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April 9, 2021

“In These Unprecedented Times”: A Genre Analysis of American University Reopening  
Statements during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

### “In These Unprecedented Times”: A Genre Analysis of American University Reopening Statements during the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Eva Rothenberg

Crisis communication helps institutions manage narratives surrounding crises. Previous linguistic studies exploring crisis management genres have focused on crises stemming from internal institutional wrongdoing or negligence. However, this study used genre analysis and corpus-based discourse analysis to better understand crisis management strategies of American universities amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, the crisis occurred outside of the institutions in question, but still directly affected their ability to function. Using Swales' (1990a) Creating a Research Space (CARS) model as a springboard, I developed a Move-Step framework and applied these patterns to a corpus of 50 emails sent out by four-year universities and colleges in the United States. These communications detail their reopening plans for the Fall 2020 semester. Contrary to the ostensible goal of these communications, this study found that these emails were not as focused on conveying logistical information as much as they revolved around asserting solidarity and strengthening the college community.

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## **“In These Unprecedented Times”: A Genre Analysis of American University Reopening Statements during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In December of 2019, the Chinese government reported an outbreak of a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wuhan, Hubei Province. COVID-19 spread to multiple countries in the following weeks and, a month later, the first case was recorded in the United States. By mid-March 2020, many regions had declared states of emergency and, by early April, 42 states had issued “stay-at-home” directives for everyone except essential employees such as first responders and grocery store workers (Gershman, 2020; Kelleher, 2020). Public health experts cautioned against large gatherings and urged those who needed to leave home for whatever reason to wear masks and maintain social distance (Elassar, 2020). These public health developments roughly coincided with the mid-semester holidays of most American higher education institutions (Korn, 2020). With rising fears that students would transmit the virus upon returning to campus from spring break, administrators across the country decided to cancel in-person classes and opted to deliver instruction remotely for the remainder of the spring semester (Korn, 2020).

As different states saw varying results with lockdowns and began easing these measures in early and mid-May, these institutions began to plan for the following semester. Between May and August of 2020, schools sent emails to students, families, and faculty that detailed a strategy for reopening campus operations. Some schools committed to allow all students to resume residential life, while others severely limited on-campus capacity. Some schools instated strict protocols for in-person classes, while others announced that all classes would be remote. Regardless of the operational decisions expressed in these emails, they all share striking rhetorical resemblances. This study explores the discourse surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic



and its far-reaching impact, specifically how it is constructed in a corpus of 50 university Fall 2020 Reopening Plans (RPs) from across the United States. Examining the rhetoric of reopening discussions in the midst of an ongoing public health crisis leads to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the ways in which people plan for and seek a “return to normalcy” during a protracted, off-kilter period of uncertainty.

### **The Campus Community: Higher Education in the United States**

In order to understand the RP as a genre, we must also understand the culture in which it operates. U.S. higher education, especially those institutions sampled in this corpus, revolves around residential life. Students are pushed to participate in on-campus activities such as academic groups, social clubs, and athletics. University dining halls, health centers, and gyms can create a self-contained microcosm, depending on the extent to which these schools are integrated into a larger city or town. Lastly, team sports such as football and basketball are a point of pride for some schools, with students rallying around mascots emblematic of their school’s brand.

Many institutions have a first year residency requirement, with administrators asserting that living on-campus allows students to engage in the school culture and form strong social and academic networks (Douglas-Gabriel, 2015). Those living on campus are often required to purchase a meal plan; such room and board fees may cost several thousand dollars per student per year. And this number is steadily climbing. According to Ma et al. (2020), from 2000 and 2020, the cost of room and board increased by 57% at in-state public four-year schools and by 41.8% at private four-year schools (not adjusted for inflation). There is also a longer-term financial incentive for promoting on-campus living. Schudde (2011) finds that “the probability of

remaining enrolled into the second year of college is 3.3 percentage points higher for on-campus residents than off-campus residents” (p. 581).

The campus-oriented experience is fundamentally “Americana,” although this standard is often limited to a financially privileged percentage of the population (Simmons, 2014).

Acquiescing to the popularity of the on-campus model, Simmons explains: “When you live on campus, learning doesn’t screech to a halt when class lets out. New friends down the hall may have as much to do with a first-year student’s evolving perspective” (para. 8). At its core, the aim of the residential experience is to strengthen the collective identity of the respective institution.

It is important to understand that mandated remote education threatens this cultural cornerstone. Beyond damaging institutional revenue, the pandemic jeopardizes the way in which colleges and universities have traditionally constructed their community. Even if administrators choose to reopen campus entirely, the need for social distancing severely constrains the immersive residential experience they could once offer. In addition to providing information about the Fall 2020 semester, RPs are largely concerned with reorienting the community as a whole to this “new normal” and ensuring its survival outside of the physical campus.

### **University Administrators as a Discourse Community, RPs as a Genre**

The RP genre can only be created by administrators. As institutional leaders, it is their responsibility to communicate campus developments to the students, faculty, and staff within their purview.<sup>1</sup> These administrators comprise a discourse community. As defined by Swales (1990b), discourse communities have a commitment to a shared goal; utilize at least one “mechanism for intercommunication” or *genre* to disseminate information between members; employ a specialized lexis or jargon; and comprise a diverse membership group wherein

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, these administrators may hire public relations agencies to help them draft sensitive communications. Nevertheless, they have ultimate oversight of these communications and can therefore take ownership of the genre.

members are inducted and work their way up the ranks from novice to expert (p. 25). By engaging in shared linguistic norms, discourse communities impart social conventions and ideologies particular to the group (Duff, 2010). In her study of how students enter into academic discourse communities, Duff (2010) found that they used writing as simply one tool with which to assert their role as scholars. Socialization into these academic communities occurs behaviorally, through interaction with others, but linguistic norms facilitate this process by helping students negotiate a space for themselves in relation to their peers. Like Duff, Bazerman (1997) conceptualizes genre as “frames for social action,” grounding the linguistic practices of a community within their real-world behavior (p. 19). Analyzing genre, therefore, allows us to gain an understanding of the ways in which discourse communities conceive of their identity.

With these characteristics in mind, let us consider university administrators as a discourse community. The American Conference of Academic Deans (ACAD) defines successful higher education administrators as those who “share a commitment to student learning and to the ideals of liberal education.” Administrators communicate both within the confines of one institution as well as across universities by participating in annual conferences such as the American Council on Education, the Association of American Colleges & Universities, and the Academic Chairpersons Conference, among others. These conferences bring together both novice and expert administrators, allowing them to interact, learn, and develop as members in their professional field. A critical component of this “enculturation” is an engagement with the genres of the community (Duff, 2010). Whether that be reading *The Resource Handbook for Academic Deans*, “written by deans, for deans,” or writing for *The ACAD Leader* newsletter, “a forum for members to share experiences and opinions related to their work as academic administrators,”

interacting with these texts allows members to socialize themselves into the norms of the academic administrator community (The American Conference of Academic Deans).

