could be improved upon was McConnell's update reliability and intentionality. McConnell's correspondence acknowledged a need for updates and regular communication. On March 19, McConnell's email explains the complete closure of the campus and essential-in-person qualifications. She assures the staff, "Employees should know by early next week whether their role is defined as essential-in-person or not." She even sets a clear schedule for regular communication, which is a positive introduction of a constant during a crisis, on April 8 by promising to send an email every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday covering a particular subject regarding the pandemic on each day of the week.

However, the interviewees expressed mixed experiences with McConnell's updates. Kate believed she received information from different offices that was inconsistent with McConnell's updates. This confusion is a major challenge with an organization of this size where the

community members have several contact points. Similarly, James mentioned hearing differing information from his professors than he was seeing in McConnell's correspondence. Others described feeling like the information in McConnell's emails left gaps or felt lacking in some way. After readdressing McConnell's March 11 email about virtual learning, Virginia felt a lack of follow-up with the protocols McConnell was putting into place:

I had a couple of professors that just didn't tell us what was going to go on with their class. I didn't hear from them. I know they were trying to figure it out, but even just getting an email saying, we're trying to figure this out. And I, at the time, was in a lab. And I remember thinking like, does that mean we get to go in? Or like, I just didn't understand a lot. I kind of feel like it was a lot of words that said nothing as most university emails seem to be.

As a crisis leader, McConnell needed to see more consistency and follow-ups happening after her emails, otherwise many experiencing this inconsistency likely felt a mistrust in the university and the validity of her emails would dull. Beth also felt she was unable to discern a clear answer from McConnell's emails:

So much of what they were telling us the information they were giving us was so vague, and like, not very clear. So it was frustrating, because I was like, okay, I just want to know if I'm going to be in person, I just want to know if I'm gonna be online, like, you know, just kind of one of the answers.

Beth's comment is likely a response to the rapid change McConnell's emails had to take on. Many emails describing severity and protocol were changed within days of her updating the community. She often expressed this was due to the rapid changing development of the crisis; however, this did not change the effect it had on those reading her emails and getting a sense of

inconsistency. Alice reflected on this pattern of rapid contraction in the university plan conveyed in McConnell's emails:

I would say probably to have a plan before just telling students what's happening once a day. Like, I feel like they change their mind about what they're going to do literally every single day. We were getting an email from Joyce and I know they're like trying to keep us updated, but I think it was just stressing people out.

Alice's comment highlights the difficult balance a crisis leader must make between keeping the stakeholders informed, so they do not think the worst, and having enough substance to a plan, so that massive changes to their expectations must not be incurred (Wooten and James, 2011).

Overall, the rapid changes gave the community members a sense that McConnell as a leader was behaving inconsistently rather than it simply being a symptom of the crisis.

On the other hand, Chad felt satisfied with the consistency and content of McConnell's emails, "I really think they couldn't have done it much better. No one really knew what to do with the pandemic. So they were just, you know, communicating the best they could. I think they did a good job overall." Likewise, Taylor found the updates to be reassuring and reliable:

I think they did a good job too at, um, keeping information coming, even if not a lot had changed because, uh, there were still a lot unknowns, but it was just reassuring to be getting those updates on a consistent basis. Even if nothing had changed, just like, "Oh, they're still working on it." They know that this is an issue or that this hasn't been thought of yet, but that helped a lot.

Chad and Taylor's closeness to resources during this semester, as freshmen living in the residence halls, likely impacted their ability to endure the ever-changing updates because of

access to more consistent additional support and possibly made them feel more consistency in the follow-up.

### **“We Will Get Through This”: The Role of Resilience-Centering**

Boin and McConnell (2007) suggest crisis leadership is centered around fostering conditions to allow for resilience. Therefore, I also examine the role resilience-centering has in McConnell’s correspondence during the first CSU semester impacted by COVID-19 to explore my second research question: *In what ways did President McConnell’s messages help construct a sense of resilience for CSU students?* Buzzanell (2010) describes resilience as constituted in and through communicative processes grounded in a series of messages; thus, I unpack the ways in which McConnell’s correspondence formed a sense of resilience. Additionally, Olsson (2014) categorizes crisis communication as reputation/organization-oriented or resilience-oriented. These distinctions contribute to how I make sense of the way in which resilience is involved in McConnell’s correspondence. First, I discuss qualities in her correspondence that fit the kind of processes Buzzanell (2010) urges constitute resilience. The processes that came up often in McConnell’s emails and the interviews as primarily resilience-oriented were crafting normalcy and affirming identity anchors. Legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action is another process of resilience building Buzzanell suggests and McConnell employs; however, this quality has already been analyzed as a leadership characteristic of normalizing challenges in the previous section. In this sub-section, I also identify the results that relate to Olsson’s (2014) idea of resilience-oriented crisis communication, which includes promoting self-sufficiency as a means to encourage resiliency. Second, I will introduce elements of the data that suggest McConnell’s communication was more heavily organization-oriented due to a higher presence of themes that frame the organization’s preferences toward strengthening its credibility

and legitimacy, and the stakeholders' perception of the organization's ability to continue producing (Olsson, 2014). I will also include information from the interviews that illuminate if this resilience was successfully fostered for these students.

### ***Constituting Resilience***

This section addresses communicative qualities of resilience building found in McConnell's correspondence and the ways interviewees suggested they were able to produce a sense of resiliency.

**Crafting Normalcy.** McConnell's correspondence suggests she is aware of the power crafting a sense of normalcy can have to comfort those in crisis. In her emails, she often signals when the community can expect to receive updates and information from her with personable phrases such as, "I'll be back in your inboxes on Friday" included on April 8. When she did in fact return to their inboxes on Friday, April 10, she offers up examples of ways people are still maintaining normal rituals:

[W]e're keeping personal connections alive, whether through academic advisors calling students directly to check in on them, departments organizing virtual birthday parties for team members, or our personal trainers in the Rec Center offering free virtual sessions to their clients.

She also includes a link to a collection of more examples of personal connections continuing to be made virtually. These are reminders that the community can still engage with the outside world from inside their homes and that celebrations and everyday activities do not have to be completely abandoned. Suggesting ways to regain a sense of normalcy braces the audience for a more prolonged crisis and attempts to reintroduce routines and human connection (Gunderson,

2000; Hanson & Roberts, 2005; Longstaff & Yang, 2008; Smith & Fischbacher, 2009; Wildavsky, 1988).

Some interviewees noted seeking out and settling into a sense of normalcy. Kate recalled returning home and spending time with family being something “constant and familiar” that “wasn’t just adding to [her] stress levels.” Robert also found a sustained ability to relate and connect with others because he was still able to go to work. Helen described how she set a schedule for schoolwork to feel a sense of normalcy and Beth recalls partaking in McConnell’s ideas of taking in the little parts of everyday life, “I think we went to Walmart like almost every day, just to have some sense of normalcy like, you know, going on walks or doing our homework.” Thus, returning to a sense of normalcy was a key ingredient to coping with the pandemic for the interviewees.

McConnell’s emails highlight the need to introduce practices aimed at allowing the community to feel a sense of normalcy in their personal lives; however, for the students it does not seem like she addresses how to set a standard for the new normal for their classroom life. John comments on how the focus seemed to be too fixed on maintaining normalcy and not enough on crafting a new normal for university operations:

There was a certain element of stubbornness to where they were like, you know, this is going on, but we’re still going to do everything just like normal...like, yes, normal is really good in a crisis situation. But, I just thought that given the circumstances, given new methods that things were being done in, I just don’t think it was right.

John’s statement suggests encouraging self-care is not enough to return the community to a sense of normalcy, but rather embracing the new normal in places where long-term change will be



implemented. Max also notes how there was not enough emphasis on restoring normalcy or setting standards for the new normal when it came to the classroom:

I remember having one professor in particular who just kind of gave up and didn't do anything. "I don't know what to do, like, I don't know how to run Canvas or anything, and everything's online now." I mean we were online for quite a few weeks when it first hit and I remember getting like, two or three lectures, like the entire time, like very little contact.

McConnell's email never details new expectations for teaching relationships or how students can maintain classroom relationships virtually. This could have led the students to believe that it was acceptable and normal for professors to "give up."

**Identity Anchors.** A stakeholder's connection to their identity anchors is also a vital component to sustained resilience throughout a long-term crisis. McConnell's emails focus on identity anchors by stressing the mindset of community experience. On March 13, she affirms that CSU is a "resilient community," a "CSU family," and often includes action items that involve being a member of the community. On April 13, she states that the audience should draw its resiliency from being a part of a community, "I urge you to draw strength from the fact that we are in it together." Additionally, on May 8, she states what qualities should be attached to identifying with the CSU community, "in many ways it's business-as-usual for Colorado State University, a place where meeting the challenges and improving people's lives is really why we're here. And to be a part of that makes me so proud." This statement communicates the form of resilience McConnell would like to influence in the community. Max found that the elements of McConnell's March 11 email that encouraged resilience as a community were an uplifting quality:

It was a lot of, like, community aspects I'd say, especially like towards the end. They were just more positive, like, we're going to get through this together and stuff and you can call it hokey or cheesy or whatever, but I like that. So, in the email, I thought it was a nice touch. It wasn't strictly business....It was uncertain times. I think in uncertain times you get stuff that's like, I don't know, throwing in ideals of unity and getting through it together kind of stuff. I think that it's a good thing to include.

Max appreciated that McConnell's email did not strictly include instructions or updates and that it referred to the university's collective ability to overcome the crisis.

The interviewees displayed an attachment to their identities as students in their resilience process. The students' ability to feel a part of the CSU community was a key element to pay attention to while considering communicative construction of resilience because it was largely threatened by the closure of campus. Lucy cited connectedness to the CSU community in general as one of the biggest challenges she faced in the spring 2020 semester. Alice felt relief from the stress of the crisis by reaching out to fellow students:

And then just like going through it with everyone else was good because I didn't feel like I was alone in it and everyone was confused and struggling. So that was good and then, we could all support each other with it.

Virginia also stated that hearing the struggles of her fellow students helped her feel less alone while in isolation. Additionally, James noted that it was particularly hard for him to feel connected because he went to his out-of-state home when the university moved to virtual learning so, he relied heavily on his fiancée, also a CSU student, to relate to in his student experience. When asked what helped push her through the semester Virginia simply stated, "I wanted to still be a student." The interviewees' ability to recognize themselves as students and

match their experiences to other students was a factor in their ability to keep going. McConnell worked to communicate a sense of pride in identifying with the CSU community and using that to assist in their perseverance. However, taking more time to specifically comment on the role the student identity could have on helping the audience find ways to connect and continue learning might have brought a particular value.

