May 4, 1970: The Aftermath

Alyssa Dunlap

John Leciejewski

Rebecca Ondrovec

& Logan Wern

Kent State University
Kent State University was founded in 1910 as Kent State Normal School for teachers. Located in Kent, Ohio, the university was influenced by those who lived in the conservative, hard-working community. In 1970, the student population had grown to 21,000 students, a record for the university. Tensions on the campus build over charges of communism, and segregated housing practices. With the end of the year approaching, Robert Matson is preparing for the graduation ceremony of 4,000 students when protests break out between May 1-4 over the expansion of the war into Cambodia and end with 13 student shot and 4 were killed on May 4, 1970. The university is closed immediately and classes are held at churches so that finals can be completed. After receiving notes from students, Robert Matson is approached by Provost Sampson Bowman, who shares that he is worried about a protest during commencement. He asks Robert for his recommendations on commencement, housing refunds, and for the retrieval of student belongings.

**Key Actors**

Robert Matson is the VP of Student Affairs at Kent who was recently promoted from a role as the Dean of Students following previous incidents of protest and unrest. Despite his compassionate nature Matson is not good at handling large crowds under tense circumstances because he has been known to easily turn off an audience and is tenacious about what he believes is right and wrong.

Sampson Bowman is the KSU Provost and is very concerned about possible protest at commencement. Matson directly supervises Michael Kappa who is the Commencement Chair and has been working with Stephanie Beta, the Student Commencement Co-advisor Chair, to finalize most of the commencement plans. This is Kappa first year in this role and is look to Matson to determine whether or not commencement should be held this year. He has suggested
canceling the event all together. While many administrators would agree with Kappa’s views Matson has been approached by two seniors, Sarah Rifle and Jonathan McGilvreym, who want to know about commencement plans and if they will be recognized as graduates from Kent. Later that week Stephanie calls to inform Matson about a student group that is upset by the lack of communication and is meeting to discuss ways to demand a formal commencement.

**Missing Info**

There is a lot of missing information that would be very beneficial in order to determine reasonable options and a course of action for this case. First of all it would be important for Matson to find out if the national guard is still present on campus and if so how long they intend to be there. This information could help the Vice President determine if and when it would be plausible to hold commencement on campus. If commencement cannot be held on campus it would be essential for Kappa and Matson to see if another location for the event exists in the local community or in the surrounding cities. It will also be important for the VP to find out as much as he can about the group of students that is meeting off campus, such as the size of the group and what are their specific wants, needs, and concerns. Does this group have any leaders that might be willing to come in and speak with the Vice President about their concerns? Also are Sarah and Jonathan connected to the group and if so in what way. When assessing whether or not students should receive any kind of refund for their room and board it would be helpful to understand how many weeks are left in the quarter and how the housing rates are determined for both room and board.

**Decisions Issues**

As Robert prepares his recommendations on commencement, there are several considerations that he should keep in mind. First, it is likely that there will be a riot if he plans to hold
commencement as scheduled, so the ceremony should be postponed for a period time to let the students process through their feelings. Feedback from the students should be gathered to determine when the ceremony should take place. The location needs to be considered, given that hosting the ceremony at a different location may have a positive influence on the student's’ behavior. The ceremony would most take place off campus because the venue would have to be large enough to accommodate 4,000 students.

Similarly, Robert would need to be aware of a number of aspects before developing a plan for students to retrieve their belongings. He would need to be aware of how many out of state students and domestic students were on campus. He then should meet with the Director of Residence Services to determine what this process would look like, since the support staff may not be back on campus. The idea of refunding the students should also be discussed during this meeting, proposing that the parents may be upset if they do not receive their money back. With no clear indication of how much time is left in the semester, it would be difficult for Robert to make this decision on his own. Through this collaboration with Residence Services, Robert will be able to develop a plan for the Provost.

Scholarship

In regard to theory that applies to the decision about students returning to campus for commencement, the concept of how the physical environment influences behavior is relevant to this case because how a campus environment is designed can lead to certain types of behavior, which is called intersystems congruence (Strange & Banning, 2001). Essentially, the campus environment communicates through functional and symbolic aspects that provide cues for appropriate emotions, behavior, and interactions (Strange & Banning, 2001). When an environment allows people to carry out their goals, it results in desirable behaviors, which means
there is a synomorphic relationship (Strange & Banning, 2001). When considering whether or not to hold commencement, the administration can apply these concepts by making sure that campus environment contains the proper cues for a commencement ceremony, which means removing any cues indicative of the shooting on May 4 (i.e., national guard, FBI, etc.).

Theories on rituals are also important to the decision about commencement. Because the shooting happened during the regular academic year and students were required to go home, there was no opportunity for students to have closure about the events and are still in what Turner (1996) refers to as liminality, which is a period of transition. In order for there to be healing, students will need to have an opportunity to have a ritual to help them move to postliminality and closure or else the campus community will face long-term repercussions (Turner, 1996; Manning, 2000). Commencement could provide the appropriate setting for students to find closure and for the university to develop a supportive environment.

