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From silence to condemnation: Institutional responses to “travel ban” Executive Order 13769

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ABSTRACT

On January 27, 2017, President Donald J. Trump signed an Executive Order that attempted to bar citizens and refugees from seven countries from entering the U.S. for a certain time period. One of the contexts most directly affected by this order was higher education. This study examined college and university communicative responses to the order from a public relations perspective. We qualitatively determined a range of responses from U.S. universities then quantitatively determined variables of particular colleges and universities that had a correlation to the nature of the responses. Responses were then assessed using public relations best practices. The data suggest variables with relationships to type of institutional response were number of international students and political stance of the state where the institution is located. While there was no single “correct” type of response, best practices suggest two options for appropriate responses to the order.

1. Introduction

On January 27, 2017, President Donald J. Trump signed Executive Order 13769: PROTECTING THE NATION FROM FOREIGN TERRORIST ENTRY INTO THE UNITED STATES. This executive order (EO) attempted to bar citizens from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen from entering the United States for 90 days. It also attempted to halt all refugees from entering the US for 120 days and indefinitely bar entry for Syrian refugees. This controversial order resulted in confusion and ambiguity for many, as law enforcement personnel responded by preventing individuals at airports from entering the country, even if they already had been approved for entry and had the correct documentation (Lussenhop, 2017). Eventually the confusion and frustration were alleviated and people who had been detained were allowed entry into the U.S., but it sparked a larger national conversation.

The focus and intent of the EO was consistent with campaign promises President Trump made during the presidential campaign. Despite a stated purpose of the EO to promote greater security for the nation, it incited anger among a large number of U.S. allies and a wide array of organizations, including academic institutions, airlines, and tech companies (Wall, 2017). The EO was criticized as being discriminatory, and many parts of it were deemed unconstitutional by a federal court. Within 24 h of the EO being signed, it was blocked by a judge in New York and by another in Massachusetts (Almasy & Simon, 2017). By mid-February the EO had been struck down by a federal court (Devlin & Kendall, 2017). The administration’s appeal to have the stay on the EO was also denied by the Ninth Circuit Federal court of appeals (Devlin & Kendall, 2017). A second version of the EO was signed by the president on March 6, and was immediately blocked once again by multiple federal judges (Almasy & Simon, 2017). On June 26, following a lengthy appeal process, the Supreme Court decided to allow some parts of the second EO to go into effect by the end of June (McGraw, Kelsey, & Keneally, 2017).

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One of the contexts most directly affected by the EO was higher education. International students and faculty make up a large percentage of campus communities. According to the Institute of International Education's Open Doors project (2016), in the 2015–2016 academic year over a million international students studied at U.S. institutions. The EO had the potential to limit the ability of international students and faculty to cross freely in and out of the U.S. and also hamper the capacity of U.S. based academics to build programs and relationships across borders. Just over 17,000 students were from the nations included in the EO (Open Doors, 2016). While this is a relatively small percentage of the total international student population in the U.S., the EO created anxiety for many international students and faculty.

Colleges and universities have a responsibility to communicate with their stakeholders about this type of event. They must listen to the concerns of their stakeholders, and respond by providing resources for those affected. That said, academic institutions are constrained by a variety of potentially conflicting stakeholder needs. Students, faculty, staff, administrators, legislators, alumni, donors, and local communities are all important organizational stakeholders, and all have some influence on the way an academic institution might respond to a situation such as the signing of this type of EO.

The purpose of this paper is to assess academic institutions' communicative responses to the EO from a public relations best-practices perspective. We sought to first define the range and variety of college and university responses to the EO. Second, we sought to determine what factors may have influenced the differing responses offered by these institutions. Finally, we examined how individual institutional responses appeared to balance these factors.

2. Literature review

2.1. Relationship management

Organizations rely on strong relationships to function in today's globally connected context, and can only effectively achieve their goals through thoughtful management of both internal and external relationships. Cultivation of strong relationships is dependent on dialogic engagement with various stakeholder groups (Botan, 1997; Pearson, 1989; Taylor & Kent, 2014). In practice, this requires willingness from organizational leadership to listen and respond to stakeholders, rather than simply promoting a top-down agenda (Macnamara, 2016). By listening well to stakeholders, organizational leadership is able to build trust-based relationships. Trust generation and relationship management are key public relations functions (Buhăniă, 2015). Hon and Grunig (1999) describe stakeholder trust in an organization as a three-dimensional concept: *integrity*, "the belief that an organization is just and fair," *dependability*, "the belief that an organization will do what it says it will do," and *competence*, "the belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do" (p. 3).

It has become particularly clear in recent years that "public relations balances the interests of organizations and publics through the management of organization-public relationships" (Ledingham, 2003, p. 181). According to Ledingham and Bruning (1998), an organization-public relationship is "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political wellbeing of the other" (p. 62). Public relations functions as the key to developing and maintaining strong stakeholder relationships, which is foundational to organizational success. As Grunig (2006) indicates regarding public relations best practice, "public relations must be organized in a way that makes it possible to identify strategic publics as part of the strategic management process and build quality long-term relationships with them through symmetrical communication programs" (p. 160). Perhaps more than many other types of organizations, academic institutions find themselves beholden to a variety of stakeholder groups.

Regarding its economic wellbeing, an academic institution must consider its relationships with its students (and their parents), its alumni, and its donors (both current and future). For its social and cultural wellbeing, those same stakeholders are of high priority, along with faculty, staff, members of the local community, and peers at other institutions. The political wellbeing of an academic institution, while affected by these various groups, is also dependent on the nature of the institution's relationship with elected officials. Despite the possible assumption that relationships with elected officials are solely the concern of public colleges and universities, private institutions also rely on resources and structures that are shaped by legislators (Douglas, 2006).

Trayner (2017), applying moral foundations theory (Haidt, 2012), proposed that in a polarized and politicized environment it is important for organizations to understand "how people's identity and values hardwire their decisions and actions" (p. 124). Trayner argued that leaders are now expected to convey values and ethos, going beyond talking points to do so. It is crucial, though, for these leaders to understand the worldview and deep drives of their audiences to make a meaningful connection on issues needing to be addressed. Reaching multiple groups with differing values and motivations, however, can make drawing such connections a difficult balance of tensions for any leader.

2.2. Stakeholder groups

All organizations are constrained by the tensions of the conflicting desires of their various stakeholder groups. Academic institutions are in a particularly challenging position with regards to any highly politicized event. Students, faculty, and staff all have a reasonable right to expect that their voices will be both heard and respected by university officials. This is particularly true in any major decision-making process, even when the true decision-making body is the administration, and ultimately a board of trustees. Academic institutions must manage the needs and interests of a variety of conflicting groups.

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