Many interviewees had additional connections to CSU beyond their role as students. As a student employee, Lucy also had a network of co-workers to relate to when it came to academics and stressing about employment:

I think probably one of the biggest things was being able to still have good relationships with my co-workers because they were all students too. So they were in the same boat.

Just that support that we all had for each other was huge for me; just knowing that I could count on them to be there for me, and then just knowing they could count on me for that same thing as well.

Lucy's role as a student employee and a member of a team provided her with extra support and more drive to continue doing her best to serve that role. Similarly, Taylor found reliability and consistency in the extra support they received in the residence halls:

I think the relationships that I formed with students who were in my classes or in my residence hall, and then additionally with my RA [Resident Assistant] as a source helped me a lot because just having those connections gave me some sort of consistency in a time when there wasn't a lot of consistency....I think that's one really neat thing about CSU too, even like, not in the midst of a pandemic, those social communities seem to be really strong throughout the university.

Strong and pre-established connections to the university through specific elements of their student identity provided a positive source of grounding for these interviewees during the height of the crisis. Additionally, the deprivation of important elements of their student identity had adverse effects. Seniors Mary and Helen both noted feeling they “checked out” soon after the switch to virtual learning largely because it was becoming apparent that they would not be able to fulfill the act of walking in the graduation ceremony. “[I]t feels like the senior class was robbed of a milestone in their life; of graduating and walking across the stage. And we didn’t get that” (Mary). This denial of a key ritual marking their identity as graduating seniors caused Mary and Helen to talk more about their disappointment with the ceremony being postponed than any sense of additional support they felt from commiserating with fellow students. “I mean, the thing that everybody works for and then, we can’t even have that” (Helen). McConnell’s only remarks on graduation took place in one paragraph on March 19, though recognition for Memorial Day and Earth Day warranted their own separate emails. In the emails for Memorial Day and Earth Day, McConnell appeals to emotion in addition to providing information by telling personal stories of the importance of each day of remembrance and urging others to reflect on the meaning of the day. However, in this cycle McConnell does not present the same sentiment to commencement. Her sole mention of the impact of the pandemic on graduation on March 19 strictly contains information:

Following recommendations from public health officials, we have made the difficult decision to move the May Commencement ceremonies to December to allow all our graduates to share their achievements with their families in person. We will celebrate all CSU 2020 graduates with the commencement ceremonies on campus December 18-20,

2020. The schedule for specific ceremonies will be forthcoming in the coming weeks and posted.

Mary and Helen felt a stronger identification with their status as graduating seniors at the peak of the crisis than anything else; thus, their identity anchors resulted in overwhelming disappointment rather than tenacity. Additionally, their instinct was to give up trying in the final weeks of their semester. McConnell's lack of attention to the emotional importance of commencement to the degree that she attended to virtual Memorial Day and Earth Day may have made them feel like it was less consequential to the administration and the significance of their loss felt ignored.

**Promoting Self-Sufficiency.** Olsson (2014) posits that aiming to promote self-sufficiency is a key quality for resilience-oriented communication. McConnell's emails primarily show signs of this in her post-crisis stage communication for this cycle. On May 18, she suggests a pledge to reserve certain days as "no-meetings" days to encourage enjoying the summer. In turn, she changes her correspondence schedule from Monday, Wednesday, Friday to Monday and Thursday to present with less frequency and to free-up Fridays. This email signifies her stepping back from guiding the audience by providing less frequent communication and encourages them to maintain and mandate their work schedules once again. She communicates this more succinctly in the same email, "I want to urge all of you to take care of yourselves this summer." One meaning here is that she wants to show concern for the well-being of the reader over the summer, but it also marks a change in the presence she will be having in their virtual worlds leaving the community more space to take care of managing their lives themselves.

The interviewees also reflected an eventual transition to a more self-sufficient handling of the situation. Kate noted trying different ways to work at home by changing up her environment

and the conditions under which she worked until she found what worked best. Robert also talked about investing further in his workspace than he initially had at home. Alice suggested she became a more self-sufficient student in the way she took responsibility for her own education:

I feel like one takeaway is learning how to quickly adapt, like with literally the entire system changing to online courses and also like, I need to stay on top of myself. I can't expect to rely on my professors or anyone else to help keep me updated on work. Like, I had to constantly check When-I-Work [a scheduling system for her student job], just to be on top of everything. So I didn't miss anything.

This sense of self-sufficiency as students working at home is a quality that McConnell's emails could have highlighted more specifically as well to aid in the process of learning how to take control over readjusting their student lifestyles to the crisis and potentially learning valuable habits that would carry over to their student lives after the crisis.

### ***Organization-Oriented Qualities***

Though elements of resilience-oriented communication can be found in McConnell's correspondence, many of the emails focused on affirming the position and value of the university. Olsson (2014) describes framing the preferences and performance of the organization as organization-oriented communication. McConnell does this in three major ways: framing the university as capable, active, and still providing its services; framing the university as putting students first; and foregrounding the concerns of the university while establishing a "model" university image.

#### **Framing the University as Capable, Active, and Still Providing its Services.**

McConnell often asserts that the university is prepared and continually finding solutions during the pandemic. In the pre-crisis stage, her correspondence implies that the university is steps

ahead of the unfolding crisis and its services will be undisrupted. Following Colorado Governor Jared Polis' State of Emergency declaration, McConnell reminds the audience on March 10, "We are working literally around the clock to prepare for whatever next steps we need to take." These statements steer the audience away from thinking of the university as idle or overwhelmed in crisis. The overall image that McConnell wants to imbue on the community is expressed on March 11:

Please know that Colorado State University is no stranger to responding to unexpected events that cause disruption in our lives and require that we dramatically and quickly alter our established paths. We have done so successfully in the past, and we will do so successfully again now.

This statement strays from the overall message that COVID-19 is unprecedented waters, which seemed to draw empathy from the students interviewed, and attempts to re-establish that the university is capable of responding and adapting to anything.

McConnell also emphasizes the role of experts to convey that the university is credible and capable. On February 4, she presents the expert team charged with directing the university through the pandemic:

We've convened an expert team that includes infectious disease specialists, representatives from the Health Network, Student Life, Housing and Dining, and International Programs – just to name a few key units. They have been in almost constant communication and are talking often with Colorado and Larimer County health experts to make sure we are responding to the needs of every impacted member of our community.

A team of experts implies the credibility of the university and its ability to provide solutions to the situation. In her correspondence, the team of experts are referred to as a Task Force to create the sense of a strong, virus-combatting entity within the university.

In addition to asserting that the university is capable of responding to the crisis, McConnell often lists ways the university is actively reacting to the changing times. On April 10, she quantifies the work of the university by announcing 2,200 CSU branded bandanas had been delivered in response to CDC recommendations to wear face coverings in public. Despite all the extra efforts highlighted as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, McConnell also assures the audience that the university has not lost sight of its primary services. On March 11, in boldface, McConnell included, amongst the information about virtual learning, a mission statement rooted in providing education, **“Our fundamental mission is to educate our students and we are committed to preserving their educational access, opportunity and success for the remainder of this semester, regardless of circumstances.”** Additionally, in an email thanking the faculty sent on March 19, McConnell mentions, “you’ve helped us continue to educate thousands of students during this uncertain time.” After announcing CSU as a member of the Governor’s COVID PPE Task Force on April 10, McConnell states “Even as we have demonstrated our incredible ability to do more, faster in response to a new challenge, I am also very proud to assure you that we have also maintained focus on our current institutional priorities.” Her message pledging the focus of the university is expressed in the entirety of her May 21 email. The particular focus of this email is research and how researchers on campus maintained the university’s status as an essential organization. In this email, she uses the repetition to emphasize the ways the university remained productive during the crisis:



So even when classes went online and the majority of our employees went home to work, many of our research labs stayed open. They stayed open to work on not one, not two, but four potential COVID-19 vaccines. They stayed open to exhaustively test hundreds of existing drugs, compounds and chemicals to see if they might be tools in the fight against the virus that causes COVID-19.

She continues to repeat the phrase “they stayed open” to describe outbreak surveillance testing, hand sanitizer production, and ventilator manufacturing. Research and the idea of “staying open” urges the audience to view the university as unmarred by the crisis and draws a stark contrast to the multitude of closures forced by the danger of the pandemic.

**Framing the University as Putting Students First.** Beyond conveying the message that the university is still providing its services while handling the pandemic, McConnell’s organization-oriented communication also urges that the university is putting students first in their pandemic response. On March 13, McConnell explains that the priority of her communication initially during the crisis stage was to focus on the needs of students and that she would now be able to address the needs of the faculty. However, much of her correspondence does not detail the needs of the students beyond technological accommodations for online learning and a general need for empathy and patience. An email sent on May 11 does highlight the financial needs of the students, but frames those needs as being met by the CARES Act:

As I shared with students early last week, federal CARES Act Emergency Aid has been made available to many students at CSU, administered by the CSU Office of Financial Aid. To-date, we have disbursed more than \$3.2 million to more than 2,600 of our students.

Describing the CSU Office of Financial Aid's distribution of funds could lead some readers to downplay or nullify perception of the enduring financial struggle students continued to face. The assumption that the students have been addressed financially suggests that they have been put first and permits the university to focus on its own financial concerns.

The university's land-grant mission is central to McConnell's message that the university has been able to put the students first in the midst of a crisis. On April 15, McConnell declares "As the land grant university of the state of Colorado, we affirm our mission of providing access to higher education, conducting impactful research, and engaging positively across the state—even and especially in a crisis." In this post-crisis message, McConnell works to reestablish the values of the university and signal the rationale for its crisis decisions. Overall, McConnell spends much of her correspondence framing the university's COVID-19 response as rooted in the students' needs.

### **Foregrounding the Concerns of the University while Establishing a "Model"**

**University Image.** Though McConnell's emails urge placing education and the students first, a majority of her correspondence actually centers on the concerns of the university. On April 15, McConnell highlights the fiscal implications of the pandemic on the university and the effort needed to protect permanent, full-time employees and the hardship of these two factors considering the short comings of federal recovery funds. On April 20, she urges university leaders to turn to an article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "which explores the ways that colleges and university need to 'step up' to help struggling students not just make it through this semester and this moment of crisis, but stay enrolled and progress successfully to graduation." Focusing on enrollment and graduation rates concern the students and their success; however, these are also metrics often used to measure a university's success (Talbert, 2012).

Interviewee Beth noticed a prioritization in McConnell's communication that focused on the manner in which coursework would continue rather than basic resources for COVID-19 testing and addressing health concerns of the community:

I remember hearing just mostly about them being worried about like, whether or not classes would be in person. And not a lot of like, "these are resources, you can get tested, this is why this is a serious matter"...I feel like it was just very focused on like, "okay, when can we be in the classroom again," which I suppose to some degree makes sense for a college.