The overwhelming majority of genre analysis studies focus on self-contained genres. Swales' (1990a) examination of research article introductions and Pintos dos Santos's (2000) analysis of letters between company officials are further examples of specialized genres written for an audience of peers. In contrast, the genre under consideration in this study is a form of communication external to the discourse community creating it. Rather than a "mechanism for intercommunication" between administrators, RPs are addressed to out-groups (i.e. students, parents, and faculty); authority figures must communicate with some wider community. Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff's (2003) study of civic genres such as ballot provisions, jury instructions, and tax forms finds that this in-group/out-group dynamic introduces new linguistic considerations, because "clashes of knowledge and perspective [result] when specialists and nonspecialists meet, clashes that have consequences in terms of how participants interact, perform their actions, and produce certain effects in the world" (p. 544).

Like these civic genres, RPs are a monologic rather than a dialogic. There is no space or convention in place for the recipient to respond directly. Students, parents, and faculty respond to the RPs through their actions, their decision to remain enrolled, to live on-campus, or to live at home. This one-sidedness necessitates that the writer anticipate the needs, apprehensions, and potential response of his or her audience and address these concerns in the text.

### **Rhetorical Moves Analyses**

As mentioned above, discourse communities construct shared genres. Analyzing the rhetorical moves in genres is one way of exploring them. A *move*, as defined by Swales, is a "rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken

discourse” (2004: 228-9). In his seminal work on genre analysis, Swales constructs an investigative model, “Creating A Research Space” (CARS). His framework explores ways in which academics situate themselves vis-a-vis other scholars by analyzing the patterns they follow in writing their introductions.

The significance of Swales’ CARS Model is that it is extremely adaptable to studying various genres. Its foundational premise is that rhetorical strategies can be catalogued and organized in ways that help the writer convey his goals. Linguists have therefore found it easy to apply Swales’ strategy to a variety of non-academic genres, such as grant applications (Connor & Mauranen, 1999; Myers, 1990), sales promotions (Vegaro, 2004), business negotiation letters (Pinto dos Santos, 2000), and company apologies (Li, 2017). The types of rhetorical moves used in these genres are informed by both the writer’s position within the community and the audience of the given text (Myers, 1990: 42).

The current study examines a specific combination of genre and social context that has not yet been studied: Official university communications in the wake of a public health fallout in the United States. A macroscopic analysis of rhetorical moves performed in these emails helps us to quantitatively systematize how these universities outline their shared community goals even as they are pressured by external safety factors that threaten their financial interests and educational mission.

### **A Qualitative Analysis of Rhetoric**

In his CARS model, Swales breaks down each move into individual “steps” that the writer must take to achieve said move. He analyzes the lexical and grammatical strategies that writers utilize in order to strengthen their arguments. However, it is important to be aware that a qualitative examination does not necessarily entail a move analysis, and vice versa. For example,

Li (2017) performs a move analysis but does not unpack the language of each move, while corpus investigations of annual company reports by Fuoli (2018), Breeze (2012), Ho and Cheng (2016), and Lischinsky (2011) do not perform any sort of general move analysis but, rather, delve into the epistemic and attitudinal stance markers (Hyland, 1998; Hyland, 2000), metaphors, and specific lexical choices utilized in the texts. While a move analysis is a bird's-eye view of a genre's organization, a qualitative analysis of these rhetorical strategies allows us to better understand *how* community members assert their role within the larger group identity and align themselves with the goals of their community. This study therefore interweaves qualitative lexical analysis within the larger framework of rhetorical moves. Similar to Pintos dos Santos' (2000) analysis of negotiation letters, my study takes on a funnel shape: I outline the rhetorical moves in these RPs, determine how they are organized and, lastly, break down the ways in which these universities lexically frame their arguments.

Of the non-academic studies mentioned, the most relevant to the present study is Fuoli's (2018) analysis of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports. The notion that companies have an ethical obligation to society adds an affective, human tinge to the often cold and abstract corporate image. Fuoli found that CSR's are "tools of social legitimation" for companies, rhetorical means for them "to show that their behavior is compatible with the interests and norms of the broader social system" (p. 851). In CSR reports, companies affirm an ethical and trustworthy corporate identity by "highlighting [their] 'human side'" (Fuoli 2018: 875). The university communications examined in this study also project a human face. Universities are companies and they are built on a foundation of interpersonal connections between stakeholders. Additionally, because the choice to attend a specific university is generally a privilege rather than a necessity, universities face fierce competition in maintaining their national reputation.

Therefore, communication between the university and its stakeholders requires a genuine human acknowledgement of the recipient.

### **The Discourse of Crisis**

Crisis communication is a subfield of public relations and a cornerstone of organizational management. According to Robert L. Heath (2009: 3), businesses seek “to avoid, mitigate, and respond [to crises] in ways that best protect capital and human resources.” Coombs (2007: 2) defines “crisis” as “an event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can impact the organization’s performance” (p. 100). By controlling the narrative of ethical violations, financial losses, or any other kind of misstep, institutions preserve their reputation. Public *perception* translates to public *behavior*, and this behavior is the link that binds the abstract reputational damage to concrete financial damage (Coombs and Holladay, 1996: 281).

The overwhelming majority of crises that have been studied by management experts and linguists alike have been internal indiscretions. For example, the Johnson & Johnson 1982 Tylenol recall (Benson, 1988), the partial meltdown of the Three Mile Island Nuclear Generating Station (Murray, 1981), the 2008 financial collapse (Lischinsky, 2011), and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (Breeze, 2012) were all events that involved a level of wrongdoing or, at the very least, mismanagement on the part of those in charge.

In contrast, this study considers the impact of a crisis *external* to any one institution: a virulent global pandemic. Because the COVID-19 pandemic is outside the control of these universities, administrators are not obligated to command the narrative surrounding the crisis; the narrative is not one that is inherently condemning them. They do, however, need to (1) validate the concerns of their stakeholders (students, parents, faculty) and (2) show the actions

that they are taking to mitigate the crisis (Shin and Heath, 2020: 7). In other words, they need to project both a personally sympathetic and a logistically efficient image.

