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COVID-19 COMPLEXITIES

Navigating Student Leadership and Professionalism Amid the Pandemic

Murphey University is a large institution in a small city on the West Coast. Within the University, there is a student-run advertising agency consisting primarily of advertising majors who provide services for clients and who get paid a fee for their work. Due to COVID-19, Murphey University's student-run agency had been working remotely for roughly eight months out of the nine-month school year, collaborating with six local clients. When their remote academic year was soon coming to a close, rising positive COVID tests in the county moved the city into a high-risk phase. There were times when events that could not be held remotely, or tasks that could not be completed remotely, such as photoshoots and podcast recordings. While all classes were being held virtually, occasionally in-person agency events were necessary and required everyone to wear masks and be socially distanced in order to fulfill client needs and maintain a safe environment.

As the end of the term approached and the weather improved, and as vaccinations became more readily available to the student body, party events and large get-togethers began to occur in spite of state and University guidelines limiting the size of gatherings. In addition, Murphey University is a school with a division 1 sports program, which is known for its spring term season sports events in football, softball, and track and field. Despite high-risk phasing, the school still ran its most prolific sporting events, known among students as "spring games". Even after the county moved to extreme-risk, students were told by school personnel that they would

be allowed to attend the spring game in person following guidelines, but a few days before the scheduled event, the in-person events were cancelled. Furthermore, rising COVID-19 cases in the county forced it to move to a higher risk designation, which mandated strict limits on gathering sizes. While this decision undoubtedly upset groups of students, regulations and supervision didn't prevent many from still congregating at large "superspreader" parties without regard to others' vaccination status on the day of the spring game. In fact, the University itself encouraged students to watch the game on television with a group of friends. Unfortunately, the University did anticipate what happened shortly afterwards.

During the weekend of the "spring games", many parties were held with 80+ students in attendance across the local Murphey campus and community. Photos from these parties were posted on various social media channels, drawing the attention of many faculty and staff at Murphey University. One such person seeing the photos was Professor Jonah Strathmore, the faculty advisor of the school's advertising agency. He was quick to message the team about these photos that were widely circulating among students and administration alike, voicing his disappointment and hoping that no one in attendance at these mass-student events were affiliated with the agency. It soon was discovered that a large number of student leaders and members of Murphey's student run agency were seen in attendance at these events. By extension, some of these student leaders photographed themselves and posted their pictures on their public social media profiles. The majority of the photos included the student agency leadership, which prompted Jonah Strathmore to type many messages voicing his concerns regarding the agency's precarious and potentially damaging standing with the University, clients, and community at large. After seeing their students in these surfaced images, many ad faculty at Murphey

University also aired their frustrations on social media. This upset many of the party-goers, as faculty was publicly commenting on their personal lives outside of the ad program.

Due to conflicting ethics and emotions surrounding the COVID-19 social gathering rules, a rift began to build between the student leadership and membership of the student group. Emotional aspects of inter-team trust, expectations, and experiences with the pandemic caused work done by the agency to suffer and dwindle. In the highly circulated images alongside the high visibility of the group's leadership, the organization had no other choice but to convene during their all-agency weekly membership meeting to clear the air and discuss solutions for moving forward.

Jonah Strathmore made the conscious decision not to attend the meeting to allow for more open conversation amongst the agency membership, without him potentially influencing the discussion. Additionally, due to the unsafe decisions made by his team and the potential consequences of spreading COVID-19, he also decided to cancel all future in-person events and photoshoots. The Zoom call was notable for a pervasive feeling of awkwardness and uncertainty among the group as tension was felt by all throughout the duration of their meeting. Some of the main speaking points included leadership holding themselves accountable for their actions, membership anecdotes of personal COVID-19 experiences, and justification by some of the party-goers for their actions.

Students not in attendance made statements such as, "How can we move forward and trust the leadership when some people haven't confided in their attendance?", "I'm super disappointed, especially since it screwed up what we had planned for weeks", "When you were physically at that party, did you ever have a moment when you knew what you were doing was wrong?", and "How do we move forward in coming up with solutions?". Some of the party-goer

responses included, “We were fully vaccinated and thought it would be okay”, “I just wasn’t thinking”, “We’ve all had our own COVID-19 experiences, so let’s try not to bash on each other”, and “I’m sorry. I know I screwed up but it doesn’t excuse what I did”. Despite some common ground and understanding being met, many, if not all, members who did not attend the parties were left feeling unconvinced of their peers’ decision-making skills regarding the COVID-19 guidelines.