The absence of information about COVID-19 testing and the dangers of spreading the virus on a college campus likely removed the actual danger of the virus from the root of the actions of the university and may have framed virtual learning as a result of government mandates not the actual pandemic.

McConnell also urged the idea of CSU being or becoming a model university in the wake of the crisis. This image of the model university insists that though a crisis is happening, the university is exceeding expectations in its performance. McConnell often frames this image as an alternative logic or opportunity within crisis. For example, on April 29, she purports an image of how the university should be viewed, "We can become the model of a land-grant university that emerges from the pandemic true to our mission, our values, and our Principles of Community, recognized for developing exciting new approaches to excellent education, research and engagement." CSU's status as a model university is expressed in her updates about the persistence of research at the university during the pandemic and references to the university as "a special place" (May 18) and "not prone to bragging" (May 21).

Most of McConnell's organization-oriented communication is dominant in the post-crisis stage of this cycle. In the recovery stage, it may seem appropriate to discuss the needs of the organization and spend time bolstering its image. However, in a long term crisis such as COVID-19, another cycle of crisis was highly probable and known by this time. Thus, more effort to maintain messages of resilience would work to prepare the community for the longevity and unpredictability of the next cycles.

### **“No Knowledge of Any Cases”: Sensemaking for Students**

Whenever the status quo is interrupted, individuals involved undergo a process of sensemaking to reestablish social blueprints in the new environment and interpret the disruption (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Weick (1988) believes this process of sensemaking is vital to harnessing control of a crisis unfolding. Inadequate sensemaking can not only leave problems unaddressed but can also create new ones within the crisis situation (Shrivastava, 1987). As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic is a much larger issue than any single organization can be held responsible for; however, mistakes in fostering the sensemaking process can cause an organization to exacerbate or produce new problems. Therefore, the final crisis element I examine is the students' ability to make sense of the pandemic crisis in the spring 2020 semester and how McConnell's correspondence is involved in that sensemaking. I do this by asking two research questions: *In what ways did students make sense of the COVID-19 health crisis in the context of their student lives?* And: *What role did messages from President McConnell play in their sensemaking?* Weick (1988) analyzed three considerations when examining enacted sensemaking: commitment, capacity, and expectations. I address the two research questions in the context of these three conditions to analyze how they play a role in the sensemaking habits of the students during the spring 2020 semester.

### ***Commitment: Over-Committing and Under-Committing***

Commitment is our reasoning for doing things and once action is applied to that reasoning in a crisis, it is rarely reflected upon as a potential site for further damage (Weick, 1988). However, over-confident and under-confident commitment can fog, mislead, or discourage the interpreters of a situation (Weick, 1988). McConnell's messages contain patterns of over-committing and under-committing to the situation at hand.

McConnell's pre-crisis and crisis stage communication, in particular, demonstrated over-commitment and under-commitment. McConnell suggests having a clear idea of the overall timeline of the pandemic in regard to its effect on the university and how student employees would be affected by the pandemic. On March 13, McConnell explains that she has informed the students about virtual learning and is now committed to providing faculty and staff with the information they need to progress forward. This email was sent on Friday, and it promises a "greater sense of clarity" on the following Monday. McConnell overcommits to the idea of a quick turnover from in-person learning to virtual cutting out room for faculty to adjust to the change. This could have potentially led to faculty members who did not feel ready to teach virtually within McConnell's timeline to give up for the remainder of the semester; experiences interviewees Max and Helen shared.

Regarding student employees, McConnell overcommitted to the idea that their employment and income would be undisturbed by the closure of campus. Also on March 13, she states, "Students who work on campus are worried that they will lose their jobs. Not so! If you need to come back to campus to work after Spring Break, please do. Your job will be waiting for you." Max was discouraged and confused by this message because he received an email from his campus employer one day prior to this email informing him that his work would be suspended

until further notice. A few days later, on March 19, McConnell amended her statement by assuring, “We are working hard across many campus units to explore options for all of you and will communicate with you soon.” Weick (1988) urges that once a commitment has been made, it is difficult to readjust expectations of what will be done. Therefore, since McConnell initially promised jobs would still be waiting for students after the break, resetting the expectation to a more flexible and ambiguous status is difficult. Ultimately, student employees experienced varying levels of employment, pay, and suspension causing McConnell to again readjust her message to student workers on April 13:

As soon as we began conversations about moving classes online after Spring Break, we identified student workers as a university population that would be uniquely affected. We engaged student-facing units across the university to survey our student workers in all categories (Work-study, hourly, non-hourly, etc.) and determine exactly how many of them depended on their university income such that they would not voluntarily leave their job this spring. We then committed to paying **all** these students through May 15—even if we couldn’t offer them in-person or remote work duties. We’ve learned over the past few weeks that some student workers were initially let go, for various reasons, and we are working with HR to retroactively reinstate those students on payroll.

McConnell’s own statement highlights her over-commitment in assuring undisturbed employment to the student workers. This statement suggests a move to rectify that over-commitment; however, the initial sting of messages contradicting the experiences of the students were damaging. When asked about his feelings toward the university during the initial closure of campus, Max expressed the confusion and suddenness of his loss of employment being a greater site of resentment than the academic setback he faced:

I mean, obviously, getting laid off wasn't fun. That's probably my biggest complaint...because I understand them shutting everything down. It was just like, "hey, you're all fired, go get a job with a pandemic at a time where nobody's hiring; everyone is closing their doors." So, I mean, that kind of was a bit of a slap in the face, which I don't know if that's by the department or the university as a whole. I don't know who to blame there. But yeah, that was probably the only thing that really ticked me off more than anything academically.

Max's experience with his employer did not match the assurances of McConnell's correspondence; thus, leaving him confused about the validity of the department he works for being unable to keep him employed at the time.

Early in the semester, McConnell over-committed to the idea that Spring Break would be undisturbed by the pandemic and therefore, under-committed to virtual learning. On March 10, McConnell had already addressed COVID-19 as something that was creating concern in other places of the world. The second sentence in this email is "I also hope you've been reading our communications regarding the COVID-19 situation, both internationally and locally." However, the subject line of the email is "Spring break is coming!" and she encourages everyone to stay safe on their much deserved break. One day later, she sends the March 11 email that informs the university community that in-person learning is no longer safe and there will be a switch to virtual learning until April 10. James and Virginia vividly remember this vow to re-evaluate by April 10 as a signal that the change would be temporary. The immediate contrast between the commitment to a business-as-usual spring break message to expressing the need for drastic changes in the university environment due to the severity of the pandemic one day later reduced the legitimacy of the university's commitment to virtual learning and COVID-19 precautions. A

few more days later, on March 16, McConnell highlights the faculty sacrificing their Spring Break to restructure their courses and announces virtual learning will stay in effect for the remainder of the semester. Finally, on March 19, McConnell's email reveals a mandatory moving of all university operations online. Lucy expressed frustration with the attempt to hang on to a business-as-usual approach until the very last minute. Lucy felt that the days-apart emails got her hopes up, which frustrated her:

I was kind of at the point that after, like, the second time [reestablishing the time span for virtual learning], I was kind of like, okay, it's seems like it's pretty clear that it's [returning to campus] not going to happen. So, I personally would have just appreciated more clarity, and just being like, okay, we're just gonna like, nix this plan, and just stay online for the rest of the semester instead of kind of like, getting peoples hopes up.

Lucy expressed a preference towards committing to virtual learning sooner to allow her to have more time to process the change without hoping for the instant return to normalcy. Virginia echoed this frustration with feeling like the university intentionally lagged with their decision making:

I felt like the students were getting a fair amount of like, mixed signals as to what was going to happen. 'Cause you know, originally, they were like, "Oh yeah, it's gonna be like an extra week for spring break," which I know they wanted to give themselves more time to decide that. But at that point I felt like we were already in a place in the pandemic where we knew that wasn't going to happen. 'Cause I feel like it was just like, we had extended it by one or two days and then they did the week and then they did the whole semester and I was like, just make the call.



Virginia's comment suggests she felt confusion about what decision making processes were taking place and why the expected time spans were set at such short intervals. John also wished the university had committed to virtual learning earlier. When asked what he thought the university could have done better, he replied "I think they could have probably committed more to the online position." By trying to commit to a business-as-usual approach, McConnell's emails suggest a lack of commitment to virtual learning; virtual learning as an afterthought rather than the best course of action and something the university administration has put a lot of planning into in response to the pandemic.

The contrast between committing to business-as-usual and implementing pandemic protocol also caused many of the interviewees to not take virtual learning seriously initially. Max reflected on how he focused on the excitement of a longer break rather than the cause of that extension:

I remember right before Spring Break when they kind of made some sort of announcement that we might get an additional week of break because of COVID, which in retrospect is so funny because we're like, "oh, yeah, another week of break!" And it's February now of the next year. And it's like, oh man, here I was thinking I was getting another week of Spring Break.

The approach to virtual learning as temporary and a slight extension of Spring Break for planning paired with staying home for a few more days led Max to underestimate the impact the pandemic would have on his entire year. His response sheds light on an opportunity to reduce this type of response by framing the time differently. On March 11, McConnell states, "Spring Break for students and faculty will be extended through Tuesday, March 24, with classes resuming Wednesday, March 25." Framing the time as virtual learning preparation with classes

resuming Wednesday rather than as extended Spring Break would give less of an impression that the time would simply be more break and it would draw attention to the way faculty was spending that time. James also recalls his peers feeling light-hearted about the need to extend break and underestimating the severity of the situation:

At first, you know, everyone's like, 'oh, cool, we get a longer break and this will probably just be fixed in a little bit.' And like, people were kind of joking and excited about it. I mean, I was the same way.

Virtual learning planning time suggests preparation for a long-term adjustment while extended break, as seen here in James' comment, suggests a short term respite before a return to normal. McConnell's approach to committing to virtual learning did not indicate the university community should be preparing for an extended disruption from business-as-usual; thus, leading to students focusing on the excitement of an extended break over how the pandemic news would impact their academic experience.

Others found that the delayed commitment caused issues for them logistically. Alice went to her home out-of-state; thus, she expressed confusion on how to make plans to return to Colorado based on the lack of commitment to a fully virtual remainder of the semester:

So, at first it was like, only a couple of weeks like we had an extended Spring Break. And then it was like, okay, maybe like a month. And it was like, okay, it's the rest of the semester. And then it was all of Fall Semester. I think it was mostly just confusing that we didn't know like, when to come back to school.

