Babson College learns that it can manage and survive a crisis.

Mobilizing for an Outbreak and Its Aftermath

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When the H1N1 virus ascended to national attention in April 2009, colleges and universities in the United States were thrust into the role of managing an unforeseen health crisis. While other institutions were scrambling to coordinate the appropriate crisis response to the H1N1 virus, Babson College was using the lessons it had learned during its recent Norovirus outbreak to coordinate an effective response without panic or paranoia. As novel illnesses continue to emerge in our increasingly globalized society, it is important to explore and understand how institutions respond to unanticipated health crises. Babson's experience with the Norovirus outbreak offers valuable insight into the importance of flexible protocol, decisive decision-making, and coordinated emergency responses that include external constituents as well as internal stakeholders.

Background

Babson College was founded in 1919 by Roger Babson in Wellesley, Massachusetts with the mission of educating the country's next great business leaders. As a master's level institution, Babson's undergraduate and graduate entrepreneurship programs are routinely ranked the top in the nation. Babson is a largely residential campus with 85 percent of the nineteen hundred undergraduate students living in a residential hall. This high residential capacity would also pose a challenge when the Norovirus emerged on campus in early spring of 2009 as campus leaders sought to contain the outbreak while addressing the needs of diverse campus community members.

Norovirus is a highly contagious, surface-surviving virus that causes “acute onset vomiting, watery diarrhea with abdominal cramps, and nausea”
(Centers for Disease Control, 2009). Although Norovirus is a relatively common illness that is rarely life threatening and lasts between 24 and 36 hours, it can induce dehydration or other health complications. Norovirus outbreaks have occurred at other college campuses, including Georgetown University (Washington, DC) in October 2008 where over 170 students were sickened and at Hope College (Holland, Michigan) in November 2008, where over 400 fell ill (Kinzie, 2009; “Hope College Estimates 400 Students,” 2009). These institutions would later prove to be valuable resources to Babson College as administrators made important internal decisions to combat the virus.

Monday, March 23, 2009 was the first day back from spring break for Babson College. Students, faculty, and staff were looking forward to the end of the year and an uneventful spring. However, business as usual was disrupted by mid-week at the first indications of a serious health issue, as revealed through interviews with Dean Betsy Newman and Dean Dennis Hanno.

**The Outbreak: From Concern to Crisis**

The first inkling of a campus-wide health issue arose on Wednesday, March 25, 2009. By the end of that day, about thirteen students had visited the on-campus Health Services with symptoms that included vomiting and diarrhea. Director of Health Services, Sharon Yardley, received a phone call from the Athletic Center asking her to send out a campus-wide bulletin stating that two student athletes reported experiencing food poisoning. Before taking action, Yardley contacted Dean of Student Affairs Betsy Newman to inform her about the elevated number of students visiting Health Services for similar symptoms. Yardley doubted that the illnesses were food poisoning and expressed concern that the campus may be contending with the Norovirus. Newman advised Yardley to contact the Wellesley Board of Health to inform them of the suspected illness. In this initial conversation, Newman emphasized that the Board of Health was supportive of the proactive measures that the college was undertaking to contain the illness.

Just two weeks before, Newman had attended a crisis management conference and met a senior-level administrator from Georgetown University, an institution that had dealt with the Norovirus in 2008. One of the earliest challenges he identified during the outbreak was effectively managing the rumors that the illnesses were caused by food poisoning, rather than the Norovirus. Reflecting upon this interaction, Newman identified that addressing the food poisoning rumors immediately would facilitate a more productive and less panicked campus response. That evening, the Dean of the Undergraduate School, Dennis Hanno, joined Newman, Yardley, and other Campus Life representatives for dinner at Babson’s main dining hall to dispel any rumors that the Norovirus was food poisoning and to distribute information.
Throughout the day on Friday, March 27, 2009, there was a constant stream of students visiting Health Services. By 4:00 P.M., Health Services had seen twenty-six students complaining of symptoms consistent with the Norovirus in addition to nine students from the previous day. At 6:00 P.M., Health Services closed for the weekend with normal after-hour on-call protocol in place and backup plans for re-opening if necessary. Public Safety began receiving calls and transporting students who were feeling ill to local hospitals. After the fourth student transport at 9:00 P.M., it was clear that Health Services had to reopen to treat students on campus.

By 10:00 P.M., Newman, in consultation with Yardley, coordinated the reopening of Health Services exclusively for students who were experiencing Norovirus symptoms. By 3:00 A.M. on Saturday, March 28, eighty-eight students had reported being ill or had been seen by Health Services. At 3:30 A.M., Newman sent an update to the Crisis Team and the executive members of the President’s Cabinet, including President Leonard Schlesinger. The e-mail outlined the actions that had been taken to combat the illness, the need to contact the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to receive support for any institutional decision-making, and the scheduled Crisis Team meeting at 10:00 A.M. on Saturday (B. Newman, personal e-mail communication, Mar. 28, 2009).