Another useful schema in which to consider crisis management discourse comes from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) National Response Framework (NRF). The NRF argues for community engagement, a tiered response (many different organizations pulling together to support others through a crisis), flexible and adaptable plans, unified leadership, and a readiness to act (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2019: 5-7). The rhetorical moves and steps developed for this study draw from both Heath and Shin (2020) and the NRF's frameworks.

### **Constructing the Corpus**

Because the genre studied comprises a novel text created for a specific aim, there was no ready-made corpus available to analyze. Therefore, I manually synthesized my own corpus, collecting and tabulating 50 reopening plans from four-year colleges and universities across the United States (69,906 tokens; median length = 55.5 sentences). For the purposes of replicability and generalizability, it was essential that these schools were geographically dispersed. Sampling was conducted from eight regions across the country, with the number of schools sampled correlating to the size of the respective region: New England (5), Mid-Atlantic (9), Southeast (8), South Central (7), Southwest (6), Midwest (12), Northwest (2), Pacific (1). The corpus also accounted for a diverse mix of small liberal arts colleges and large research universities, public and private institutions, and rural, suburban, and urban campuses. These designations were in accordance with the U.S. News & World Report.

All states except Rhode Island, New Mexico, and Alaska are represented in the corpus. Six campuses are rural, 22 suburban, and 22 urban. 31 schools have an affiliated medical school,



medical center or hospital. Of the 50 schools in the corpus, 22 are private and 28 are public schools. Twenty nine have a student population of over 15,000. The largest university sampled was Texas A&M, with 71,109 students as of Fall 2020. On the other end of the spectrum, the smallest institution included in the corpus was Lawrence University in Wisconsin with 1,445 students. For a comprehensive list of schools, see Appendix A.

The criteria for including any one email in the corpus was that it must be the *first* time that a particular institution had taken a definitive, actionable stance on whether students would be returning to campus in the fall. The earliest announcement included in the corpus was released on May 21, and the latest on August 11 2020. However, the vast majority of these emails were published between mid-June and mid-July, within days of each other. This proximity suggests intra-communication within the discourse community of school administrators, as well as the fact that one decision to reopen may have influenced schools in the same region. It is also worth noting that every school in the corpus accounted for at least some level of on-campus activity for Fall 2020, whether that included inviting only one cohort back or allowing every student who wanted to attend in-person to do so.

### **Developing a Methodology: Moves and Steps**

Each communication was manually read and qualitatively analyzed for rhetorical patterns, extrapolating from Swales' (1990a) CARS model. I formulated three primary moves. The first is a personal framework, wherein administrators attempt to connect with their recipients on an individual, sympathetic level. The second is a logistical framework, wherein administrators operationalize the steps that had been and would be taken by faculty and students leading up to and during the Fall Semester. The third move is an intentional one, meant to scaffold the

communication meta-textually. In addition to these main moves, greetings and sign-offs were also included pro forma, as ancillary moves.

Below I have defined the specific rhetorical steps for each broad move (Figure 1). The numbers do not indicate a required chronological order, but they correspond roughly to where each step first presented itself in the texts. Steps can be, and are, repeated, omitted, and rearranged.

**Figure 1**

*Rhetorical Moves and Steps in RPs*

Moves	Steps
Personal	P1. Acknowledge broader social context P2. Defer to community P3. Defer to authority P4. Acknowledge fluid, developing situation.
Logistical	L1. Outline previous steps taken L2. Outline current steps taken L3. Outline future steps L4. Redirect attention to other genres L5. Commit to future communication
Intentional	I1. Establish communicative intent I2. Direct reader through the text

Every sentence was tagged with either a Greeting (G), a Sign-Off (SO), or one of the above 11 steps. Each RP was then pasted into an Excel sheet sentence by sentence, numbered accordingly and organized by school. This helped develop a macro picture of the rhetorical moves and steps utilized in this genre (Figure 2).

These RPs were then separated according to move and step designation and manually read again, with a primary focus on content words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that carry semantic meaning. Function words such as possessive determiners and pronouns were also examined because they are utilized by writers to frame themselves in relation to their audience.

**Figure 2**

*Categorization of the RP Corpus*

	University of Mississippi		Tulane University		Texas A&M
1	Dear faculty, staff and students G	1	Dear Tulane C G	1	Dear Students: G
2	This message marks the rel I1	2	Resilience is P2	2	As we move i P1
3	The plan is the product of e: I1	3	We are a comm P2	3	Over the last I1
4	planning efforts designed to I1	4	Today, we mu P2	4	As you may k L1
5	The "Campus Ready" plan r P2	5	We are now ju P2	5	We will proce L3
6	Our response and planning P2	6	There will be P2	6	In April, I shar L1
7	As demonstrated by the rec P3	7	Returning to c P2	7	While much w I1
8	Wearing facemasks or appr L3	8	We will be abl P2	8	The Board of P3
9	Many of these protocols are L4	9	We will have t P2	9	In making pla P2
10	If we cannot achieve full cor P2	10	Most importar L1	10	We will follow P3
11	If we all do our part to previ P2	11	That has beer L1	11	Our top priorit P2
12	Version 1.0 of the "Campus L4	12	We know of n P2	12	To make this I P2
13	Please note that the plan wi P4	13	Our plans are P3	13	Returning to c P2
14	While we remain focused o P1	14	And we will, o P4	14	Aggies take c P2
15	"Campus Ready" is a compr I1	15	With technolo P1	15	We must also P2
16	Below is an overview of key I2	16	Online learnin L1	16	We have man P1

### The Macro Organization of RPs

As noted above, my analytical approach to the RPs assumes a rough funnel shape. I begin by examining how the genre is constructed macroscopically before delving into the nuances of each move and step. A bird's-eye-view analysis reveals the typical organizational formula below (Figure 3):