In this scenario, the slow commitment to virtual learning for the remainder of the semester removed the information Alice needed to decide how she was going to adjust to the change. Helen also had difficulties due to being at home in another state. She believed reevaluating

virtual learning by April 10 meant they were likely to be back to campus so, she left her school materials in Colorado when she left for Spring Break. Overall, an over-commitment to a set timeline for the change that ended up needing several revisions and a business-as-usual approach to student employment and Spring Break restricted faculty to a particular way of handling virtual learning, frustrated student employees, and led students to underestimate the impact of the pandemic on their academic lives.

### ***Capacity: Recovery Plans and the Unmarked University***

According to Weick (1988) commitment is the reason for action in a crisis; capacity is the ability to take that action. Systems of hierarchy and perceptions of competence and control drive this element of sensemaking (Weick, 1988). Attachment to roles prescribed by identity is also a key component to determining if an individual will be able to make sense of a crisis situation (Weick, 1995; Wicks, 2002). McConnell's breakdown of the university's recovery plan in her post-crisis correspondence, primarily in her April 29 message, is very detailed and accompanied by step-by-step information and contingency plans for any required changes in course. The average word count for McConnell's emails is 1,280; this email is nearly double at 2,116 words. The message, while potentially too lengthy for anyone to completely read in detail, implies the university is competent and in control of its own recovery even if the reader only scrolls through. In this email, McConnell also purports that there are other options forward for the university that can be seen modeled by other universities. However, she urges that CSU has taken charge of their approach and have catered it to their values rooted in caring for the students and faculty above the needs of the budget. She also suggests the process of recovery will be collaborative, which may not be the approach of some other universities. "I believe our best path forward is through a transparent, engaged process grounded in our land-grant commitment"

(April 29). This extreme detail in the recovery planning process contrasts the pre-crisis distribution of information.

Pre-crisis communication implied the virus was primarily affecting people in other countries and international students connected to those countries rather than presenting it as a concern that would soon spread to the readers' world. On January 28, McConnell urges the university community to show concern and empathy for Chinese students:

The coronavirus is affecting the lives of millions of people in China and some in other parts of the world. Be mindful that our Chinese students may have family and friends in China about whom they are worried. We always care for one another, and Rams take care of Rams. I urge you all to make a special effort to reach out to these members of our community right now, ask what they need, and show that you care.

In this first acknowledgement of the virus, McConnell does not address the potential for the virus to effect anyone on campus but this particular group of students in a distant way. Omitting the potential for a pandemic in this message may be due to a lack of information that would suggest that the virus would eventually impact the U.S.; however, McConnell's coverage of COVID-19 does not change course until the university enters the crisis stage itself. At no point in the pre-crisis stage does McConnell warn that the virus could be in their own backyard. Thus, when the university entered its crisis stage, many students were not prepared to take its threat seriously. Robert recalls being resistant to closing the campus because he did not see the threat the virus posed for the community:

I remember being pretty upset that that's the route that we took because, you know, at the beginning before we knew less about this, it seemed to me that COVID wasn't all that bad. And, I mean, obviously when it hit, I mean, that was wrong and it was, and still is, a

big deal but, initially there was definitely frustration around shutting the school down and around moving things online.

Robert had little to no reason to believe COVID-19 would affect his life directly at the point of crisis. McConnell's pre-crisis correspondence does not urge the audience to think of COVID-19 as anything else but a new headline about other places, which would reasonably lead them to underestimate the need for action. Beth also felt the information she was presented with enabled a casual approach, "I feel like, as much as I hate to admit, I still wasn't very concerned or very invested in what it was going to do or what was going to happen." Beth took cues from university correspondence on how seriously to take the pandemic and its commitment to business-as-usual suggested an insignificance regarding the virus.

A number of interviewees felt a lack of concern for the virus even if they received pre-warning of its impact from individual professors. Mary recalls discrediting her professor's predictions as early as January:

I remember being in class beginning of January and my professor bringing up the fact that COVID is happening and it was kind of funny. He predicted that everything was going to shut down. So everyone thought that like, he was just being crazy and like, dramatic. And the next thing, you know, it's like the week before they shut down and professors are prepping to move everything online and I'm like, wow, this is actually happening on my last semester of college.

The contrast between McConnell placing the virus elsewhere in January and Mary's professor positing that everything would be shut down for the university here led her to believe that her professor was being overly dramatic since it did not match the attitudes of university leadership.

Virginia had a similar experience with a professor that warned her to be prepared to not return to campus after Spring Break:

I feel like a lot of people in that class kind of thought she was crazy, but I'd had a lot of communication with that professor. And I was like, she's right. There's no way this woman isn't right. And just talking to a lot of the faculty, I did have quite a few professors saying, you know, they're talking about closing down. I don't think we're going to come back.

Virginia's previous rapport with this professor led her to lean towards believing her; however, she was still not moved to action since the university had not officially suggested it might close. Therefore, even though Virginia had this warning and she believed it, she did not feel enabled to act upon the information until McConnell presented her course of action. John also had a professor spend time in class explaining the true threat of the virus. In retrospect, John acknowledges that his professor was "spot on about pretty much everything" though in the moment he felt compelled to prioritize his typical daily concerns:

Personally, I put it to the back of my mind. I didn't want to think about it. I was like there's other [stuff] to do. I have assignments. I have a test. I'm like, I can't be thinking about this Coronavirus, whatever it is.

Since the university's pre-crisis communication privileged a business-as-usual approach, it fostered students to think like John and encouraged them to prioritize their thoughts on their immediate academic concerns. The cautioning of these individual professors was not mirrored by the university as a whole, enabling students to cling to believing things will progress without major disruption.

Much like Wicks (2002) discovered a macho identity can manifest a sense of invulnerability, McConnell's implication of CSU as an unmarked university suggested little action was needed to keep students safe. This supported a business-as-usual approach to her correspondence that created blinders to the needs of the students in regard to improving and adjusting to virtual learning. In a previous section, I discussed McConnell's suggestion that CSU is a model university in the pandemic implying that it was setting standards in response. There is also the implication that CSU is an unmarked university in her correspondence suggesting that the virus has little effect on the university community. She does this by repeatedly urging that no cases have been found in connection with the university. As early as February 2, McConnell states, "I assure you that we are staying on top of this crisis and we currently do not have any cases affiliated with our university community." Virginia recalls these assertions and comments on the lack of clarity on how that could be measured:

I felt like that series of emails following up with [virtual learning], that was just constantly being like, "We still don't have any cases really connected to the university," even though we weren't there. So, I don't know, like, how they would have kept track of that.

Virginia questions this assurance because McConnell never described how campus cases were being monitored. A few days later on March 16, McConnell restates the lack of known positive cases while also conceding that immunity is not guaranteed for any group. "While **we are unaware of any positive case of COVID-19 in association with our CSU community**, the virus continues to spread, and no community is immune." While McConnell reminds the audience that no community is immune, she takes the opportunity to reassert the lack of positive

cases within the university in bold. This presentation of her words coupled with the prior declarations of a case-free campus privilege one message over the other.

The maintained notion of an unmarked university establishes and reestablishes a sense of accomplishment for keeping out the spread of COVID-19. This sense of accomplishment may have muted real issues taking place in the university's transition to virtual learning. Many interviewees report receiving an inconsistent education when forced to switch to virtual learning. Max was unclear on why his teachers seemed so unprepared if the university knew virtual learning was a possibility:

That initially sucked when [virtual learning] first started because none of the teachers had any sort of plan, which I understand is like, a big transition to online. But at the same time, towards the end of that first semester when COVID was hitting, teachers had to be aware that we were going to go online....And even so, it seemed like all of my teachers were completely dumbfounded and like, not prepared for it. Like they had no idea what to do, no idea what was happening or that any of this was going to occur when everyone knew it was....The university did say that like, in so many weeks, we'll be moving online. So, I remember being really annoyed with that as a student....so many teachers were just clueless.

Max's frustration stems from assuming the faculty had the capacity to act upon the change and the tools from the university; yet, they somehow still seemed unwilling or unable to construct a meaningful virtual learning environment. Mary also felt dissatisfied with her professors' interpretation of virtual learning, "I just wish that my professors made an effort in terms of Zoom class." She believes the professors were capable of more than posted slideshows and recorded lectures and McConnell's emails reflect that the faculty was facing a challenge, but not one they



were ill equipped to handle. Alice recalls that most of her classes just ended, and Virginia similarly dealt with never hearing from her professors after the switch to virtual learning. Helen states that some of her teachers had a plan, others seemed very nervous to teach in a new way. Likewise, Taylor experienced a lot of inconsistency between classes. This inconsistent commitment to virtual learning may stem from McConnell's seemingly last minute and bumpy commitment to the practice, which would make faculty members feel limited in their capacity to be effective virtually, and thus, making students feel less capable to learn during the semester. Many interviewees claim they did not learn much once the semester went virtual.

### ***Expectations: Duration and Performance***

Expectations are the third and final factor Weick (1988) examined as influences in sensemaking. Two major themes the interviewees discussed when thinking about their expectations were the duration of the disruption to their student life and performance expectations. Many interviewees mentioned expecting a shorter duration of disruption caused by the pandemic. The first thing Lucy recalled about her experience in the spring 2020 semester was the ambiguous timeline. "I think at the time we were trying to come back in like, a few weeks. I remember them [CSU administration] saying probably like a month after Spring Break. And then that deadline just kept getting pushed back further and further. And we're still online now."

Alice also reflected on how her expectations were challenged by the duration of the situation:

I definitely thought that we were only going to be doing it [virtual learning] for a couple of weeks. I was not expecting it to be a full year so far. But, yeah I think that my expectations kind of were continuously changing. I would think, like, oh, it'll be over soon, we'll be going back to normal soon. Obviously that wasn't true.

Alice refers to a constant need to readjust her expectations because she would predict a set time for a return to normal without much information to suggest she would be correct or incorrect.

Anita remembers being at fencing practice when she received the March 11 email:

So we all just kind of looked at our phones and were like, ah, so apparently we need to stop class and everyone has to go home now. So, everyone packed everything up and then went home for the day. And we're like, well, it's supposed to last two weeks. So we had planned to reschedule everything two weeks later and we're supposed to have like, um, other events and stuff. But then once the two weeks passed and they're like, yeah, it's [campus closure] going to keep going.

Her interpretation of McConnell's March 11 email suggests her mention of reevaluation by April 10 gave the impression that April 10 was an end date not a deadline for further information. Max discussed his uncertainty with the length of circumstances in the spring causing him to be apprehensive about plans for the hybrid fall semester. All of the interviewees' experiences with constant readjustment and uncertainty about their expectations with the duration of this disruption to their student life suggest it was difficult for them to settle into one vision for the remainder of the semester, and even the remainder of the year if they were returning in the fall.