Should the ad agency student leadership be held accountable for their decisions? If so, how?

QUESTIONS

1. Is Murphey University's Communications Department responsible for making a statement regarding the mass-student events that happened off-campus? If yes, how should they approach their communication to their community?
2. Should Jonah Strathmore take any other actions? If yes, in what way(s)?
3. Was the faculty advisor wrong to message the members of the agency with his concerns regarding the situation?
4. How should the ad agency operate moving forward for the rest of the academic year? Should they continue the conversation or dismiss what happened?
5. Should the ad agency make a statement on their social media accounts regarding the situation at hand and their stance on the whole situation?
6. Was it wrong for faculty to make statements about the incident on their public social media accounts and call students out for their actions?
7. Did the student leadership have a right to get upset at faculty?

RESPONSE - DR. CAITLIN CARTER, SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

“This is a complicated situation because you are considering humans (students) that exist in a position that is almost always in overlap with their emerging professionalism. Yes, we all have a personal life and a private life, but we rarely at any point in our lives have those pieces of our identity tethered to the same institution. [...] That said, students of this generation are incredibly aware of social media pit-falls and the possibility to run a private account. You hope students in leadership positions are the most capable of critically assessing a situation and making smart decisions.

To answer [the] question directly, yes, I think student leadership needs to be held accountable for their actions. Even though they are still students, they are also professionals doing business in the community. Selecting those best suited for these leadership roles means they should be able to set the best example for their peers, even if it goes against their personal desires to enjoy elements of a pre-Covid-19 social life. This is due in part to the fact that social media cannot be contained exclusively in a personal space. An example would be issues around cyberbullying that have come up in jr. highs and high schools. Some parents argue what is posted on social media is not for the school to weigh-in on, while others argue that if a student is bullying another student, or has created a negative persona online, that indrutes upon the school

space where students are asked to cooperate as peers. It can create hostile environments in which students feel threatened going to school, even if the bullying took place exclusively online. The fact that one can take social media to the workplace, that as a student one can check social media while at school means that what has been viewed in the past as something private or personal has now been allowed access to public and professional spaces. That is to say social media exists wherever it is accessed. Therefore it will be increasingly difficult to argue that what you do at home shouldn't affect what happens on-campus or in a work space.

That said, this is clearly a question of ethics and you also would have to consider anti-discrimination law. What cannot be monitored by a professional entity and what can be? Where is the line? If I post about a weekend trip, is that safe? If I consume alcohol on that trip, is it safe to post that? Can one post it if their account is private? However, even if the optics weren't such an issue in this case study, members of student leadership still made a poor choice in attending a superspreader even during a pandemic. That is what makes me say they should be held accountable. The second a single member of the group, or the faculty advisor, found out about this, it would have become an issue, even if social media weren't in play.

Part of accountability is allowing those affected to weigh-in on how to proceed. I think it would be appropriate for the student group to vote on whether or not to elect new leadership. I think it's also appropriate for the group, excluding leadership members, to make a recommendation to the university (including the faculty advisor) if those student leaders should be removed from the group. For any remaining or newly voted leadership it would be nice if the university offered (or even mandated) training and clear expectations on how to act as a professional in an informal student space. When can you kick back and just be a student, and when are you representing the university? Are you ever not an ambassador for the school, and what does that mean in a digital age for students with dual roles in the community (student and emerging professional)?

Occasionally, **an apology** goes a long way in acknowledging that one has negatively affected others, even if that was not the intention. It doesn't matter if those that attended the party thought it would matter, thought it was a personal decision, or didn't think it would offend their ad agency peers. The fact of the matter is it did. Part of emotional competence is acknowledging that you've hurt or disappointed someone despite your intentions. A formal apology to the group and ownership of one's actions may cover some ground in clearing the air in the group.”