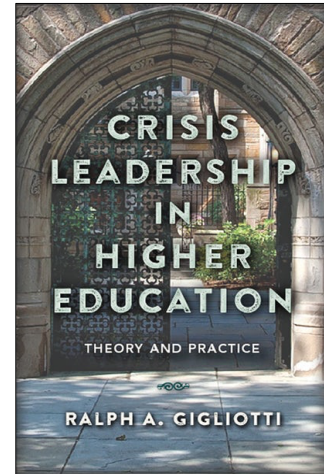


Ralph A. Gigliotti, **Crisis Leadership in Higher Education: Theory and Practice**, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019, 179 pp., \$78.00 (hardcover), \$26.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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With all of the problems currently confronting institutions of higher education, Ralph A. Gigliotti's examination of what those in positions of authority need to know and can do to address crises of varying sorts is both timely and illuminating. **Crisis Leadership in Higher Education: Theory and Practice**, however, is no cure-all for what ails such organizations. Nor does the author apparently intend for it to be. Instead, he treats the subject as something about which useful guidelines for response are matters that those who ultimately must deal with such occurrences are frequently lacking in requisite knowledge of how to do so successfully. Gigliotti seeks to remedy this unfortunate situation. In my judgment, he succeeds for the most part. As to how well he succeeds, however, is a matter about which I have some minor reservations.



Chapter 1 (“The Landscape of Crisis in Higher Education: Introduction and Context”) makes clear that higher education is an arena in which crises in recent years have been occurring with growing frequency and increasingly serious consequences. Progress in responding to such events, moreover, has not been historically commensurate with either their incidence or management. Gigliotti views the consideration of crises in higher education and their management from a communication perspective as contributing to a “richer understanding of the process by which crises emerge” (p. 14) and clarifying “the contexts within which leadership and organization occur across institutions of higher education” (p. 14). The remaining six chapters, he feels, serve these two functions well, in respect to components involving both (1) what other scholars have had to say concerning crises and their management and (2) data assembled in conjunction with the preparation of his PhD dissertation.

In “The Social Construction of Crisis in Higher Education: The Perception of Crisis, the Reality of Crisis” (chapter 2), Gigliotti begins addressing the first of the two objectives mentioned previously. More specifically, “viewing a crisis as a social construction,” he contends, “can be useful in understanding the fluid and dynamic nature of these types of occurrences” (p. 21). After reviewing in brief fashion the evolution of the term, he undertakes the task of “deconstructing” (p. 28) the concepts of symbolic interaction and the social construction of reality. In so doing, however, he seems to be more intent on promoting nonpositivistic views of reality than necessary — just to make the point that perceptions have a significant bearing on what those encountering events that are sudden, threatening, and require rapid response say about them and subsequently do. The section of the chapter focusing on how leaders and those in media frame crises is more to the point, as well as informative, in helping one understand what a crisis is and how they or others may, therefore, choose to respond to it. So too is the part of the chapter illustrating how the designation of a threatening event or cluster of related such events can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies that, in turn,

facilitate particular lines of response and thereby may preclude others that actually could be of greater value in arriving at a successful resolution.

How communicative behavior enters into situations qualifying as crises as Gigliotti portrays them is a subject that he further explores in chapter 3 ("The Process of Defining and Labeling Phenomena as Crises"), which relates primarily to the first of the two functions he identifies in his introductory chapter and as noted previously. He begins with a general overview of extant definitions of crises, as well as concepts and characteristics they have in common, and subsequently particularizes what crises in higher education entail. Within this part of the chapter, Gigliotto discusses crises as distinct from other types of problematic events and situations with which those in positions of authority and leadership often must contend. In so doing, he also explores the impact that social media can and do have in "accelerating, accentuating, and escalating crises" (p. 54) largely from interviews he conducted in the doctoral study from which substantial parts of this book were derived. The material that Gigliotti presents in this chapter strikes me as being of substantially greater value and applicability than what he has to say in chapter 2 concerning the social constructionist perspective that informed his thinking.

The material that Dr. Gigliotti introduces in chapter 4 ("The Characterization and Categorization of Crises in Higher Education"), like that in the preceding chapter, further impresses me as having relevance and applied value for those most likely to be called upon to address the variety of crises their respective institutions may encounter. In addition to identifying five different general taxonomies that others interested in crisis management have introduced, Gigliotti presents a detailed scheme that represents a synthesis of some aspects of prior schemes, a content analysis reflecting thoughts expressed by the authors of numerous published articles relating to crises and attendant leadership, and input from those he interviewed in conjunction with his dissertation project.

The chapter also contains a taxonomy pertaining to the crisis domain (institutional versus environmental), where the responsibility for address resides (one unit or division versus multiple units or divisions), and crisis declaration (self-declared versus other-declared). Relying on such taxonomic structures in making crisis-related decisions could do much to minimize the potential for chaotic responses to emerge—an all-too-frequent occurrence not only in organizations in general but in higher education more specifically.