In terms of expectations, the interviewees also talked about the need for a shift in productivity expectations from their professors and from themselves. McConnell mentions the students taking time to reflect on their losses due to the pandemic only when paraphrasing the message from Vice President of Student Affairs Blanche Hughes on April 13, previously quoted. McConnell's inclusion of Hughes's message recognizes the disruption to student life and their ability to conduct their normal activities; however, the interviewees were also in need of prominent figures in their personal and student lives to tell them it was alright and it is expected

for their productivity and academic performance to change due to the disruption. Lucy recalls receiving advice from a professor to this avail:

I forget who first kind of told us this, but one of my professors was telling us that like, your productivity and just you in general is completely different right now as it has been in the past. Not only are you experiencing something completely new, like in the social means of not being able to go out having a pandemic going on. But you're also having to learn how to do this all online now. So, you can't really compare how you were operating before all of this to how you're operating now because these different circumstances have kind of led to different results or ways of doing things.

Lucy's remark highlights a reflection upon the disruptions to her student life and her professor giving her permission to experience it as an ongoing crisis. When asked about what helped her when the semester got particularly challenging, Virginia talked about a similar assurance:

The fact that my parents didn't expect me to do well during that semester and even talking to my counselor, you know, she was like, no one's going to look at this semester and be like, "wow, how dare you not get straight As?"

Virginia took cues from her family and her counselor to relax her expectations about herself as a student. John appreciated this room from his professors, as well, "I got really lucky with my professors who were very accommodating and really didn't expect much out of me that semester." On the other hand, Beth felt her professors were maintaining the same expectations about their performance after the change to virtual learning. Beth cited the feeling that "expectations from teachers didn't really change" as a major challenge to her semester. Rather than solely framing the change to student life as something to be grieved, McConnell's correspondence could have attended more to the idea that the students should take time to think

about creating slack in their expectations regarding their ability to perform as students during the crisis.

The mixed approach of taking in McConnell's correspondence and interviews from students illuminated major themes salient for the students in light of the university's response to COVID-19. Regarding McConnell's leadership mindset, the analysis revealed McConnell relied heavily on messages that normalized the challenge higher education faces in a crisis such as COVID-19, led with gratitude, and maintained her *ethos* and *pathos* as the university president. Important crisis communication leadership strategies, such as foregrounding opportunities/historical influence and framing empowerment for the stakeholders were present in McConnell's correspondence; however, they could have been a more consistent theme in her emails to encourage stronger bonds of identity anchoring with the university and a sense of self-sufficiency. Additionally, the quality of crafting normalcy, affirming identity anchors, and promoting self-sufficiency present in McConnell's communication support a communicative construction of resilience. However, McConnell's emails largely privilege organization-oriented messaging that frame the university as capable, active, and still providing services; putting students first; and offering a "model university" image. Finally, in regard to enacted sensemaking, McConnell's communication displayed some common crisis pitfalls related to over/under-committing to response actions, impeding stakeholders' perceived capacity for action while living in a presumed "unmarked university," and not setting clear expectations for the duration of the crisis and performance expectations for the students while in crisis.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which leadership, resilience-centering, and sensemaking impacted Colorado State University students in their first semester dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. James and Wooten's (2011) theory on crisis leadership, Buzzanell's (2010) writing on communicative resilience building, and Weick's (1988) insights on enacted sensemaking provided the framework for analyzing the four research questions. In this section, I discuss three major takeaways from the results of this study that contain theoretical and practical implications. Though each takeaway connects to a RQ area of interest, the insights contributing to the observation are all informed by the study at large. The implications that can be drawn from this study is rooted in the interconnected importance of crisis leadership, resilience, and sensemaking.

The first research question: *In what ways did President McConnell exhibit a leadership mindset in her response to the COVID-19 pandemic?* aimed at exploring McConnell's leadership mindset and how she performed her transition into crisis leadership. McConnell's emails and feedback from the interviewees drew attention to three characteristics central and enduring in McConnell's leadership mindset: normalizing challenges, leading with gratitude, and maintaining *ethos* and *pathos*. Additionally, foregrounding opportunities/historical influence and framing empowerment were discussed as characteristics that were present, but could be more sustained throughout the cycle. Finally, the data suggested the reliability and intentionality of updates could be a site of improvement for McConnell's crisis leadership mindset. The analysis of these characteristics led to the first takeaway which will be further explained later in this

section: crisis leaders as at risk for becoming figureheads of the crisis response rather than stand-alone managers.

The second research question delved into understanding the construction of resilience taking place during the crisis cycle by asking: *In what ways did President McConnell's messages help construct a sense of resilience for CSU students?* I began by examining qualities that align with Buzzanell's (2010) view on communicatively constructing resilience: crafting normalcy, and affirming identity anchors, and Olsson's (2014) contribution to the concept of resilience building: promoting self-sufficiency. Then, I analyzed when McConnell's correspondence favored organization-oriented communication: framing the university as capable, active, and still providing its services; framing the university as putting students first; and foregrounding the concerns of the university while establishing a "model" university image. A tension emerged from looking at these qualities and the interviewees' responses that creates the second takeaway: balancing a sense of normalcy without overcommitting to a problematic business-as-usual mindset.

Finally, research question 3A: *In what ways did students make sense of the COVID-19 health crisis in the context of their student lives?* and research question 3B: *What role did messages from President McConnell play in their sensemaking?* address the ways in which the students responded to McConnell's enacted sensemaking process and how it affected their ability to make sense of the semester. I analyzed the emails and interviews in accordance with the three considerations Weick (1988) applies concerning enacted sensemaking: commitment, capacity, and expectations. The insights resulting from these perspectives led me to the third takeaway: pairing normalizing challenges with readjusting expectations.

The following unpacks each takeaway and relates to Coombs' (2019) crisis staging theory as an applied theory in crisis communication. Additionally, I will conclude this section with comments on my methodological contribution to the study of crisis communication.

### **Crisis Leaders at Risk of Becoming Figureheads**

The first takeaway of this study is that crisis leadership is at risk for transforming into a figurehead role during a crisis rather than standing out as a reliable leader. There are many leaders within an organization, especially within a university. McConnell is at risk of becoming a figurehead in the eyes of the students because she is communicating on the behalf of the entire university. Thus, the contents of her emails suggest the actions and opinions of the entire administration and potentially the faculty for most students. McConnell's emails demonstrate how her approach to the crisis leadership mindset as a spokesperson and leadership figurehead influenced the abilities other administrators and faculty had to be effective in their actions. In turn, the actions of other administrators and faculty impacted the student view of McConnell's leadership. The scholarship on crisis leadership thus far focuses on leader's actions and the direct effect they have on the stakeholders. However, the results of this study suggest there is a relationship between the crisis leader and other secondary sources of crisis leadership that impact the experience of the stakeholders.

McConnell's crisis leadership mindset embraced uncertainty and normalized feelings of stress and anxiety in the wake of the pandemic. This allows students to believe the administration and faculty members as a whole were united in their approach. However, her pre-crisis communication did not address the possibility of the pandemic drastically affecting all students equally. Several interviewees experienced professors warning in detail of the large impact the pandemic would have on their student lives as early as January 2020. Most of those interviewees

expressed feeling at the time that their professors were being overly dramatic. This disregard for the serious and accurate heeds of their professors was largely influenced by the fact that the university president was not prompting this level of concern. McConnell's correspondence, until mid-March, did not express any concern over the student body at large or the daily functions of the campus due to the pandemic and it did not present possible scenarios for actions that may need to be taken in the near future. Even the interviewees that believed their professors' concerns were accurate, did not believe the faculty had the capacity to act on the crisis without the support of the administration so, those interviewees stuck to their daily habits and avoided mentally preparing for the disruption.

On the other hand, McConnell's ability to be viewed as a leader in the crisis was impacted by the words and actions of others in leadership positions, as well. McConnell supported her position as a gracious leader by including videos of faculty and administrators expressing their gratitude for specific areas of effort during the crisis. These videos suggest a culture of gratitude under McConnell's leadership. McConnell also relies on the words of Vice President of Student Affairs Blanche Hughes to assist in expressing the mindset of the university as compassionate and considerate. Interviewees Chad and Taylor interacted with positive extensions of her leadership when talking to their Resident Assistants and desk staff; therefore, they felt trust and general good will towards the efforts of McConnell and the university as a whole. Alternatively, inconsistencies between the president and the actions of extended leadership can foster mistrust in the organization and leadership. Kate, James, Virginia, and Max explicitly discussed doubting McConnell's words because they either did not receive clear instructions from their instructors after the virtual learning announcement or their instructors quickly reduced the attention they provided the course. These instances impacted their trust in



most of her correspondence because the initial promise of receiving support and further information from instructors was met with a lack of follow-through.

Thus, crisis leaders should not only be concerned with their own messages and actions in response to the pandemic, but also how those messages and actions are forming public opinion around other authority figures involved. According to Boin, Kuipers, and Overdijk (2013), quick and shallow assessments of leadership performance from stakeholders are most common during a crisis. They posit this is because stakeholders can only judge what they see. Therefore, leaders reaching out to stakeholders in crisis are providing the materials on which opinions about their leadership will be constructed. Additionally, it is key for leaders to pay attention to those in positions to execute the commitments they are attaching the organization to in crisis for a lack of follow-through can invalidate the trust and authority placed in that leader.

### **Balancing Normalcy and Business-as-Usual**

Buzzanell (2010) lists crafting normalcy as one of the communicative acts that construct resilience; however, this study suggests some nuance should be applied to this concept to avoid relying on a business-as-usual approach to crisis, which the interviewees expressed as harmful. A business-as-usual approach takes a step further from establishing normalcy and suggests that the crisis or disruption at hand provides little to no barriers in typical productivity and decorum of the organization. Additionally, organization-oriented communication (Olsson, 2014) should be understood as a form of crisis communication that privileges a business-as-usual mindset.

McConnell's correspondence shows a desire to craft normalcy by creating routines for communication and supporting virtual events. In crisis situations, especially one involving isolation, setting rituals and routines make prolonged crisis more livable (Gunderson, 2000; Hanson & Roberts, 2005; Longstaff & Yang, 2008; Smith & Fischbacher, 2009; Wildavsky,

1988). The interviewees concurred this importance for a sense of normalcy during a crisis to help them cope by returning home to family (Kate), keeping in touch with co-workers (Robert and Lucy), setting schedules (Helen), or going on walks (Beth). However, crisis leaders must attend to a delicate balance between crafting normalcy and denying a disruption to the standard of normal that existed before the crisis. John noted that he felt the university's correspondence veered too closely to the latter and that an attempt to distinguish the new normal needed to be made to successfully acclimate students to virtual learning. John believes this was hindered by a desire to end virtual learning and return to in-person classes as quickly as possible; thus, making it difficult for the university to fully commit to a virtual semester.