A phone call at 9:00 A.M. on Saturday was pivotal in the fight against the Norovirus. Hanno and Newman had been conducting research on Norovirus outbreaks and came across Hope College, a comparable institution that had experienced the virus recently. Newman and Hanno made contact with Richard Frost, dean of students and vice president, and spent an hour discussing Hope’s response to the outbreak and any lessons that could be implemented at Babson. During the outbreak, Hope College was temporarily closed by the state due to concerns over the virus’s spread. Frost encouraged Newman and Hanno to take proactive steps to voluntarily close Babson to retain control over institutional decision-making. Hanno and Newman took this advice and called President Schlesinger to express their recommendation to close, which entailed cancelling events, reducing the openness of the campus, and supporting students who were already ill in the residential halls. After the 10:00 A.M. Crisis Team meeting, Hanno and Newman contacted the Wellesley Board of Health to “bring them on board” with the decision. The Board of Health expressed concern over Babson’s decision to remain open rather than close immediately to handle the outbreak, but Newman and Hanno emphasized their commitment to a non-panicked and deliberate closure that would take time to orchestrate.

Moments after ending the phone conversation with the Wellesley Board of Health regarding Babson’s voluntary closure, administrators noticed that Wellesley police cars had parked in front of the main campus entrance, effectively blocking individuals from entering or exiting the campus. A member of the Crisis Team immediately contacted the chair of the Board of Health and expressed concern that the police presence would cause panic...
and impede the voluntary closure that Babson was attempting to execute. After communicating this to the Board of Health, the Wellesley officers were removed from the gate and replaced by Babson’s Public Safety officers.

From 12:00 P.M. to 3:00 P.M., preparations to close campus were made. The Crisis Team was convened with representatives from departments including Public Safety, Health Services, Food Services, Public Relations, Information Technology, Office of Campus Life, and Facilities and tasks were delegated to ensure that the closing would go as smoothly as possible. A Web site was developed that allowed students to self-report the illness and access real-time information about the Babson closing, a document outlining frequently asked questions was drafted, and a media space was erected near campus to deal with the impending national attention. By 3:30 P.M., arrangements to close campus were complete.

At 4:00 P.M., President Schlesinger announced via e-mail that the campus would be closed from Saturday, March 28 at 5:00 P.M. until Wednesday, April 1 at 5:00 A.M., “all non-essential personnel should not report to campus,” and students should “remain on campus to limit the spread of the virus” but were free to leave if they chose, an option that many students embraced over the course of the closure (L. A. Schlesinger, personal e-mail correspondence, Mar. 28, 2009). All campus events and classes were cancelled until the campus reopened. The e-mail also explicitly stated that Babson had reached out to the Wellesley Board of Health who, in turn, had also involved the Massachusetts Department of Public Health for guidance. The president’s e-mail was followed by a joint press conference at the Wellesley Board of Health building where Babson officials, including Newman, Yardley, and Schlesinger, and Board of Health representatives communicated a unified message regarding the institutional management of the virus. While the campus was closed, Health Services continued treating students and staff members, and resident assistants went door-to-door handing out cleaning materials, dining services coordinated a take-out dining service to limit student congregation, and Facilities sanitized public spaces.

The Consolidation of Crisis Response Power to the Deans

The purposes and roles of Deans at every institution are different, meaning that their involvement in crisis management can vary widely. Prior to the Norovirus outbreak, Newman was designated as the individual responsible for “coordinating, developing, and employing the Babson College Crisis Management Plan” with the purpose of quickly unifying various departments and managing their “separate and significant areas of responsibility” (Babson College, 2009). In planning for crises and outlining the response expectations for the Dean of Students, the Crisis Management Plan is clear that it is not possible to plan for every crisis. Rather, each emergency should be approached in a “temperate manner” using “good judgment and sensitivity.”
The written protocol is always available, along with a crisis response matrix, to all authorized administrators via a secured campus-wide intranet site.