**Figure 3***The Organizational Skeleton of RPs*

Move	Function	Examples
G	Greeting	<p>Dear Students (Notre Dame University)</p> <p>Dear Pomona College Community (Pomona College)</p>
I	Establish overall intent of email	<p>I know you have been eager to learn of our plans for the fall, and that is why I am writing this morning. (Bowdoin College)</p> <p>With so much uncertainty these days, we write to provide a measure of clarity on one issue we know many of you have been wondering about: our plans for the upcoming academic year at UVA. (University of Virginia)</p>
P	Personal appeal to students	<p>We made this decision with the health and safety of our students, faculty, and staff foremost in our minds, and that principle will continue to guide us going forward. (Western Washington University)</p> <p>I am so proud of how the resilience, determination and character of our UA family have shown through. (University of Alabama)</p>
I	Transition into logistics	<p>Below is an overview of key aspects of the plan that will be necessary to contribute to a successful Fall 2020 semester. (University of Mississippi)</p> <p>Here are some of the initial changes we are implementing to care for our</p>

		community: (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)
L	Outline logistics of the plan	<p>We plan to offer face-to-face classes, with remote options for every course. (Texas A&amp;M University)</p> <p>We are also continuing the programs we started this past spring for students who need access to technology (loaner laptops, wifi hotspots, etc.) to support remote learning. (Augsburg University)</p>
P	Reiterate personal commitment	<p>If there is one thing that we have learned through this pandemic, it is how much we all cherish and benefit from our campus life. (University of Mississippi)</p> <p>I have never been prouder of Davidson, of the work done by our staff and faculty in a short time to overhaul how our campus functions and of our students' courage and devotion to our community. (Davidson College)</p>
SO	Sign Off	<p>With warmest regards, (Iowa State University)</p> <p>In hopeful anticipation, (University of Miami)</p>

Each P and L in Figure 3 correspond to at least one (and typically several) paragraphs. This extremely simplistic rendering captures the essence of the genre, which is its tendency to pivot between the logistical and personal rhetorical strategies.

We can even go one step further, removing the pro forma G and SO Moves and the metatextual I-Move, all of which contribute significantly to the organization of the genre but

only minimally to its content. Paring down the RP in this way leaves us with its rhetorical core: the P- and L-Moves. It also reveals an interesting bookending strategy. Out of the 50 schools sampled, 100% opened with at least one and closed with at least three P-Move sentences. This interweaving style plays into the primacy-recency effect, wherein readers will recall best the first and last items of a given series. This repetition is in and of itself a rhetorical strategy.

Forefronting the P-Move suggests that administrators want to maintain a warm, humanized persona even while establishing their operational know-how as authority figures. It also underscores the importance of personal audience appeal to the genre as a whole. The significance of the P-Move is further discussed when analyzing the micro-structure of individual paragraphs.

### **The Move-Step Model**

#### **Greetings and Sign-Offs**

Like any formal email, each RP begins with a greeting. These communications address a community of students but, at times, also their families, campus staff, and university faculty.

Greetings and sign-offs vary by formality. Compare the tone of Examples 1 and 2, and Examples 3 and 4.

1. Dear Students, Parents, and Members of the Faculty and Staff,

(Swarthmore College)

2. Dear Lumberjacks,

(Northern Arizona University)

3. In solidarity,

(University of Maryland)

4. Roll Tide!

(University of Alabama)

Regardless of their tone, greetings and sign-offs are often used to evoke a sense of solidarity, either overtly (Ex. 3) or implicitly through references to school mascots, mottos, and other in-group lexical choices that connote a shared identity. Forty of the 50 schools in the corpus mention their school or mascot by name in their greetings, while ten opt for a more generic address to their “dear students” (Ex. 1). Rhetorically, the G-Move functions to introduce the RP to its audience, and so the fact that these opening statements are heavily marked for unity immediately instantiates the RP as a community-oriented genre.

### **The Intentional Move**

While the I-Move is not as ancillary as the greetings and sign-offs, it mainly functions as an organizational signpost. I1 explicitly outlines the function of the RP genre:

5. Today, I am announcing how we are returning to campus this fall. (Colorado

University, Boulder)

6. Today, I am both optimistic and hopeful as I write to share our plans for the upcoming

Fall Term. (Carleton College)

In contrast, I2 signals a transition from the initial P-Move-dominant opening paragraph to a more L-Move-focused summary of protocols.

7. Below I am including specific steps we are taking as a university to provide for you --

medically, residentially, and as an engaged and connected community. (University of Connecticut)

8. Below is an overview of key aspects of the plan that will be necessary to contribute to

a successful Fall 2020 semester. (University of Mississippi)

The I-Move is not as widespread as the P- or L-Moves, because its use is firmly circumscribed to these metatextual signposts; there are an average of two I-Move sentences in every RP. Despite

this rhetorical limitation, however, 49 schools incorporate at least one I-Move sentence, most often I-1, while I-2 sentences are present in 21 schools. While this move is rhetorically rigid, it still plays a significant role in scaffolding the genre.

One interesting stylistic point to note in the I-Move is that, out of its 99 instances in the corpus, exactly one third are written with the first person singular *I*, while a little less than a quarter are written in the first person plural *we*. The P- and L-Moves, as we will see below, tend to overwhelmingly favor the plural form, utilizing it as a way to highlight the collective organizational efforts that have gone into devising the RP. However, because the I-Move is metatextual in nature, administrators may feel more comfortable here to step away from their institutional nosism and project a more individual persona in order to connect with the reader on an intimate, affective level.

### **The Personal Move**

In the Personal Move (P-Move), administrators develop a united front by acknowledging and appealing to their audience's emotions. This utilization of pathos personifies these institutions, giving them human sentiments such as empathy, pride, and concern. Significantly, the P-Move is utilized as a means of emphasizing a university's agency as an institution. It is valuable to differentiate between control and agency, as this distinction sets COVID-centric genres, such as RPs, apart from conventional crisis communication. Control is demonstrative, the ability to affect change on some external entity. One's sense of control relies on environmental conditions that conform to pragmatic expectations. Most crisis mitigation efforts seek to maintain control over the undesirable situation. In contrast to control, agency is the internal capacity to enact change on the self. It relies on internal instrumentality; every person, no matter how ostensibly helpless, possesses agency in how they conduct themselves. Because these



institutions have no direct control over the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, the administrators are absolved from the damage control measures that companies accused of wrongdoing might have to enact.

The P-Move is characterized chiefly by the frequency of the plural first person pronoun *we* (n= 678) and possessive determiner, *our* (n=586), which are generally used in the inclusive sense in the P-Corpus. That is, they tend to refer to the writer and the reader (Ex. 9) instead of the writer and her colleagues (Ex. 10).

9. [We are] monitoring our own individual health and following guidelines aimed at keeping our fellow Panthers safe and healthy. (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee)

10. We sincerely appreciate your patience and understanding. (Oregon State University)

This inclusive sense heightens the feeling of collective identity by emphasizing that the administrators themselves are part of the campus community rather than detached arbiters.

