

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

DECEMBER 4, 2009; VOLUME LVI, NUMBER 15

## Harsh Economy Drives New Brand of Communication From the Top



*Jessica McGowan, Getty Images*

Emory University's president, James Wagner, did not put a rosy spin on the first "Dear University" message he wrote discussing the economic crisis.

**BY KATHRYN MASTERSON**

For colleges the past year's global economic crisis was much bigger—and wetter—than your typical financial downturn. It was, in the words of many a college leader, a "perfect storm," a "financial hurricane," an "unprecedented and uncharted economic whitewater"—even full-out "climate change."

Metaphors like those turned up repeatedly in presidential messages about the economic crisis. In letters, videos, and blog posts, leaders told their communities that they were not immune to the turbulent financial storms roiling the world economy and that they must work together to weather the tempest.

Such messages, as well as others that didn't call upon meteorological hyperbole, have played a big part in helping college leaders explain the changes and cutbacks they have had to make. Starting last fall, many presidents stepped up their communications, some making monthly or even weekly addresses to faculty and staff members, students, parents, and alumni. An

examination of presidential rhetoric during this period suggests how difficult it was to craft a message around uncertainty, when no one knew where the economic bottom was.

As hard as it was to explain a shifting situation, the risks of not communicating were worse. With expectations of openness, and a greater number of communication tools available, silence from the top could spur a loss of trust, a decline in morale, and the spread of misinformation about what was happening.

"People can deal with bad news, but they want to know what's going on," says Vinca LaFleur, a speechwriter who worked for President Bill Clinton and now writes for both public and private figures. "If you don't give them the information, they will connect the dots, and rumors get started. Once that happens, it's hard to put that genie back in the bottle."

For models on how to communicate well, college leaders looked to one another. They read one another's letters (which may account for why so many used similar storm metaphors), studied their frequency, and considered the cutbacks others made. (Many also pointed out in their messages that other colleges were in worse shape.) The prestigious Association of American Universities even put a collection of its members' letters on its Web site as a resource for campus leaders.

"We've all learned a little bit from each other about the key messages and the importance of messaging," says Graham B. Spanier, president of Pennsylvania State University, who figures he has read a couple dozen letters from other campus chiefs.

Not everyone adopted the same strategies, and some took opposite tactics. But no matter the approach, the leaders who spoke to *The Chronicle* all had lessons to share. We highlight 12 of them here. What these leaders learned can provide some guidance for the future, because, to borrow a popular phrase, the storms have yet to clear.

## **1. Avoid Doom and Gloom**

As other leaders wrote letters about perfect storms, E. Gordon Gee, president of Ohio State University, read them and decided he wouldn't be sending one, even though some of his colleagues at the university wanted him to. In his opinion, the letters conveyed a pessimism he didn't share. "They created a feeling of helplessness and hysteria, and created a sense of a downward spiral," he says.

Mr. Gee might have written such a letter when he was a younger president, he says, but after leading Ohio State and other institutions through different recessions, he was careful not to overreact. Plus, he says, a leader's role is to inspire.

Instead, Mr. Gee saw a chance to push through big changes he wanted to make, such as switching to a semester system from a quarter-based one and realigning five arts-and-sciences colleges to encourage cooperation.

While other college presidents were talking about the negatives, Mr. Gee stressed the opportunities created by the crisis. He believes that approach will position Ohio State better with lawmakers and donors. "No one," he says, "wants to invest in an institution that views [itself] in a crisis or a decline."

## **2. Be Consistent**

If a leader overstates how serious the potential cutbacks might be for the institution, his or her credibility—or the broader credibility of higher education—could suffer.

Mr. Spanier, Penn State's president, says he spoke with some leaders on other campuses who said they would need to make serious budget cuts, including salary freezes—but later allocated the money after all. While that was good for the individual universities, it put leaders like Mr. Spanier, who froze salaries for the first time in his tenure, in a difficult position.

It's important "for the credibility of higher education," he says, that "we do what we say."

## **3. Don't Soft-Pedal the Circumstances**

College leaders can also jeopardize their credibility if they understate problems.

James W. Wagner, president of Emory University, was one of the first presidents to write a "Dear University" letter discussing the crisis, early in October 2008. He says he wanted to be frank about the financial shortfalls he saw ahead, and didn't consider putting a rosy spin on the message. "It's inappropriate and disingenuous to give a pep talk with false hopes," he says.

But after receiving positive reaction to the letter, Mr. Wagner had trouble sleeping over the holidays because he worried he hadn't adequately conveyed the severity of the situation. A few months later, after Emory's endowment dropped more than 20 percent, the university cut 150 jobs and 250 open positions and halted most pay raises.

Looking back, though, Mr. Wagner doesn't think he would have written the letter differently. No one knew then how bad things would get, and he didn't want to overstate the problem, either. In later messages, he used strong language about "long-term reductions in revenue" and a "worldwide transition to new economic circumstances."

## **4. Speak With a Unified Voice**

The more people commenting publicly on budget situations, the more confusion an institution can invite, says Doris R. Helms, provost at Clemson University.

Early on, Clemson's top administrators decided that the university would have one voice: James F. Barker, the president. Mr. Barker wrote weekly "Dear Clemson" letters and recorded video messages, and was the source of information on furloughs and cutbacks.

Giving up control over communication wasn't easy for Ms. Helms, she says, but the decision was the right one. It reduced the chances that people would hear different things from different people, even if they were communicating the same message.