Gigliotti's focus in chapter 5 ("Centrality of Communication in the Theory and Practice of Leadership") returns the reader to social constructionist perspectives on human behavior and interaction in particular and as applicable to the context of crises in higher education. This reversion in focus, however, is not without its shortcomings. Among other things, it assumes an audience for whom social constructionism has much to offer, when, in fact, it is apt to be rather limited in its appeal, not terribly practical in terms of how to address crises, and otherwise confusing as a basis for managing organizational crises successfully.

Of potentially greatest practical value to members of the ostensible primary target readership (that is, those in higher education responsible for dealing with institutional crises) perhaps are the insights one gleans from the testimony of the interviewees who took part in Gigliotti's study in respect to specific crises they encountered, how they approached them, what appeared to have positive consequences, what proved to be unwise, what they might, if given the opportunity, do differently in comparable situations, and the

like. Despite references to such testimony, I confess to some surprise at the limited overall attention the author pays to what must have been a substantial wealth of experiential data on which to draw. In this respect, the actual contribution of the interview data, in my estimation, falls well short of its potential. The author perhaps needed to remain consistently more conscious of the second part of the subtitle, *Theory and Practice*, throughout the development of the book.

Chapter 6 ("Crisis Adaptation of Leadership Competencies Scorecard for Leaders in Higher Education") begins with what appears to be by now in the realm of organizational studies an almost obligatory disavowal that leadership and management are interchangeable concepts. According to Gigliotti, "There is a more expansive collection of needed competencies, skills, and values associated with leadership during crisis situations . . ." (p. 104). Having honored the increasingly conventional norm noted above, Gigliotti turns his attention to an overview of his mentor's "Leadership Competency Scorecard 2.0" (see p. 106) and related discussion of its value in respect to what those in positions of leadership in higher education who are apt to have responsibility need to know, as well as be able to do, in addressing various types of crises if and when they arise. Of particular interest in the discussion is the utility of the scorecard in leadership training and development programs.

In the section of chapter 6 preceding the conclusion, Gigliotti discusses the importance of "value-centered academic leadership" (p. 113). Although he cites some examples of this aspect of crisis leadership, the link to the competencies and skills components is not especially clear. In fact, the discussion has something of a "tacked-on" quality. It may be, however, that the author was simply attempting to further the opening argument concerning the distinction between "crisis management" and "crisis leadership." In any event, the discussion of values required more development.

Chapter 7 ("Implications for Effective Crisis Leadership in Higher Education") has three main sections, not including the final one, which presumably relates to the volume as a whole even though each of the first six chapters has its own independent concluding section. In the first main section ("A Sector 'in Crisis'"), Gigliotti emphasizes that crises in higher education are likely to be a matter of continuing concern. In respect to the second main section ("Implications for Crisis Leadership"), emphasis is on the persistence of crises, their increasing incidence, as well as the attendant need for address, and the increasing diversity of stakeholders give rise to needs for greater sensitivity to, among other factors, perceptions, expanded involvement of affected parties, appropriate infrastructure for use of social media, preparedness, agility, training and development, receptivity to learning from experience, developing high but nonetheless realistic expectations for success, and adopting a values-oriented approach in responding to emergent crises. This set of implications relates primarily, if not exclusively, to the practice of crisis leadership. In the third main section of chapter 7, Gigliotti discusses implications of his work and that of others for subsequent lines of research. Among the possibilities he identifies as needs are studying who should be involved in the exercise of crisis leadership, how communication among them functions, leadership as distributed versus concentrated, differences in the process as a function of crisis type, and the merits of different approaches to leadership training and development.

As to the quality of Dr. Gigliotti's examination of crisis leadership in higher education, I found myself impressed by his grasp of the subject, but at the same time disappointed by the lack of concrete illustrations

of instances of effective and ineffective leadership in the crisis domain of interest. His neglect in this regard leaves the reader with limited basis for believing that the guidance he offers to practitioners is sound. At the very least, I would have anticipated an examination of a few actual crises for which leaders in higher education were successful in what they did to address them and comparable instances of failure as a means of assessing at least partially the probable efficacy of his prescriptions. Without such material, the practices Gigliotti recommends for exercising crisis leadership successfully while intuitively sensible are not demonstrably convincing as ones having impact of the kinds for which a practitioner would presumably hope.

From my perspective, Dr. Gigliotti underestimated the difficulty of adapting a dissertation project that may have a certain theoretical appeal to academics, such as the members of a PhD examining committee, for consumption by practitioners actually having to confront problematic situations that qualify as crises and who are looking for guidance they feel will reliably inform their actions and provide grounds for believing that such actions will have desired effects. Whether or not this was the case, the "practice" component of the book lacks adequate development and, hence, provides an insufficient basis for harboring such confidence. Notwithstanding this concern, those interested in crises in higher education are probably better off having *Crisis Leadership in Higher Education: Theory and Practice* as a resource on which to draw than not.