A semantic examination of the collocates of both *we* and *our* also establish the P-Move as an assertion of agency in the face of uncontrollable circumstances. *We* overwhelmingly precedes verbs such as *prepare*, *prioritize*, *navigate*, *hope*, *cherish*, and *confront*, which demonstrate resolution to action but, significantly, not its performance. Similarly, while the possessive determiner *our* does qualify several concrete nouns such as *campus*, *faculty*, *guidelines*, and *nation*, nearly one third of its collocates are abstract processes such as *efforts*, *spirit*, *intentions*, and *ability*. These processes are all dynamic, underscoring an active engagement with the external obstacles facing administrators. Yet, critically, they evidence only a conceptual commitment built on intentionality rather than definite solutions. The Personal Move manifests in four steps, discussed below, each contributing a different rhetorical hue to the bigger discursive picture.

***P1: Acknowledgment of Broader Social Context***

P1 constitutes the sympathetic backbone of the Personal Move. With this step, administrators position themselves face-to-face with their audience's emotions. This engagement is primarily focused on the impact of the pandemic, and manifests in references to the broader public health circumstances (Ex. 11) and recognition of students' mental and financial hardships (Ex. 12).

11. We hope this note finds all of you well during this incredibly difficult time for our country and the world. (University of Virginia)

12. We know this announcement will raise questions for families and students who are in the midst of making their own fall quarter plans, and perhaps the biggest question is around tuition and fee reductions. (Western Washington University)

Because this formal communicative genre is one-sided, the onus is on the administrator to identify and address the concerns of the recipient on the other end of the email without the advantage of receiving direct feedback. Through P1, administrators attempt to hedge the procedural portions of their plan by preemptively drawing attention to any potential obstacles and misgivings of the audience.

This anticipatory attitude is best exemplified by the fact that the most frequently occurring verbs in this step are *know* (n= 27), *hope* (n=17, and *recognize* (n17), which are preceded by *I* and *we*. These first person pronouns create an interpersonal connection between administrator and student, which reinforces P1's emotional appeal; sentiments are shared between people, not abstract entities. More importantly, the verbs *know* and *recognize* explicitly validate the apprehensions and struggles of the audience. By clearly signposting their concern,

administrators demonstrate that their decisions are a product of extensive interrogation and exploration of essential variables.

The acknowledgement of social context strengthens the RPs, because they take into consideration the fact that administrative decisions are not formed in a vacuum. This recognition of external circumstances and their effects on the internal workings of their communities demonstrates proactivity on the administrators' part. P1 broadcasts the administration's willingness to engage with these issues; although these conditions are outside of their direct control, this legitimization contributes to the development of the P-Move's agency-minded approach.

***P2: Deference to the Community***

While P1 emphasized each student's individual circumstances recognizing their circumstances, P2 seeks to reinforce the collective spirit of the college community by appealing to emotion. In this step, administrators thank their students (Ex. 13) and reaffirm their academic mission statement (Exs. 13, 14, 15).

13. I appreciate your patience as our community continues to respond to the unpredictable nature of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and its implications on our planning efforts to return the University of Delaware campus to its normal rhythm of friendly faces, intellectual pursuit and cultural enrichment. (University of Delaware)

14. We must approach our work—to create and share knowledge that benefits humanity and to prepare leaders of insight and integrity—with a renewed sense of purpose. (Yale University)

15. And, even as we take these steps, we must ensure that in social distancing to protect our health we find ways to draw closer together as a community, united in common

purpose toward a greater sense of understanding around shared values.... After all, this is who we are. This is what we do. (University of Kentucky)

The most frequently-occurring nouns in this step are *community* (n=147), *students* (n=130), and *campus* (n=125). Each appears at least once across 100% of the RPs in the corpus. The possessive determiner *our* modifies 41.5% of the instances of *community*, 36% of *students*, and 15% of *campus*. These nouns all collocated with *thank* (n=21) and/or *appreciate* (n=8), demonstrating respect and gratitude towards the students' *dedication, patience, hard work*, and *understanding* (Figure 4). While these nouns acknowledge the actions of individuals, unlike P1's recognition of hardship P2 highlights the positive aspects of the audience's actions and frames them as a service towards the university community.

#### Figure 4

##### Concordances of "Appreciate" and "Thank" in P2

reserve our face-to-face learning environment. We	appreciate your adherence to this policy. Not onl
joy and privilege to teach. I know and	appreciate that all of you are willing to pitch
community healthy and safe. In the meantime, we	appreciate your continued patience as we have work
classes will require everyone's best efforts. I	appreciate each of you and your patience, hard wor
I	appreciate your patience as our community continue
work is detailed and time-consuming, and we	appreciate your patience" "Some students, particu
I know this uncertainty is difficult and	appreciate your understanding and resilience as we
ovide a high-quality student experience I creatlv	abooeciate the work of the committee and the more
dozens of faculty, staff and students, and I	thank them all for their commitment to our shared
rough these questions and the various scenarios.	Thank you also for the concern you have shown
be, a community effort. I would like to	thank everyone engaged in this process and offer m
" In particular, I want to	thank our Facilities, Public Safety, and Residence
fall. As we move forward, I want to	thank our faculty, staff, students and supporters
s well as uniquely memorable!—year at Carleton.	Thank you for this.
who we are. This is what we do.	Thank you for being a community so committed to
calls for equity and justice. I want to	thank you for your commitment to build a 'better
and shared sacrifice across the College. Finally,	thank you for your patience, as I and others
lot of work to do to get ready.	Thank you for your patience and thank you in
and, we sincerely hope, you as well. We	thank you for your understanding and your commitme
ntinuity of academics, research and engagement. I	thank everyone in advance for your efforts to make
get ready. Thank you for your patience and	thank you in advance for doing your part to
duration of this public health crisis. And we	thank all of you for sustaining Yale's core
want to look back one more time to	thank all of you — our faculty, staff and students
, and to that end, I would like to	thank many of you for your thoughtful questions an
of our entire campus community. I want to	thank the scores of faculty members who are creati
ents for persevering through this difficult time.	Thank you to all group members who provided their
adership, parents, alumni and community members.	Thank you to all of those who have and
of our UD community. I personally want to	thank all UD faculty and staff for their united
that to which we have dedicated ourselves.	Thank you. We are proud of our commitment to

Further cementing the community-driven goal of this step, *together* (n=51) appeared across 21 of the 50 schools sampled. *Together* collocated with references to school mascots, bringing the audience under the collective umbrella of *Lawrentians*, *Bufffs*, and *Sagehens*. The reference to mascots, to “Tide Together,” and to the “Triton community” induces the audience to identify with the writer and suggests that, in a time of uncertainty, this cooperative unity is now, more than ever, a unique strength. References to community substantiate the university as a stable force in contrast to the turbulent current events specified in P1. P2 is a rhetorical step that may be easier to accomplish in this genre than it would be in other crisis management texts, simply because there is no need for these administrators to validate their reliability in the face of criticism. The university has the advantage of being a neutral entity; it is probably easier to forge a positive narrative because these administrators were forced by external circumstances to make choices on behalf of their stakeholders.