McConnell's pre-crisis correspondence supports the idea that the university was too committed to maintaining the status quo over addressing the disruption the pandemic would cause to allow for the early establishment of a new normal. McConnell maintained communication as if Spring Break would take place as it did every year until days before it began when her narrative changed to encourage students to take caution traveling during the pandemic and that precautions such as an extended period for virtual learning preparations would need to take place. This approach of supporting business-as-usual communication then announcing plans for major preventative measures suddenly in one email shocked interviewees, such as Lucy and Virginia, into believing that the measures were overly drastic or that McConnell was behaving indecisively. Conversely, if McConnell's pre-crisis emails had breached the possibility for long term changes on the horizon, the need for a new normal would gradually become apparent. Surrounding crisis action in a business-as-usual approach allowed students to adopt the perception that the pandemic would be a temporary inconvenience rather than preparing them for the crafting of a new normal in the midst of a long-term disruption.

The framing of the virtual learning planning period as an “extension” of Spring Break is also a sign of favoring business-as-usual language. Rather than introducing a foreign concept, such as a planning period to adjust to virtual instruction, McConnell chose to frame it as an extension of their break. However, Max and James expressed how this framing led them to underestimate the crisis and caused them to focus on the excitement of a few extra days without coursework rather than preparing for a change in their daily lives. Considering the time as an extension of Spring Break rather than something new and required by the crisis at hand is an example of an overattachment to wanting to maintain a business-as-usual sentiment and keeping the students in a non-crisis related frame of mind for as long as possible. On the surface, this can be seen as a kindness to allow students to enjoy their time off for as long as possible; however, as the interviews show, the approach creates further problems with preparing students for the change, demonstrating the university’s commitment to the change, and emphasizing the seriousness of the crisis at hand.

Understanding the business-as-usual approach as a detriment to fostering resilience for long-term crisis, it should be noted that organization-oriented communication favors arguing for the business-as-usual, crisis-free perception. In order to accomplish the goals of organization-oriented communication in crisis, promoting and framing the preferences, credibility, and legitimacy of the organization (Olsson, 2014), the discourse coming from the organization often must urge that the normal order has been undisturbed for them. The analysis of these texts highlighted McConnell’s employment of this messaging. The entire email spent discussing the financial needs of the university during the pandemic was framed to assure that it was to keep things running in a business-as-usual manner where employees could be kept employed and students could keep being educated, even though the interviews revealed that many student

employees were left to feel ambiguous about their employment and the perceived quality of their education during virtual learning varied drastically. Similarly, messages suggesting a model university image or unmarked university image serves to assure that the organization is still valuable and viable. However, this instinct to suggest a business-as-usual environment due to the continued work of researchers or the lack of known cases fosters what Wick (2002) defines as a mindset of invulnerability, which he cautions is a dangerous element to underestimating a crisis.

### **Pairing Normalizing Challenges with Readjusting Expectations**

Buzzanell (2010) also discusses the importance of legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action as a key element to the communicative construction of resilience. In essence, she recognizes that to move forward productively in a crisis, the real lived experiences and emotions of those within the crisis cannot be snubbed with optimism. “This process involves the deliberate foregrounding of productive action while simultaneously acknowledging that the circumstances perceived as detrimental could legitimately provoke anger and other potentially negative feelings” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 7). Therefore, McConnell’s acknowledgement of negative reactions to the pandemic, such as anxiety and fear, drew attention as a key characteristic in her crisis leadership mindset due to its alignment with Buzzanell’s (2010) theory of constructing resilience. However, an additional element valuable to the realistic embrace of negative feelings while attempting to move forward in a crisis emerged in this study. Many interviewees, when considering the way in which they attempted to make sense of their student lives during the spring 2020 semester, reflected on the expectations of others and themselves when it came to their academic performance in the midst of the pandemic disruption. Their comments highlighted that real negative feelings resulting from a crisis should also call for an adjustment to the expectations the stakeholders have for themselves. Weick’s (1988)

understanding of expectation and commitment during crisis urges that these concepts should remain as fluid as possible and that fluidity should be communicated to avoid over-commitment and rigid expectations. Thus, when crisis leaders are recognizing the appropriate negative feelings that exist during a crisis, that communication should be paired with a conversation on the adjustment of expectations and the need for flexibility in those expectations for all parties involved in the crisis.

As mentioned in the analysis, McConnell only gets close to this practice once when she refers to a statement made by Hughes on the necessary and appropriate grieving students should be allowed for the disruption and loss they experienced in the semester. While the idea of grieving normalizes the negative feelings involved in the campus closure, comments on the kinds of expectations students should have for their semester fall short. The interviewees expressed a need for this kind of readjustment of expectations and why it was necessary to pair with acknowledgements of negative emotion. Lucy, Helen, Alice, Anita, and Max described believing the pandemic would cause only a minor disruption to the semester despite McConnell's correspondence acknowledging the challenge of uncertainty. Interviewees Lucy, John, and Virginia noted that receiving that adjustment to expectations from instructors and family members largely helped them reframe their ability to succeed during the pandemic and allowed them to realistically understand the situation of learning virtually due to a health crisis.

Readjusting removed the expectation of performing as they usually would because they were in unusual circumstances. This mentality is key for maintaining longevity in a virtual learning environment when the end of the situation is unknown (Wildavsky, 1988). On the other hand, Beth felt pressure from her instructors to perform as well as she would in a non-crisis environment, which she felt was a major detriment to her motivation to keep up with virtual

learning. Pairing sentiments acknowledging the difficulty of the situation with a reestablished set of flexible expectations provides a full picture of the reality of the crisis and its effect on the students' lives. When a crisis leader addresses the anxiety and fear a crisis is likely causing for the stakeholders, there is an opportune platform to also unpack how those feelings are likely to impact productivity. Readjusting and reducing expectations in difficult circumstances allows stakeholders to adequately make sense of the situation rather than cling to the way they would perform normally. This approach opens the door for stakeholders to understand the full picture of the situation—that negative feelings caused by crisis inevitably impact actions and performance. Once a stakeholder is permitted to release their non-crisis expectations of themselves, they are more open for new expectations that at worst relieve pressure and at best allow them to imagine the opportunities available to them in the new crisis setting.

### **Contextualizing the Stages of Crisis**

These three takeaways: understanding crisis leaders as figureheads, balancing normalcy and business-as-usual, and pairing normalizing challenges with readjusting expectations are drawn from the insights of the analysis of this study. The results of studying these three crisis topics (leadership, resilience, and sensemaking) in conjunction illuminates a more holistic approach to the stages of crisis. Each takeaway contributes to the idea that Coombs' (2019) macro-stages of crisis should be thought of not just as a way of categorizing crisis time but also as a guideline for what is needed in crisis communication at certain stages. The analysis of McConnell's emails and the interviews suggests crisis communication requires the emphasis of certain mentalities and messages at particular moments of the crisis unfolding. For example, urging the seriousness of the pandemic and hope for maintaining educational services while in isolation by attempting to craft normalcy came too late for many of the interviewees who already

felt abandoned, overwhelmed, or blindsided by the effect of the pandemic on their student lives. Understanding the needs of the stakeholders in the stages of crisis and what messages to focus on in those stages can make a crisis leaders' communication more effective and timely. Looking at these communication patterns in McConnell's correspondence for the semester and listening to the experiences of the interviewees shed light on what information is useful at any particular stage and what information, or lack thereof, can be counter-intuitive or harmful to the authority of the crisis leader. Thus, this study attempts to contextualize Coombs' (2019) staged approach to crisis, which condenses the stage theories of Fink (1986) and Mitroff, (1994). For example, Coombs' (2019) describes pre-crisis as a time for prevention, signal detection, and preparation. Being aware of the harm a business-as-usual approach to pre-crisis communication caused in this case study suggests avoiding this approach to allow students to prepare themselves for at least the possibility of crisis related disruption. I unpack what the results of this study suggest are good ways to prepare stakeholders in Table 4.

Table 4.

*Contextualizing Coombs' (2019) Stages of Crisis*

Crisis Stage	Pre-crisis	Crisis	Post-crisis
Coombs' definition	Prevention, signal detection, preparation	Actions, coping, damage containment, recovery	Resolution of crisis , learning from it
COVID-19 at CSU Spring 2020 Context	Awareness of COVID-19, discussions about effect on university, information about CDC's preventative measures	Virtual learning, addressing fiscal implications, essential-in-person work only	Semester procedures set, preparing for summer and fall, taking stock
Stage In Depth	Affirm feelings, provide general resources for information,	Gather as much information before releasing plan, urge flexibility and	Prepare for next cycle or new change of expectations, express gratitude, get

	foreground productive action while legitimizing negative feelings and readjusting expectations, be wary of business-as-usual communication, nuance regular communication with the potential of danger and disruption, avoid mindset of invulnerability or displacing concern; align with other organizational leaders	possibilities for change to plan, focus on identity anchors, craft new normal without attaching to business-as-usual viewpoint, reiterate adjusted expectations, establish a clear and reliable process for information sharing, avoid mindset of invulnerability, express gratitude; align with other organizational leaders	feedback from stakeholders, address identity anchors, communicate necessary needs of the organization, express achievements of the organization
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Early expectation setting and framing of the possible impending crisis sets the organization up for success during the crisis stage. Interviewees expressed being unprepared to take the crisis seriously because of the lack of pre-crisis concern. Understanding the complexity of these stages of crisis provides more direction for when to emphasize certain mentalities, messages, and actions.

### **Crisis Communication Methodology**

The final key takeaway from this study is about methodology. Crisis communication case studies primarily focus on offering best practices or drawing conclusions from an organization's communication and the results they seemingly yielded for that organization. Coombs (2006) classifies crisis communication research into two categories: form and content, used for consulting and academic research respectively, "Form indicates what should be done....Content addresses what is actually said in the messages" (p. 171). However, Frandsen and Johansen



(2010) note a limitation of this dichotomy is that it leaves out major actors within the crisis from the research:

In most cases, previous research has focused on just one actor defined as the sender, i.e., the person, organization, or institution that finds itself in a crisis of such a nature and intensity that it is necessary to communicate. Other important actors, including key stakeholders such as the media, investors, political groups, consumers, and citizens, are seldom heard and are only involved as the entity accusing the organization of wrongdoing, or as the entity attributing crisis responsibility to the organization (p. 428).