For the purposes of managing this urgent health crisis, President Schlesinger authorized Hanno and Newman to engage in decision-making and directly manage the Crisis Team. Hanno and Newman both pointed out that even with this authorization, it is still not entirely clear whether they should have been the ones managing this specific one due to its scale and public health implications. However, Hanno as dean of the Undergraduate School directly oversees such diverse offices as the Registrar, Athletics, Student Affairs, and Finances, meaning that his day-to-day administrative roles stretch beyond academia and into the realm of student life. His wide net of jurisdiction suggests that whether or not he was officially the “official designee” for managing the crisis, he would have a large amount of involvement in coordinating decisive and effective responses on behalf of the students. As dean of Student Affairs, Betsy Newman has direct oversight of Campus Life, Health Services, and Public Safety, and her leadership of these departments enabled her to mobilize them in response to the virus. For Newman and Hanno, their student-centric job descriptions, coupled with their abilities as effective leaders with multidimensional relationships and jurisdiction across campus made them a strong team to help address the crisis.

During post-outbreak debriefing sessions, the deans faced some criticism for decisions that they made internally. Some executive-level administrators were concerned over who was and was not involved in the Saturday morning Crisis Team meeting and whether they should have been involved sooner, although key executive leaders, including the president, had been briefed of the situation beginning on the Wednesday before closure. There was also some disagreement over how the crisis response groups were identified and coordinated. The Crisis Team representatives were not always the most senior-level administrators within each department, but instead those who could be the most effective in taking action. In addition, because the Norovirus is so contagious, individuals on the Crisis Team also fell ill themselves, leading to the necessity of developing extensive contingency plans to account for the influx of leadership.

With the information that was available at the time of the outbreak, as well as the general need to consolidate power to actors who could quickly and decisively implement change, consolidating power to the deans was appropriate and necessary. However, having a formal plan regarding the delegation of leadership roles in the Crisis Team may have alleviated some internal disagreement over who could and should orchestrate each department’s response. The coordination of a multitude of departments across campus was pivotal in Babson’s ability to holistically brainstorm and implement the necessary measures to decrease the severity of the outbreak. Hanno and Newman’s flexibility and willingness to involve external support networks, including colleagues at other institution and government entities,
indicates their willingness to collect and reflect upon information from a variety of sources before making a decision.

**Relationship with the Wellesley Board of Health**

As suggested by the communications issued by the deans and the President’s Office, involving the Wellesley Board of Health was an important step in legitimizing the actions taken by the college to combat the illness. Hanno and Newman both indicate that they actively reached out and asked the Board of Health to become involved in the crisis management process. Neither Newman nor Hanno had any previous experience in managing health crises, and the Wellesley Board of Health played an important role in the media management component of the outbreak. As Babson prepared to reopen, the Board of Health supported the decision, with President Schlesinger’s office issuing a public health advisory on March 31, 2009, stating, “throughout the past six days we have been consulting on an ongoing basis with the Wellesley Board of Health and the Wellesley Health Department. Both have expressed full support for our decision to reopen at this time and for our planned actions going forward” (Babson College Office of the President, 2009).

When the reopening was announced, Marcia Testa Simmonson, the vice chairman of the Wellesley Board of Health stated, “what we perceive now is a time that the school can be reopened safely” (Zak, 2009). By involving the Wellesley Board of Health in a proactive yet controlled way, Babson was able to use the Board of Health to legitimize the campus’s reopening while retaining control of the decision-making process. Newman reflected that the Board of Health was a supportive partner, but that Babson had to rely on its own resources to manage the incident because it was able to handle the outbreak in flexible and customized phases.

**Relationship with Other Community Members**

Located in a wealthy residential area of Massachusetts, “town-gown” relations between Babson and the surrounding Needham and Wellesley communities are generally positive. Seeking to be a good neighbor, Babson was committed to transparency with the surrounding community. Although the campus hotline was mainly set up to address inquiries about the Norovirus from students and parents, concerned neighbors were welcome to call to receive more information, and a list of neighborhood-related talking points were developed to address any community questions or concerns.

Parents of current students also represented an important constituency that had to be informed of campus events in a timely manner. Newman and Hanno were aware that announcing the closing of the school without the proper preparations in place could result in a parental panic that could create a more difficult environment to contain the virus. In addition to the hotline
and Web site, parents were e-mailed updates daily from the President's Office. By creating multiple avenues of communication, such as e-mails, hotlines, and Web sites, through which individuals could get information, Babson was able to effectively and thoroughly communicate necessary information to multiple stakeholders.

One serious challenge facing Babson during the outbreak was its physically close and semi-integrated relationship with the Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering. As a relatively new and very small institution, Olin students, faculty, and staff regularly utilize Babson's facilities. During the outbreak, Olin chose not to close, but instead implemented heightened sanitation protocols, launched an educational campaign on preventing the spread of the virus, and discouraged students from interacting with Babson students or Babson's campus. This tactic appeared to have been effective; only one faculty member and two students exhibited symptoms consistent with the illness (Hatch and Wasserman, 2009). Any institution that has a symbiotic relationship with another should have an individualized crisis response plan in addition to a plan that will ensure its continued functioning during the closure of the partner school.