In asserting the collective identity of the institution, these administrators take the opportunity to reiterate their institution’s educational philosophy. Examples 13-15 all define the institutional values of their respective university and affirm that the strength of the university lies in its function as an intellectual powerhouse. The above references to community and evocations of solidarity demonstrate that, in P2, the administrators turn their attention inward, towards their own communities rather than externally as they did in P1. This further develops the P-Move as

agency-centered; P2 attempts to signal the strength of the university community rather than seeking clarity and surety from the outside.

***P3: Deference to Authority***

In contrast to the previous two steps, which were primarily focused on emotional overtures, P3 utilizes a more *ethos*-centric rhetorical approach. This step serves as a foundation on which the authority of the RP is built. Its primary function is to enhance the credibility of the RPs. Here we might see administrators turn to entities outside of their campus community, such as the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, state and federal governments, and local departments of health, incorporating the protocols of these organizations into their plan (Exs. 16, 17). Less frequently, they may also recognize the various task forces of faculty and administrators internal to their institution (Ex. 18) who have come together to formulate and deliberate upon these RPs; of the 31 institutions that have an affiliated medical school, only 16 explicitly reference in-house medical experts.

16. Housekeeping staff will continue to clean office and workspaces according to CDC guidelines and “high touch” areas like doorknobs and bathrooms will be cleaned more frequently. (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

17. Augsburg Dining Services, of course, will follow all Department of Health guidelines for food service. (Augsburg University)

18. We also are appreciative for the health and medical experts involved in these efforts, as their expertise has been fundamental to the development of our recommendations....In particular, Dr. Marsha Davis, Dean of the College of Public Health; Dr. Lisa Nolan, Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine; Dr. Shelley Nuss, Campus Dean of the AU/UGA Medical Partnership; and Dr. Garth Russo, Executive Director of the University Health

Center, took the lead on developing the various health aspects of the Return to Campus Guidelines you received on June 4. (University of Georgia)

Every RP in the corpus demonstrates at least one instance of the P3 step with a reference to *health* (n=132), 69 instances of which are modified by *public*. In contrast to the campus-focused scope of P2, P3 turns its attention towards a wider community manned by *state* (n=55) and *local* (n=27) officials from the *Department of Health* (n=22). These authority figures can enact public health protocols that impact the administrators' capacity to enact rules of conduct for their own university communities. Deferring to external *guidance* (n=40) and *guidelines* (n=36), grounds the RPs in the competence of experts, using their knowledge as scaffolding to reinforce internal administrative decisions.

P3 also has a significantly stronger logistical sense to it than the previous two P-Move steps. In fact, Examples 17 and 18 could be just as easily termed L3 steps in that they outline steps the university means to implement upon reopening. However, the explicit references to familiar and trustworthy public health organizations signal an attempt to placate the audience.

P3 is instrumental in developing institutional agency. Citing the authority of organizations whose jurisdictions extend beyond the campus allows administrators to position themselves as the next link in the public health chain-of-command; they assume the responsibility of implementing and enforcing public health guidelines. Beyond asserting the RPs as a collective endeavor, this alignment with health authorities situates the university efforts alongside the state and national "return to normalcy" efforts. Like P1, P3 anticipates and responds to potential audience concerns. However, P3 encodes authority by specifically responding to safety-related apprehensions with recourse to public health experts and proactively seeking to alleviate these concerns within their own communities.

#### ***P4: Acknowledging the Developing Situation***

Out of all of the P-Move Steps, P4 is the least common and least linguistically variable. It primarily functions as a hedge, qualifying the conditions of reopening in order to manage audience expectations. P4 is instantiated in 43 of the 50 schools sampled in the corpus, whereas all other steps are present in at least 49. The most frequently occurring verbs, *continue* (n=19), [to] *change* (n=19), *evolve* (n=8), and *adjust* (n=8), 29.6% of which are modified by the modal *may* (n=16), qualify the RPs as a set of workable solutions to an uncertain situation. As exemplified below, abstract nouns such as *safety*, *circumstances*, and *situation* suggest that, similar to P1 and P3, P4 is an externally-focused rhetorical step, delicate balancing between responding to the larger public health fallout and prioritizing the needs of the smaller campus community.

19. Please know that not all decisions have been made yet, as we are still closely monitoring our own phased approach at reopening campus, as well as monitoring the state of Louisiana's success at reopening. (Louisiana State University)

20 Of course, we are prepared to pivot to fully remote operations if public health considerations dictate such a decision. We sincerely appreciate your patience and understanding as we adjust to ever-changing pandemic conditions and public health circumstances. (Oregon State University)

Perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, it is precisely by forefronting their lack of control over the enveloping crisis and acknowledging the limitations of their RPs that administrators further cultivate their agency as leaders. Their willingness to adapt to challenges demonstrates the administration's take-charge attitude to problem-solving, and their emphasis on *flexibility* (n=17)



displays a proactive commitment to realistic, viable policies, illustrating an anticipation and mitigation of audience expectations.

### **The Logistical Move**

Because the goal of RPs is to provide actionable measures for the Fall 2020 semester, the genre rests on the Logistical Move. It is therefore unsurprising that the L-Move is the most frequently-occurring move in the entire corpus. It comprises 37,440 word tokens, 11,141 tokens more than the P-Move.

Stylistically, the sentences corresponding to L-Move steps are shorter and simpler than their P-Move counterparts. Whereas the P-Move was primarily emotionally-driven, humanizing these institutions and, consequently, giving them agency, the L-Move performs a more action-centric persona, concretizing the steps of the administration and stressing the operational facets that these universities can control. It is primarily focused on providing practical and insightful information to students, faculty, and staff.

The average length of L-Move sentences is 20 words, in contrast to the 27 word average length of P-Move sentences. Additionally, in four instances throughout the corpus, the logistical components of the RPs are expressed as bulleted lists of incomplete sentences (Ex. 20).

20. The return to campus will involve a wide range of adjustments including:

- Phased return of students to BYU on-campus housing
- Hybrid classes that combine in-person and remote learning
- Expanded number of BYU Online courses
- COVID-19 testing for sick individuals and some testing of asymptomatic individuals. (Brigham Young University)

The most common verbs in the L-Move data set are the modal *will*; the copula forms *be*, *are*, and *is*; and *have*, in both its auxiliary and lexical forms. These verbs are utilized in formulaic sentence structures: “*X will be Y*” (n=470); “*X will have Y*” in the lexical form (n=48); and “*X have been Y*” (n=38). This lack of variety coupled with a shortage of hedges and grammatical cushioning, so to speak, makes for a blunt and matter-of-fact reading of L-Move sentences.

