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Aldemaro Romero Jr.
CUNY Bernard M Baruch College

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Regional

Scandals are threatening higher education

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.
Letters from Academia

Among the unfortunate curses affecting the image of higher education are the scandals taking place with unrelenting regularity. Whether they have to do with athletics, sexual assaults, murders, cheating, hazing, or corruption, the media are echoing those scandals, sometimes in excruciating detail. In some cases, like the "Sandusky affair" that made headlines for months and tarnished the reputation of Penn State University and its renowned football coach Joe Paterno, these scandals have a lasting effect on public opinion.

We in academia have always been worried about the effect of these scandals on an issue very important to colleges and universities – enrollment. We have also asked ourselves how common those scandals are. Now a study recently published by Harvard University is providing data corroborating what we feared most, that scandals are extremely common in higher education and they are followed by a significant drop in applications to the institutions involved.

The report, titled "The Impact of Campus Scandals on College Applications," analyzes a dataset of scandals at the top 100 U.S. colleges and universities between 2001 and 2013 as measured by U.S. News and World Report. The researchers behind this study found that during that period of time there were 124 major scandals at these institutions, affecting more than 75 percent of them. In other words, public scandals are extremely common. Six colleges experienced more than one scandal in a single year, with one experiencing four different scandals during the same year.

The researchers looked at stories published in The New York Times or in magazines in the form of long-form articles. They found that scandals with more than five mentions in The New York Times lead to a 9 percent drop in applications the following year for the colleges involved. Colleges with scandals covered by long-form magazine articles received 10 percent fewer applications the following year. Because the number of applicants is one way colleges and universities are ranked by U.S. News and World Report, colleges affected by those scandals fell roughly 10 places in rank from one year to another.

In other words, this is a vicious cycle. The scandal gives the college a bad name. That reputation in turn leads to a drop in the number of applications, which leads to a lowering in ranking. The lowered ranking leads to even fewer applications. After all, rankings influence students' (and their parents') decision on where to apply to college.

The report also points out the fact that a college or university tends to respond rapidly to a scandal and is 50 percent less likely to have another scandal a year later. In other words, academic institutions know how detrimental these scandals are for them and tend to take immediate action to ameliorate their effect.

Of the 124 scandals analyzed, the most common ones had to do with murder (42 percent) followed by sexual assaults, hazing and cheating. This is not surprising. Murders are always investigated by the local police and they always end up in the media. Since campuses are perceived as supposedly secure places, the news looks even more shocking. These incidents, of course, can never be hidden from public view.

Other crimes are not always reported. Case in point is sexual assaults. The victims are many times silent. And when they are not, many colleges and universities do their best to keep the crimes under wraps despite their obligation under federal law to report them. In fact, there are studies that indicate that more than half of all sexual assaults are never reported. We also need to remember that not all scandals at colleges and universities are reported by The New York Times or major magazines. Many of the stories are confined to the local press. Yet, the effect of those stories cannot be dismissed given that in many cases they affect the very few institutions found in a particular rural area. We also need to realize that with the use of social media – the favorite means of communication among traditional college students (between 18- and 22-years-old) – there is a lot of information, accurate or not, being circulated that is not necessarily picked up by the conventional media.

This study also found that the reason why there were fewer or no scandals after the initial one was reported was because, in most cases, the institution took measures to avoid another situation. In this instance we can see the positive effect of the media in generating a sense of accountability.

There are other aspects of this problem that we need to keep in mind that have to do with the culture of higher education. Colleges and universities tend to be secretive in the way they handle things. That very culture is conducive to some people thinking that they can get away with malfeasance. The other problem is that the leadership of some of these institutions is not always well prepared to deal with public relation crises. Instead of acknowledging the problem and taking action right away, many take refuge behind vague statements generated by their public relations and marketing departments.

The general public has grown very savvy. They realize the difference between cover-ups and decisive responses. As any expert in public relations crisis management will tell them, there is no substitute for the head of the organization to appear in public and explain what kind of action she or he is taking. The problem is that many times they listen too closely to the advice of their lawyers for whom the less said the better. The problem is that the court of public opinion can be even harsher than courts when it comes to shedding a bad light on the institution.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: http://www.aromerojr.net