The decision issues that Robert Matson has to make invariably involve ethics, especially the ethic of care in this situation. Some of the characteristics of the ethic of care are that it focuses on responding on the basis of loyalty, trust, empowerment, and genuine concern when making decisions (Shapiro & Gross, 2008). This means that leaders move from a hierarchical approach to a more collaborative and relational approach, which requires them to consider multiple perspectives and how their decisions will affect others (Shapiro & Gross, 2008). Rather than making decisions based on what is best for the university, it will be beneficial for Robert to consider the ethic of care since his decisions about commencement, refunds, and retrieving belongings directly involve students who were required to leave campus by the university.

Aspects of the ethic of care are also relevant to complexity and chaos leadership theory. Like the ethic of care, chaos theory emphasizes breaking down hierarchy, relationships between
roles and tasks, collaboration, and is further supported by local decision making and organic processes - instead of applying universalistic principles to decisions (Kezar, Carducci & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). In fact, relationships both in and outside of the organization are crucial to leaders’ ability to stay connected external to the organization and adjust to changes in the environment (Kezar et al., 2006). Ultimately, chaos leadership theory is helpful to the case because it is “the practices of combining simple rules that are adaptive to multiple local conditions” (Kezar et al., 2006, p. 41).

The ethic of care and chaos leadership theory are relevant because they take into account the changes in the environment and how decisions will impact students. Also, the characteristic of collaboration and relationships shared by the ethic of care and chaos leadership could help de-escalate the situation with the group of students who want to protest.

**Options/Pros and Cons**

After reviewing applicable scholarship, it is important to discuss the variety of options that are available in this case. Listening to students’ feelings toward graduation and how they feel the situation should be dealt with could be very beneficial. This could help the administration gain a new and important perspective, as it is the students’ graduation. On the other hand, students’ emotion or anger toward the event might prevent them from conveying their ideas in an effective way. Their ideas may also logistically not be able to be carried out. In this time of high tension and crisis, canceling commencement seems like a simple way to avoid any further conflict. Commencement Chair Michael Kappa suggests canceling the event and mailing degrees to students. This would give the administration time to process the events and plan their next action thoroughly. This would also eliminate the rush to get campus back to its normal functioning. However, students have made it clear that they want a commencement. Canceling this event
would fail to provide students with closure or healing and leave them all dwindling in the limbo of liminality (Turner, 1996). At the opposite end of the spectrum, the administration could continue with plans and hold commencement on the scheduled date as it was planned. This would be beneficial because all arrangements for the event have been made. This would grant students’ wishes to have their ceremony and continue with the tradition of past graduated classes. While this sense of normalcy in a time of crises may be comforting, this particular spring at Kent State is not normal. Treating it as such could paint the administration as being insensitive to the events of May 4. Holding it on the planned date may also coincide with the investigation and overlap with the National Guard’s stay on campus. The presence of these three parties would not present the type of healing that the students’ so desperately need at this time. Another option would be to hold the ceremony on campus, but wait until it has been restored to its normal functioning. Having the ceremony at a later date would give students and administration time to reflect. It would also allow time for the investigation to carry out and the National Guard to leave. This would ensure that no blatant reminders of the tragic day are present on campus. According to Strange and Banning (2001), removing these cues would result in more desirable behaviors. The obvious cues may be removed, but the campus on its own is a great reminder of the May 4 events which could cue past behaviors by students (Strange & Banning, 2001). Thus, holding commencement at a location off campus could be a healthy alternative. Having the ceremony off-campus would ensure that the environment is free of reminders of the tragedy. The ceremony would also allow students to gather, reflect, move through their transition stage, and begin to heal (Turner, 1996). The event would not need to be postponed for the National Guard and FBI to leave campus. However, this would go against Kent State’s tradition and students may not like the idea of holding the ceremony elsewhere.
Course of Action

Matson needs to meet with the Residence Services staff and other administrators to coordinate students’ immediate retrieval of their belongings and decide whether or not housing refunds will be distributed in the near future. The missing information on these topics is too great to make an informed decision. Meeting with Residence Services staff will answer some of the questions Matson has and determine what is best for the university and the students. Applying Shapiro & Gross’ (2008) ethic of care to hearing students’ concerns regarding residence halls and the commencement ceremony is an important piece to addressing larger issues within the campus community. Matson should first meet with students’ Sarah and Jonathan to ask for their ideas regarding graduation and see if they are a part of the commencement protest group. Hearing their ideas will empower the students and give Matson insight from their perspective. If Sarah and Jonathan are not a part of the protest group for commencement, find out who is and speak with a few students from the group. This will help these students to trust the administration more in a time when all authorities appear to be the bad guys. Gaining trust, empowering students, listening, and sharing are all important pieces in rebuilding the relationship between the students and the administration (Shapiro & Gross, 2008). Holding commencement off-campus on or around the planned date would be the best option for Matson at this time. The ceremony would allow students to gather and feel some closure. The events would clearly be addressed in the ceremony and a moment of silence would remember those students’ lives that were lost. Having commencement off-campus would ensure that the event does not coincide with the FBI and National Guard’s stay. It would help students to transition from Turner’s (1996) liminality. Finally, it would eliminate any cues of the May 4 events which may trigger old behaviors. Understanding and addressing students’ concerns and conveying the administrations’ point of
view will help rebuild the trust that has been lost to chaos. Having the ceremony at an off-campus venue would be a laudable compromise between both parties.
References