Like the P-Move, the L-Move tends to favor the first person plural forms *our* (n=343) and *we* (n=574). Unlike the P-Move, in which *our* and *we* were often inclusive, in the L-Move the same forms are used solely in the exclusive sense, referring to the group of administrators who have formulated the reopening plans and are now conveying their collective decision. By acknowledging the shared planning efforts undertaken by task forces and committees across these institutions, the plural forms promote credibility and responsibility. Communicating that these reopening plans are a concerted, cooperative effort also enhances their integrity. A plan that has been scrutinized, workshopped, and approved multiple times by various professional entities is more likely to be perceived as tenable than the recommendations of an individual, no matter how qualified she may be.

The L-Move diverges from the P-Move in two additional, predictable ways. First, the L-Move addresses concrete subject matter such as *students* (n=595) , *campus* (n=458) , *classes* (n=163) , and *semester* (n=131) , those entities that have been impacted by the ongoing pandemic. Second, the collocates of the pronoun *we* are much more businesslike: *work*, *monitor*, *develop*, and *implement* are all verbs that evidence direct action. Whereas the P-Move focused on motive and expectation, the L-Move shifts gears away from intentionality, which is the commitment to action, and towards execution.

### ***L1, L2, and L3: Outlining Previous, Present, and Future Steps***

Stylistically, steps L1-3 are almost entirely identical and they interweave with one another to accomplish the same rhetorical goal. Therefore, for the sake of convenience and clarity I have consolidated their analysis.

A review of previous efforts (Ex. 21), a summary of present endeavors (Ex. 22) and an outline of future steps (Ex. 23) reinforce the credibility of this genre. These rhetorical steps comprise the core of the RP, delivering the information that administrators have promised and students have awaited. Of the three, L3 is the most common; it constitutes, on average, 68% of the steps in each RP.

21. When spring semester ended, we pressed forward to explore every responsible option for returning students to campus for fall. (Pomona College)

22. I want our students to know that Rutgers faculty are busy preparing for remote undergraduate instruction and building on lessons learned from the spring semester. (Rutgers University)

23. We will continue physical distancing in our classrooms, residence halls, academic offices, research laboratories and other shared spaces. (Texas A&M University)

Taken together, steps L1-3 temporally frame the RPs as a culmination of protracted administrative efforts. By signposting the various obstacles surmounted and considerations taken, administrators assure their audience that these plans have been deliberated upon for months and are therefore products of extensive and meticulous calculations.

These steps underscore the components of reopening that are directly under the university's power to command. However, the control-centric focus on these steps restricts what they can address. Their scope is limited to subjects such as the *academic calendar*, *building ventilation*, *research*, *sanitation*, *residence halls*, *dining services*, and *classrooms*. This constraint

might in and of itself necessitate a more succinct writing style. However, the pithy approach of L1-3 is also a strategy in and of itself. The stylistic tidiness helps communicate information in a more efficient manner. Rather than forcing their audience to wade through several embedded clauses and fish for crucial details, administrators opt for succinctness as a demonstration of transparency.

***L4 and L5: Additional Information and Future Communication***

Whereas steps L1-3 communicate clear-cut decisions, the last two steps in the L-Move demonstrate continued engagement beyond the bounds of the RP. Often appearing consecutively in any given text, they reorient students away from the genre itself and towards other sources of information. L4 may point students towards a “Frequently Asked Questions” page on the university website, contact information for different departments (Ex. 24), or videos explaining COVID-19 guidelines in greater depth. Six schools even promise a virtual town-hall-style meeting between families and administrators to address any remaining concerns (Ex. 25).

24. Please check our website often for additional information, where you can also find contact information for specific Lehigh offices. (Lehigh University)

25. Before the semester begins, I will host virtual town halls for students, families, faculty, and staff to address your questions. (Swarthmore College)

On the other hand, L5 acts as an assurance of forthcoming information, a reminder to students that these RPs are merely laying the groundwork for an unprecedented semester (Ex. 26).

26. In the near future, look for additional information about move-in, guidance for returning to the workplace and additional details about campus operations. (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

Above all, steps L4 and L5 are concerned with conveying *information* (n=96), either in the form of providing more details about the upcoming semester or responding to student questions (Figure 5). While L1-3 emphasize the magnitude of the RP, L4-5 recognize that they are by no means a finalized end product. They prepare students for supplementary instructions, allowing them to digest the present plan with the safeguard that any logistical gaps will be presently addressed. In their forward-looking capacity these steps somewhat mirror P4. However, rather than simply anticipating uncertainty, L4 and L5 seek to assuage it by promising additional, actionable information on specific facets of campus life such as contact tracing, course selection, and returning to dorms. Planning efforts undertaken in a constantly-fluctuating environment tend to be drawn-out. By readying themselves to deliver necessary information in the future, these administrators commit to regaining a modicum of control over their uncertain situation.

## Figure 5

### *Concordances of “Future” and “Information” in L4 and L5*

all of these topics will follow in	future communications.
will share details soon. In the near	future, look for additional information about move
resources to assist you now and in	future semesters. Please contact your advisor or
will be recorded and made available for	future viewing. Next week, we will contact all
the employee holiday schedule in the near	future. We will continue to communicate often, in
hear from campus offices with more detailed	information on housing, registration, and all the
college. The University will send you more	information on moving in and the necessary prepara
will in the coming weeks post more	information on the website as it becomes available
oratories) will have an online option. Additional	information on this process can be found on
on fees at its August 21 meeting. More	information on which face-to-face courses will
a short survey to give us more	information on your potential plans, so you may
made now, and we will share more	information once we have it. We have not
, you will be receiving much more detailed	information over the next several days.
. More details are available here. For more	information, please refer to the Financial Aid web
finalized in the next several weeks. Additional	information regarding the move-in process will be
be updated frequently to convey decisions and	information. Schools will provide additional guida
. We will follow up with guidance and	information specific to international students and
and students will be receiving more detailed	information this week about what we know right
We will communicate again with more specific	information throughout the summer. UCLA Housing wi

### Interaction of Steps

Beyond an in-depth analysis of each step, it is critical to explore how they interact with one another in context. The organization of these strategies within the text contributes to the overall rhetorical function of the genre. While a macroscopic examination of the RP structure reveals a bookended framework, characterizing a paragraph primarily as a P-Move or an L-Move does not mean that they consist of solely P- or L-Move steps. While that is the general rhetorical feel of a paragraph, a sentence-level reading reveals an interesting pattern.