Reopening Campus

Over the course of the closing, the campus was thoroughly disinfected and cleaned. On Monday, March 30, only five students visited health services, indicating that the outbreak had peaked. At 5:00 A.M. on Wednesday, April 1, 2009, Babson College reopened and all students, faculty, and staff were welcomed back to campus. In one of his last public updates, President Schlesinger reiterated that the decision to close Babson was correct and effective in “stabilizing the situation” and reducing the outbreak’s severity. From reopening, the number of cases continued to sharply decline and by Monday, April 6, an evening health advisory from the President’s office heralded that Babson was back to its “high octane activity level” (Babson College Office of the President, 2009).

By the conclusion of the Norovirus outbreak, a large swath of the campus community had fallen ill: 359 students, 55 faculty, staff, and on-campus spouses/partners, 4 Sodexo employees, 4 visiting students, 4 admissions visitors, 4 Olin students, 1 alum and 1 visitor had either seen Health Services or self-reported the illness via an online form (Newman, 2009). As these numbers suggest, the virus hit nearly every campus constituent. However, the majority of the campus population remained healthy.

Long-term Changes

Since the Norovirus outbreak, there has been an ongoing assessment and development of emergency response protocol. Clearer protocols that clearly designate roles and responsibilities have been defined and will better equip
the college to address time-sensitive emergencies. Although Hanno and Newman were able to take several hours to prepare the campus for closing, Babson is fully aware that this time line may not be appropriate for all incidents. There has also been dialogue regarding who should coordinate emergency response and how consistent messaging regarding crises could and should be developed. When asked how Babson was so successful in managing the Norovirus outbreak, many of those interviewed cited the fact that it is a small, interconnected campus that values the experiences of its student, staff, and faculty. Babson's size may be helpful in many ways in terms of coordinating emergency response, but may also pose challenges in the future if a more devastating or departmentally fragmenting emergency occurs, a possibility which is being planned for in new emergency response protocols.

There have been changes to the day-to-day operations of how Babson functions. Babson has implemented increased sanitation practices that include weekly bathroom cleanings for all upperclassmen suites. Sanitation stations containing hand sanitizer have been erected to facilitate cleanliness as faculty, staff, and students travel across campus. Months after the outbreak, Public Safety, Health Services, the Office of Campus Life, and the President's Cabinet attended a two-day disaster planning summit that formally trained all of these departments on timely and thorough disaster response.

Lessons for Other Institutions

No institution wants to be known for a serious virus outbreak; however, Babson’s handling of the situation reveals important lessons for other institutions in how to coordinate large-scale responses to public health emergencies. Administrators and staff members shared similar advice for other institutions, including having clear and consistent emergency protocols already in place, ensuring that all crisis team responders are familiar with each other and the other departments involved, and facilitating centralized locations where clear and consistent communications can take place. In managing external constituents and messaging, Newman and Hanno emphasized that they were committed to reaching out to external resources, being transparent with stakeholders, and facilitating diverse communication opportunities. Above all else, Hanno and Newman emphasized the importance of staying in front of crises and not being afraid to ask for help when it is needed.

Coordinating a response similar to Babson's may be more challenging at a larger school that has to contend with more students, staff, faculty, and external stakeholders in addition to a larger campus to clean and more media attention. Response coordination may also prove challenging at institutions with more commuter students, as identifying or containing the outbreak may
be less straightforward than simply closing campus. Other institutions should make sure that there is sufficient protocol in place to facilitate the closing of the college or university for either short-term or long-term situations. Response protocols that are already in place should be sufficiently flexible to facilitate the development of new protocols as necessary. Finally, institutions should ensure that good personal hygiene is practiced across campus and augmented by professional cleanings of public and private space.

**Conclusion**

Much of Babson College's success in this emergency can be attributed to the strong leadership of Hanno and Newman; nevertheless, credit should also be directed at the staff members who worked on campus while it was closed to ensure that students were safe and well cared for. At reopening, and for the next few days afterwards, President Schlesinger publicly thanked staff and faculty who contributed to the smooth closing and reopening of campus, a gesture that reiterated how important the campus community is in responding to emergencies. As Babson moves forward from the crisis and contends with new emergencies, its handling of the Norovirus sets a strong example for how to manage crises at an institutional level and has given many administrators at the institution confidence in their ability to handle stressful and highly public situations. By understanding how decisions were made and what ramifications emerged at Babson College, other institutions can reflect upon and develop their own systems for responding to large-scale public health crises in a way that addresses the needs of faculty, staff, and students as well as external constituents who may become involved as the process unfolds.

**References**


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