"As soon as you get into that kind of turmoil," she says, "it's almost impossible to stop it."

## **5. Say It Straight**

It's common sense, but some presidential letters hide their messages behind flowery phrases or jargon, says Ms. LaFleur, the presidential speech writer. When jobs, wages, and benefits are at stake, "it's important to say it straight up."

The most effective messages discuss the issues that resonate with the intended audience—financial aid, job security, the reassurance that cost-cutting is happening wisely—in a way that the audience can understand.

Ms. LaFleur, an alumna of Yale University, remembers receiving a letter from its president, Richard C. Levin, and thinking it hit the right tone. In it, the president described the way the university was handling its loss of endowment income by putting a cap on salary increases, among other strategies. "I remember being struck by what he was telling us, and by the measures being taken, and thinking, 'Wow, they are acting.'"

## **6. Lean on the Strategic Plan**

After Linda P. Brady took over as chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro last August, she attended the Harvard Seminar for New Presidents. One of the lessons she took away: Never write a strategic plan in the first year on the job.

But Greensboro's strategic plan at the time, which highlighted some 100 goals, was in need of a major edit. And as the economic crisis hit home, Ms. Brady set aside Harvard's advice and helped create a new strategic vision—this one focused on five key areas for growth.

As the new chancellor mulled cutbacks, she leaned on the revamped plan. Greensboro eventually trimmed a few of its master's programs, some of which enrolled just a few students, and invested money in nursing, nutrition, and public-health programs that will form the foundation of a school of pharmacy the university hopes to start.

"It was important that we had campus agreement on where we were going," Ms. Brady says. "We didn't want to cut areas that would make it difficult for us to advance our plan."

## **7. Communicate What You Know**

Arizona State University is located in one of the hardest-hit states. It's difficult to know when the financial picture might improve there, so Michael M. Crow, the university's president, is focusing on what is certain: Arizona State's mission, and the responsibility faculty and staff members have to fulfill it regardless of resources.

"Our message going forward is we have to stay on track to take care of our students, no matter what," says Mr. Crow, who prefers communicating budget messages by video. He put out about a dozen videos and letters in the past year on financial topics.

Arizona State's president doesn't believe everyone needs to know every little detail of the budget, which is why he prepares one video message for faculty and staff members and another for students.

## **8. Don't Make the Crisis Your Only Message**

While communicating about the budget is important, it's essential that it not dominate the conversation, presidents say. Universities aren't businesses whose most important goal is solvency—they're places of intellectual discovery and transformation. At Arizona State, Mr. Crow increased his positive messages about the intellectual life of the university and his "New American University" initiative at the same time the budget messages went out. "We're not going to let some financial storm set the level of discourse," he says.

## **9. Avoid Crisis Fatigue**

The recession refrain to "do more with less" doesn't work as a long-term solution, says Mr. Wagner, Emory's president. For example, Emory employees didn't get salary increases this year, but he sees that as a short-term solution, because he can't ask employees to keep doing with less for a long time. "This is neither a long-term nor an ethical solution," he said in his state-of-the-university speech, in September.

Mr. Wagner's message is now that the university must do "less with less." He realizes that's not a popular thing to say, but the message has helped the university focus on areas that are essential and excellent. Anything that doesn't fall into one of those two categories will be re-examined.

## **10. Say It Often**

Timothy P. White, chancellor of the University of California at Riverside, believes in the high-touch approach, making people feel noticed and heard. In one of his first letters last year, he acknowledged the angst people were feeling over the economy. "Please be supportive of each other and yourselves as we navigate through these times," he wrote.

This year Mr. White began writing a weekly 500-word message he calls the Friday Letter, which goes out to 67,000 staff and faculty members, alumni, students, and supporters. The informal notes illuminate different aspects of university life, from budget cuts to move-in day to how administrators handle the death of a student.

Mr. White says he has been surprised by the positive e-mail messages he's received in response: "It has hit a gap that I didn't know existed."

As for the pace of his communications, he favors frequency, especially during a high-pressure time when situations are changing. "If it's infrequent," he says, "that's when mischief happens."

## **11. Say It Again**

Even when you get the rhetoric just right, one shot isn't enough, says Mary Sue Coleman, president of the University of Michigan.

Sometimes people aren't listening the first time, or it takes repetition before an idea becomes ingrained. When she has something important to share, she writes letters, puts messages on Facebook, talks with students and the student newspaper, and organizes luncheons with faculty members. "I think you have to do it all ways," she says. "You have to repeat your messages over and over and over again."

In the spring, university leaders knew that they would be able to offer a small salary increase to faculty and staff members but that health-insurance costs would go up. Those messages were repeated multiple times, Ms. Coleman says, in part because employees were hearing about more drastic cuts at other colleges.

## **12. Make the Budget Understandable (if Possible)**

One thing Ms. Coleman believes she can't repeat enough is how the university budget works—where its revenue streams go, why research dollars can't be used for general operating costs, what private donations pay for, and why tuition goes up. "I find even some very well-informed people do not have a clue how university budgets operate," she says.

She and other top administrators, including the provost, have put together informational materials they share with students, alumni, and others to make the budget process clearer. It may not be a simple explanation, she says, but she has a responsibility to do it, so people can see why Michigan makes the financial decisions it does.

"You should never assume anyone understands the financing of higher education," she says. "We just need to find better ways to explain it."

*Brad Wolverton and Emma Carew contributed to this article.*