The opening and closing paragraphs in each RP remain uniformly composed of P-Move sentences. However, the P-Move punctuates the middle paragraphs as well. Although these middle sections are used as a space to develop the RP's logistical voice, the P-Move is inserted here as justification for decisions iterated through the L-Move. Take the following examples:

27. **[L1]** [The] provost announced in May that we will be following a modified academic calendar to allow students to complete in-person educational programs by Thanksgiving break. **[P2]** As has been the case since the beginning of the pandemic, our plans are guided by considerations for the health and safety of students, faculty, staff, and neighbors. **[L3]** We will be implementing social distancing measures for all courses. **[P2]** The fall semester will require self-discipline and a focus on the well-being of others, especially those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19. (Yale University)
28. **[L3]** Effective immediately, face masks will be required in all indoor spaces unless someone is alone in a private office. **[L3]** Roommates in residence halls are not required to wear face masks in their private living space. **[P2]** We appreciate your adherence to this policy. **[P2]** Not only does it protect our campus community, but it will allow us to remain in face-to-face instruction this fall. (Abilene Christian University)

The alternating L-P pattern demonstrates a continued attunement to the audience throughout the text, especially in paragraphs that are dominated by the L-Move. By justifying the decisions laid out in steps L1-3 with community-focused P2 sentences, administrators showcase a human, emotional reasoning behind their perceived logistical briskness. These interspersed sentimental appeals parallel the macroscopic bookending structure of the RPs and achieve the same purpose; they emphasize the importance of community.

Each RP showcases a median of 17 total rhetorical shifts between an L-Move to a P-Move sentence or vice versa. Taking into account that the median length of an RP is 55.5 sentences, these oscillations occur every three or so sentences. By consistently returning to the P-Move, administrators remind the reader that these RPs are, at their core, constructed with the students' best interest as the fulcrum. Although the RP is ostensibly meant as a formal communication of information and is publicized as a "reopening plan," the pervasive P-Moves throughout mark it as a fundamentally personal, community-driven genre.

### **Discussion**

It is valuable to revisit crisis communication, especially with regard to such a calamitous crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic. One year later, perhaps enough time has passed to allow for some objective reflection. The ways in which the crisis was linguistically framed is one way in which we can begin understanding the effect the pandemic had on all aspects of our society. Previous literature on crisis communication, such as Murray (1981), Benson (1988), and Lischinsky (2011) focused on crises that stemmed from inside specific companies, I explored a disaster that, while not caused by internal negligence, nevertheless affected the stakeholders of colleges and universities. Because this pandemic response did not necessitate blame-shifting and

conciliatory apologies, administrators were able to more easily project a proactive, positive persona through their RPs.

Additionally, I developed my own model — based off of Swales' move-step framework and genre theory — to analyze a new, unique genre. While genre analyses of the past, both academic and non-academic, this study examined a genre targeted towards an out-group, university stakeholders who had not been enculturated into the discourse community of administrators writing these RPs.

A macro and micro analysis of my move-step model reveals two major findings. First, while the goal of the RP emails is ostensibly to deliver information regarding the Fall 2020 semester, it functions as a reaffirmation of institutional identity. This is particularly evident in the decision to open and close each RP with a P-Move paragraph, as well as the prevalence of P-Move sentences in sections of the RP that are logistically focused. Deprived of the in-person, on-campus community on which the ethos of American higher education is founded, administrators repeatedly harken back to that collective identity in order to instill a sense of solidarity in its diasporic student population. While other crisis communication genres give credence to audience concerns, the RPs go one step further, expressing gratitude for the college community, placing it on a pedestal.

This brings us to my second major finding, namely the two-pronged preoccupation with institutional agency and strategic control. There is, at this point, almost no responsibility to take; the plan has not been implemented yet. By forefronting the P-Move throughout the RP's, administrators choose to emphasize their agency. This genre, unlike most crisis-centered ones, focuses on an issue external to these institutions. Therefore, administrators can ingratiate themselves to their audience without their efforts seeming wholly insincere attempts at evading



responsibility. In the face of uncertainty and chaos, there is a sense of liberation in acknowledging what one can and cannot control. While the RP's do outline actionable protocol, administrators continually hedge these measures with reminders of the pandemic's unpredictability. In doing so, they turn to their own communities as sources of strength and support during these unprecedented times.

### **Conclusion**

The main goal of this study was to describe the rhetorical strategies of university reopening plans in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. I did not attempt to judge the efficacy of the RPs by exploring their reception. Further research could also explore the effectiveness of individual reopening plans. For example, both Notre Dame University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reopened on-campus activity only to send students home and pivot to online classes several weeks into the fall semester. Unlike in the original RP's analyzed in this study, the communication following this fallout would require an explanation of internal mismanagement or negligence and would probably resemble more traditional crisis communication genres.

This study is also narrow in scope. I sampled only 50 institutions throughout the United States, all which promised (to a certain extent) a traditional college experience. No historically Black institutions, two-year community colleges, or trade schools were sampled. While some schools had well-established online degree-granting programs, like University of Oklahoma and Oregon State University, the majority of the institutions had reputations for vibrant on-campus culture. Future studies could analyze administrator-student communications of institutions who had a significant online presence before March 2020. This could help determine whether reopening plans were influenced by a lack of a remote-learning framework. However, this

analysis of a nontraditional crisis genre illustrated that, in the face of uncertainty, people tend to seek comfort in their communities and find strength in their personal agency,

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**Appendix A: Colleges and Universities Sampled**

Abilene Christian University

American University

Augsburg University

Boston University

Bowdoin College

Brigham Young University

Carleton College

Colorado University, Boulder

Davidson College

Iowa State

John Brown University

Kansas State

Kenyon College

Lawrence University

Lehigh University

Louisiana State University

Manhattanville College

Michigan State

Northern Arizona University

Notre Dame University

New York University

Oregon State University

Pomona College

Rutgers University

Swarthmore College

Texas A&M University

Tulane University

University of Alabama

University of California, Los Angeles

University of Chicago

University of Connecticut

University of Delaware

University of Georgia

University of Hawaii, Manoa

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

University of Kentucky

University of Maryland

University of Miami

University of Mississippi

University of Missouri, St. Louis

University of Nevada, Reno

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

University of Oklahoma

University of Vermont

University of Virginia



University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee

Vanderbilt University

West Virginia University

Western Washington University

Yale University