Thus, Frandsen and Johansen (2010) present a multivocal approach to crisis communication research. They paired their rhetorical study with observations of online forums discussing the content the organization was supplying in response to crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). This provided them with a more robust picture of the effect the communication had on what Frandsen and Johansen (2010) call the complete “rhetorical arena.”

Similarly, I conducted the rhetorical analysis of this study in conjunction with stakeholder interviews. While the rhetorical analysis warranted certain messages to be drawn from McConnell’s correspondence, putting those messages in conversation with the feedback of the students contextualized the meaning and effectiveness of those messages. This study draws upon the insights of the interviewees (students at the university) as guides to aid in meaning making when it comes to understanding what action was needed, when McConnell was particularly effective, and when the organization’s communication left the students wanting or encouraged a misinterpretation of the situation. These insights allowed me to add more depth to the stages of crisis and context to remind researchers to regard these stages as playbooks for crisis situations. Multivocal approaches to crisis communication research allow the research to

gain a holistic idea of the rhetorical arena, or the entire platform of actors engaged in communicating about the event (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). In particular, this study seeks to focus on the overall results regarding the student's attitude towards the university and sense of well-being and perseverance rather than observing their reactions to particular texts from the university. This style of interviewing with the text in mind rather than collecting direct responses allow for the researcher to become exposed to the potential gaps in the crisis leader's communication.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This project is not without its limitations; however, such limitations open the door for future directions in this area of study. The first limitation is that the analysis focuses on a single case study; thus, the results stem from a single university in a very particular crisis situation. Case studies inherently present concerns about the overall generalizability of the results due to the influence of particular contexts of the case (Fishman, 1999; Veil & Husted, 2012). However, case studies are a dominant methodology in crisis communication research because an actual crisis is present (Yin, 1994). Case studies allow researchers to examine real-life circumstances surrounding crisis, which would be difficult to authentically and ethically simulate (An & Cheng, 2012). Therefore, Veil & Husted (2012) assert that “while case studies are not statistically generalizable to populations or universes, they are analytically generalizable to theoretical propositions” (pp. 134-135). I acknowledge the results of this study hinge on the particularities of this case study; however, it also provides a reference point for other studies involving universities and student populations in crisis situations, public organizations in health emergencies, and email correspondence from leadership during a crisis. The case study also focuses on the undergraduate student experience within this situation. Further study into the

exploration of the experiences of faculty, staff, and graduate students as stakeholders under McConnell's leadership and leaders of their own university communities would be a fruitful analysis. Further research into the crisis knowledge management side of a crisis, such as COVID-19 in a university setting will provide additional insight into the ways in which community leaders communicate amongst other leaders within the organization. A study focused on this might explore the experience and types of communication received by administrators, student employers, faculty members and/or other professionals involved in the university's COVID-19 response strategy. This would provide more information on behind-the-scenes communication, information sharing, and constructing of knowledge for stakeholders.

The second limitation is the sample size of the interviews. Sixteen students were interviewed, and one interview was disqualified from the study due to the student's lack of enrollment during the spring 2020 semester. Though the interview material appeared to reach saturation, a small sample size of the interviews could mean that other perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of the crisis situation might have been missing from the analysis. More research should be done in this area to mitigate this limitation. Though the sample included several different colleges, other studies should attempt to get an even richer diversity of participants. Thus, the procedure of this study can be replicated for a wider range of participant demographics, for a different higher education setting, or perhaps a different crisis situation. Additionally, further study can confirm or dispute the findings of this project.

The third limitation is the complex timing of the interviews. Interviews took place close to a year after the timeline of the analysis; though the participants and interviewer were still experiencing limitations to daily life due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the participants were both removed from the specific cycle in question (Spring 2020, when the pandemic first

disrupted their student lives) and simultaneously still immersed in the pandemic. At the time of the interviews (Spring 2021), the participants who were still enrolled were experiencing a hybrid between virtual and in-person learning. These participants often elaborated on questions to include their current experience. Interview questions were crafted in an attempt to transport the mindset of the participant to the time in question. However, integrating their current experience with the university was not completely avoidable. Additionally, students might have felt more cynical to the preventative action with the passing of time after feeling like they were not in real danger or the decision to move to a remote campus was executed poorly. Nathan (2004) contends that “[h]indsight is not 20-20 because seeing things after they have occurred does not mean they have been seen accurately” (p. 189). However, engaging with students at this phase of their processing can inform crisis managers on what is needed in the post-crisis stage when stakeholders may be feeling like overly cautious measures were taken or a line of support was not extended for long enough.

Sensemaking is interpretive and ongoing (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Often, in crises, the details of the future require time to familiarize with the situation or looking back at historical similarities (Nathan, 2004). Weick (1988) described the paradox of sensemaking using the metaphor of the explorer:

The explorer cannot know what he is facing until he faces it, and then looks back over the episode to sort out what happened, a sequence that involves retrospective sensemaking. But the act of exploring itself has an impact on what is being explored, which means that parts of what the explorer discovers retrospectively are consequences of his own making (p. 306).

In other words, the best course of action is typically only clear after some action has been taken so the results can become observable. This study is uniquely placed in a stage of the crisis that has not yet reached the resolution (Fink, 1986), but enough time has passed from the trigger, or breakout, for the potential for learning to begin. Therefore, while students were still experiencing disruption, a level of retroactive sensemaking is possible that may be impactful for knowing how to cope until we have reached a final resolution stage in the pandemic crisis.

Many crises evolve over long periods of time and as they evolve, they take on different forms with adjusted concerns and risks (Nathan, 2004). For example, the aftermath of the gas leak disaster in Bhopal persisted eight years after the accident (Shrivastava, 1993). Along with the evolution of a crisis, sensemaking must evolve as “we continually seek to understand what is happening and what events mean in relationship to our organizations” (Nathan, 2004, p. 194). Nathan (2004) posits that there must be an acceptance of the imperfection inherent to the hindsight/foresight relationship to sensemaking and attempt to move forward anyway. Thus, understanding beliefs and misunderstandings after a crisis could contribute to our understanding of crisis communication overall. In the future, more studies should focus on crisis sensemaking at several phases of the crisis and the crisis aftermath. An additional study could explore the thoughts of the students once they return to a fully in-person learning environment and for future crisis situations, research can be done with participants while in the midst of the first exposure to crisis through interviews, participant journaling, or focus groups.

## **Conclusion**

Boin and McConnell (2007) argue that organization rationalizing, failing to present resources, and inhibiting the ability of stakeholders to prepare for crisis are major barriers to resilience. While the university held no control in the overall pandemic crisis, this should not be

misinterpreted as a freedom from control in the more localized response to the crisis causing potential for double crisis. Students not having proper access or motivation to continue the semester is a result of not just the pandemic itself, but the way in which the university handles the pandemic. Thus, this study provides some points of interest and urgency when addressing crises that disrupt student access to their campuses, faculty, other students, educational resources, and their general expectations for conducting student life. The following are overall insights drawn from this project aimed for crisis leaders in positions, such as McConnell's, regarding the crisis leadership mindset, fostering resilience, and sensemaking when experiencing long-term crisis.

As a crisis leader, the results of this study suggest it is of great importance to take time to consider and research the possible duration of the crisis at hand. Crisis communication should be positioned in anticipation of the long-term needs of the stakeholders and the challenges they will face. Short-term information and solutions are attractive to leaders because of public demand for expedient responses (James & Wooten, 2011); however, underestimating the duration and impact of a crisis can lead to over-committing to a quick return to normal or under-committing to the protocols put in place to reduce harm. Interviewees often spoke of their disappointment once they realized the university's impression of the length of time they would be adhering to virtual learning and a closed campus was not reliable. McConnell and many other crisis leaders faced a challenge in the wake of COVID-19 because many underestimated the longevity of viral pandemics in the modern age. In general, crisis leaders should maintain positive outlook, value the trust and confidence of their stakeholders, and empathize with the challenges presented by crisis while avoiding promising an overly expeditious return to business-as-usual. Caution should

be used in unprecedented situations and leaders should always keep in mind the regenerative nature of crisis (Coombs, 2015).

In terms of building up the potential for resilience amongst a stakeholder population, crisis leaders should understand that organization-centered communication is important in the sense that it works to maintain the confidence the stakeholder has in the organization by assuring it retains its credibility, scope of control, and legitimacy. However, the scales must be balanced more in the direction of resilience-centered communication if an organization desires returning to normal as-soon-as possible or continuing to be productive throughout the duration of a crisis. Instilling confidence that the organization is still capable does not address the full spectrum of needs a stakeholder can have in crisis situations. The goal of every crisis leader should be to balance assuring the stakeholders of the capability of the organization while acknowledging the fact that crisis presents an array of concerns that many stakeholders and organizations are not prepared for and will need help overcoming. In this realm of communication, the crisis leader must face that they cannot fix all problems presented in the crisis immediately; however, by focusing on promoting the agency of the stakeholder, they can assist in building resilience throughout the organization for general upward growth during the crisis (Nicholls, 2012).

Finally, understanding the factors that contribute to a stakeholder's sensemaking during a crisis should influence crisis communication decisions. This study illuminates a number of ways to avoid influencing a stakeholder's sensemaking in a direction that causes them to misunderstand the situation, put them in additional danger, or damage their ability to believe in a positive outlook (Weick, 1988). To begin, it is vital to understand the potential harm inherent in a mindset of invulnerability (Wicks, 2002). Believing a particular organization will experience less harm in a crisis simply by willing it so can cause the organization to create blind spots or

over-commit to one solution in a complex and developing situation. Being cautious of the mindset of invulnerability may steer crisis leaders away from messages of unmarked universities or model responses. Additionally, it is helpful to remember that a response that necessitates normalizing negative feelings due to crisis will likely also be improved by encouraging stakeholders to readjust the expectations they have for the organization and for themselves in this time.

Crisis communication should always be about learning more to enable leaders and managers to respond and guide stakeholders in the best ways possible to foster safety, endurance, and the will to recover. Living through crisis in the information age does not mean crisis becomes easier. Rather, communicating while in crisis has become more complex and highly magnified. Communicators in crisis situations must continue to chase the best practices in responding for the benefit of the organizations they belong to; however, COVID-19 has been an excellent case study displaying the importance of caring for the individual to strengthen the whole amidst a wide-spread disaster.



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## APPENDICES

### **Appendix A: Interview Participant Recruitment Email**

Hello [name],

As you probably know, I am a graduate student from the Colorado State University Communication Studies department. I am conducting a research study on the student experience in regard to the COVID-19 disturbance to your 2020 spring semester. If you were enrolled at CSU in the spring of 2020, I would greatly appreciate your input. I would like to hear about your experience during the semester so we can learn more about how university officials can support students through an event like COVID-19.

