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# When secrecy hurts institutions of higher ed.

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## Regional

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# When secrecy hurts institutions of higher ed

In 1982, seven people died in the Chicago metropolitan area after ingesting Extra Strength Tylenol that had been deliberately contaminated with potassium cyanide. Johnson & Johnson, the manufacturer, responded by pulling 31 million bottles of tablets back from retailers, stopped all production and advertising of the product, got involved with the Chicago Police, FBI, and FDA in the search for the killer, and offered up to a \$100,000 reward for information on the culprit, all while permanently discontinuing the capsules and developing tamper-resistant “gel caps.”

The crisis cost the company more than \$100 million, but Tylenol eventually regained 100 percent of the market share it had before the crisis. The media appreciated the lengths the company went to and its concern for the public interest, so the company was portrayed generally in a good light. This is a textbook example of how to respond to a public relations crisis. Unfortunately, many in higher education have yet to learn from this case.

In July of this year the Los Angeles Times published a report that the dean of the medical school at the University of Southern California, Carmen A. Puliafito, had used illicit drugs and consorted with a prostitute before resigning from his administrative post in 2016. Video footage and pictures of him engaged in these activities in a hotel room supported the paper’s story.

The news was shocking for many reasons. Puliafito, age 66, was a renowned eye surgeon and is married with three grown children. He obtained his medical degree from Harvard University and had been the founding director of the New England Eye Center and chair of the Department of Ophthalmology at Tufts University in Massachusetts before becoming dean at USC. He had also been the director of the Bascom

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Palmer Eye Institute and chair of the Department of Ophthalmology at the University of Miami’s medical school. The newspaper review of public records in the states where he had practiced showed no malpractice lawsuits or disciplinary actions against him. However, it was later revealed by The Chronicle of Higher Education that while in Miami Puliafito had settled an assault lawsuit and faced sexual harassment allegations.

At USC Puliafito oversaw hundreds of medical students, thousands of professors and clinicians, and research grants totaling more than \$200 million. He was credited with raising more than \$1 billion for the school and other causes. He was also a regular at star-studded USC fundraisers with the Hollywood elite. His yearly salary was \$1.1 million.

Yet, he resigned under suspicious circumstances. Not only was he forgoing a very high salary and a very prestigious position, but also his resignation took place in March, in the middle of a semester, a rarity in higher education. The official explanation from his university was that he went on sabbatical.

The real explanation was that the video footage and photographs started to circulate in social media. In one videotaped scene Puliafito, wearing a tuxedo, shows an orange pill on his tongue. “Thought I’d take an Ecstasy before the ball,” he tells the camera, then swallows the pill. Ecstasy is a psychoactive drug. The newspaper reported that a 21-year-old woman who overdosed

last year in his hotel room in Pasadena, Calif., Sarah Warren, met Puliafito in 2015, when she was working as a prostitute, and that they had become frequent companions. She told the newspaper that she had offered him methamphetamine, which he accepted. After her overdose, the police found the drug in the hotel room where the two of them were reportedly staying together, but no one was arrested, the newspaper said.

There was incredulity by journalists and over social media that USC officials could have been unaware of their dean’s extracurricular activities given the photos, videos, and other evidence that had been floating around. USC’s response to the Times story evolved rapidly. From a “no comment,” to minimal comment, to acknowledging that the university had received a number of complaints before Puliafito’s resignation last year.

The university response was unsurprising given the culture of many institutions of higher education that like to keep things under wraps until it is too late. Initially C.L. Max Nikias, the university’s president, stated in a public letter dated the same day the newspaper article was published that Dr. Puliafito was on leave and not seeing patients. The letter wished Dr. Puliafito a full recovery “if the article’s assertions are true,” and that “This specific issue is, of course, complicated by privacy rights.” Four days later the USC president released a statement saying “We are outraged and disgusted by this individual’s behavior,” and that the university had hired Debra Wong Yang, a former state judge and federal prosecutor, to “conduct a thorough investigation into the details of Carmen Puliafito’s conduct, the university’s response, as well as our existing policies and procedures.”

At the same time Michael Quick, the university provost, released his own statement, suggesting that the university received “first-hand” information about the former dean’s substance abuse and that USC had initiated a process of firing Puliafito and stripping him of tenure.

Interestingly enough, the Los Angeles Times published days later an article detailing the newspaper’s efforts over the course of 15 months to get university officials to comment on Puliafito, for which they received no response. Later the university president acknowledged that “over the course of his nearly 10 years as dean, we received various complaints about Dr. Puliafito’s behavior, which were addressed through university personnel procedures.”

That all this happened for so long and with someone taking illegal drugs who was responsible for patients’ well-being is beyond comprehension.

Apparently, the university leadership never understood that the best way to deal with scandals is to confront them head on, showing transparency, decisive action, and full recognition of errors made. But, instead, they retreated into secrecy and cover up in the false hope that their actions would protect a person whose fundraising abilities had brought so much money to the coffers of the institution.

At the end of the day the leaders of the institution were the ones who really looked bad by the way they managed the whole affair.

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