Your involvement would be in the form video chat or phone interview that will be audio recorded for accuracy. Participation would take 30-60 minutes and would remain confidential. All recordings will be deleted after the conclusion of the study. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board. Please contact me at [juliet.letteney@gmail.com](mailto:juliet.letteney@gmail.com) by [deadline date] if you would like more information on how you can be involved in the study.

Best,

Juliet

## **Appendix B: Interview Participant Recruitment Email By Referral**

Hello [name],

A friend of mine named Juliet Letteney is a graduate student from the Colorado State University Communication Studies department. She is conducting a research study on the student experience in regard to the COVID-19 disturbance to your 2020 spring semester. I participated in the study and I think you could be an ideal participant, as well. She would like to hear about your experience in the Spring 2020 semester so she can learn more about how university officials can support students through an event like COVID-19.

Your involvement would be in the form of a video chat or phone interview that will be audio recorded for accuracy. Participation would take 30-60 minutes and would remain confidential.

All recordings will be deleted after the conclusion of the study. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board. You can contact Juliet at [juliet.letteney@gmail.com](mailto:juliet.letteney@gmail.com) by [deadline date] if you would like more information on how you can be involved in the study.

Best,

Juliet

## Appendix C: Social Media and Classroom Recruitment Blurb

# Let's talk COVID, Rams

**Where you enrolled at CSU in Spring 2020?**

Then you qualify to participate in the research study: Leadership, Resilience, and Sensemaking at CSU during COVID-19



JOIN OUR RESEARCH STUDY!

### Who is conducting the research?

Researchers from the Communication Studies Department at Colorado State University are recruiting participants for a study to explore the factors that formed their educational experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### What will you be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in an interview conducted by phone or video chat. You will be asked about your experience as a student in the spring 2020 semester. The interview will be 30-60 minutes. Your participation will remain confidential and all information collected will be destroyed after the project has concluded.

### Why should I join the study?

This study is seeking to understand how to better support students through crisis and will provide an outlet to express how the pandemic has affected you as a student.

### How do I join the study?

If you are at least 18 years of age and were an active student enrolled at CSU during the spring 2020 semester, you are eligible to participate. **Please email [juliet.letteney@gmail.com](mailto:juliet.letteney@gmail.com).** A researcher will then email you to schedule an interview. If you have any questions, please email the above email address.

## **Appendix D: Interview Protocol**

Read to participant: Hello, my name is Juliet Letteney and I am a graduate student from Colorado State University in the Communication Studies department. This is a research study examining the student experience with COVID-19 in the spring of 2020. I am hoping to understand the kinds of messages that helped or harmed students in the first semester of the pandemic. The title of the project is “Resilience, leadership, and sensemaking at Colorado State University during the COVID-19 pandemic.” This project is being conducted under the supervision of my advisor Dr. Elizabeth Williams.

Did you receive the waiver of signed consent I emailed you? Have you had time to read over it carefully? (if no, give them time to read now) Do you have any questions about the waiver or the project?

I have some questions about your experience at CSU in the spring 2020 semester. Please feel free to elaborate on your experience beyond the actual question. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. As a reminder, your participation in this research is completely confidential and voluntary. Your name and email address will be kept during the data collection process but will be removed from the data shared in the report and pseudonyms will be used. Your contact information will be destroyed when the study is complete. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty and the interview will conclude.

Would you like to proceed with the interview? And are you ok with the conversation being audio recorded for accuracy?

If yes: Continue to questions.

If no: Thank you for your time. Ask if they would like to give a referral to someone who may be interested in participating.

### Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your experience since the beginning of the pandemic. Draw or write out your own timeline.
2. What are three key words you would use to describe your experience as a student right now? (sensemaking)
  - a. How do you think that differs from how you felt in the spring (2020)?
3. What kind of experiences helped you through the spring semester?
4. Where did you go to for information during the spring semester?
5. What do you remember hearing from CSU during the spring semester as the pandemic unfolded in the U.S. (January – March)? (leadership)
  - a. How did this make you feel?
6. What were your feelings toward the university itself during the semester?  
(leadership/sensemaking)
  - a. What made you feel that way?
7. When you first heard of the switch to virtual learning, what did you expect the rest of your semester to look like? (sensemaking)
8. How would you describe yourself as a student once the semester went virtual?  
(resilience)
9. I am going to read you an email that was sent on [date] from President Joyce McConnell.  
(leadership)
  - a. Do you recall this email?

- b. What thoughts does this email bring up for you?
- 10. What challenge(s) do you think students in general faced during the spring 2020 semester? (sensemaking)
  - a. What challenge(s) did you face during this semester that you typically do not as a student?
- 11. What helped you continue through times that were especially difficult during the semester? (resilience)
  - a. What do you usually rely on to get you through a semester?
- 12. What major takeaways would you say you have about the spring 2020 semester? (sensemaking/resilience)
- 13. (If enrolled in Fall 2020 or Spring 2021) What made you decide to return last/this semester? (resilience)
- 14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your time as a student during the pandemic?
- 15. Do you have a preferred pseudonym for the report?
- 16. Would you be willing to help me gather more people to participate either by emailing three friends or posting about the study on your social media? I will provide the material to send/post.

Thank you very much for your time. Once I have a report on my findings, I will be checking in with a few people. Would you be ok with me potentially contacting you with a follow-up chat in the future?

## Appendix E: Consent Form

[Date]

Dear Participant,

My name is Juliet Letteney and I am a researcher from Colorado State University in the Communication Studies department. We are conducting a research study on CSU students' experience during virtual learning due to COVID-19. The title of our project is Leadership, Resilience, and Sensemaking at Colorado State University during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Principal Investigator is Dr. Elizabeth Williams, Associate Professor of Communication Studies. I am the Co-Principal Investigator.

We would like you to participate in video chat or phone interviews that will be audio recorded. Participation will take approximately 60 minutes. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty. Your privacy will be protected and the confidentiality of your data will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms. The principal and co-principal investigators will be the only ones with access to your interview recording. All identifying information will be removed when the recordings are transcribed, and then recordings will be deleted. Your name and contact information for scheduling and future participation will not be connected to your research responses. While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on student resilience and sense making and provide an opportunity to talk through your experience with COVID-19 as a student.

The potential risks are limited to possible discomfort in talking about your experience and possibly speaking negatively about the university. However, the researchers have taken steps to minimize this by maintaining your confidentiality.

If have any questions, please contact Juliet Letteney ([juliet.letteney@gmail.com](mailto:juliet.letteney@gmail.com)) or Dr. Williams ([elizabeth.a.williams@gmail.com](mailto:elizabeth.a.williams@gmail.com)). If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553.

Sincerely,

Dr. Elizabeth Williams  
Associate Professor

Juliet Letteney  
Graduate Student

## Appendix F: Interview Email Focus

# Important public health message to the CSU campus community

March 11, 2020

Dear Students, Faculty and Staff,

With the courageous commitment of our Colorado State University community, CSU has faced many challenges. Today, we face a global health crisis in which we can play a critical role by slowing transmission of COVID-19 and freeing our local hospital to treat the critically ill. We can and must do our part to safeguard the health of our entire community. I thank all of you in advance for your compassion for others and patience in navigating a complex situation.

We have no knowledge of any cases of COVID-19 associated either with our residence halls or with the university more broadly.

Nevertheless, as you know, we are in daily consultation with public health officials at local, state and national levels and following their science-based guidance. As a result, we are taking the following steps immediately to do our part, which includes the following:

**Classes Moving Online:** Spring Break for students and faculty will be extended through Tuesday, March 24, with classes resuming Wednesday, March 25, as follows:

- Classes at all levels will be delivered online beginning Wednesday, March 25.
- Online teaching and course delivery will remain in effect until April 10. We will re-evaluate and issue further guidelines in advance of that date.
- Individual academic units will follow up with their students regarding accommodations for accessibility issues—including online and computer access, internships, laboratory classes, and other special circumstances.



**Our fundamental mission is to educate our students and we are committed to preserving their educational access, opportunity and success for the remainder of this semester, regardless of circumstances.**

**Campus Operations:** Campus operations will remain at normal levels. University buildings will operate as follows:

- The CSU Health Network will be open regular hours, including over Spring Break, to see students for medical and counseling concerns.
- Residence halls, university apartments, and dining halls will remain open as usual, including over Spring Break.
- The Lory Student Center, Student Rec Center, UCA, and all academic, business, and service buildings will remain open for business as usual.
- The Veterinary Teaching Hospital and Diagnostic Lab will remain open for business as usual.
- The Morgan Library will be open for campus community members **only**.

We will provide guidance for employees who need to work remotely; this will be shared soon.

**University Travel:** All university international and domestic travel that has not yet commenced is suspended effective March 23 through April 10. We will re-evaluate and issue further guidelines in advance of that date. Exceptions may be granted based on critical need. More information on the exception process will be shared soon.

**On-Campus Events:** All university events involving 20 or more external visitors or targeted toward [people at risk for serious illness from COVID-19](#) are suspended effective March 23 through April 10. We will re-evaluate and issue further guidelines in advance of that date. Exceptions may be granted based on significant need. More information about the exception process will be shared soon.

**Off-campus Events:** All university-hosted off-campus events involving 20 or more people or targeted toward [people at risk for serious illness from COVID-19](#) are suspended effective March 23 through April 10. We will re-evaluate and issue further guidelines in advance of that date. Exceptions may be granted based on significant need. More information about the exception process will be shared soon.

These actions will obviously have a profound effect on our campus. In the coming days, we will be working through the many questions that will emerge from these immediate actions to provide additional guidance and clarity.

I fully understand the burden this puts on many in our community who will have to rearrange plans and rework how they conduct the university's daily business. I deeply appreciate the hard work so many of you have done and will continue to do throughout this public health crisis.

Confronting the challenges of a public health emergency like this creates discomfort and anxiety. Please know that Colorado State University is no stranger to responding to unexpected events that cause disruption in our lives and require that we dramatically and quickly alter our established paths. We have done so successfully in the past, and we will do so successfully again now.

We will continue to provide updates and guidance as soon and as often as possible via email, social media, and at [CSU's Safety website – Information about COVID-19](#).

I am thankful for each of you. I want you all to stay safe and healthy during this difficult situation. That is our primary goal, now and always, at CSU. Please take care of yourselves, of your friends and families, and of those in our community to whom you have the capacity to reach out with compassion.

We are strong. We are resilient. We are Rams. We will get through this—together.

Thank you,

Joyce McConnell