


# Chapter 2


## Navigating Contradictions Cognitive Dissonance and Narrative Conflicts in Higher Education Crisis Diagnostics

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study exposes how cognitive dissonance and narrative conflicts critically undermine crisis diagnostics in higher education. Through systematic literature review and thematic analysis of 170 studies, we demonstrate that psychological discomfort (e.g., leaders rationalizing budget cuts) and competing stakeholder narratives (e.g., administrative “efficiency” vs. faculty “betrayal”) jointly distort threat assessment, causing diagnostic delays, 25% budget overruns, 40% enrollment declines, and prolonged disruptions. An integrated framework counters these barriers via (1) stakeholder alignment workshops to resolve dissonance (35% faster consensus), (2) digital sensemaking protocols co-creating unified narratives (50% faster resolution),*

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*and (3) ethical AI governance ensuring transparent, bias-audited analytics (40% trust restoration). The framework transforms crises from collapse points into catalysts for resilient renewal through narrative coherence and accountable governance.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

For higher education institutions dealing with complex challenges, effectively diagnosing crises—the methodical process of identifying, evaluating, and responding to existential threats like financial collapse (e.g., state funding cuts forcing closures), reputational damage (e.g., scandals eroding trust), or governance failures (e.g., leadership paralysis during protests)—is crucial (Boin et al., 2016; Tight, 2019). To evaluate concerns such as financial shortfalls, stakeholder implications, and operational viability, this diagnostic process—which is essential for organizational stability—requires precise techniques, including multi-source data triangulation (Kezar, 2014; Seeber et al., 2016). However, psychological, and linguistic elements, particularly cognitive dissonance, and narrative conflicts, have a significant impact on the precision and effectiveness of crisis diagnosis. Leaders and stakeholders may reject important information, downplay threats, or justify inaction due to cognitive dissonance. This psychological discomfort arises from holding opposing views or encountering information that challenges preexisting convictions. This can seriously skew the diagnostic lens. The emergence of conflicting, frequently incompatible narratives about the nature, causes, and solutions of the crisis among various groups (faculty, administration, students, boards, and external stakeholders) also causes fragmented understandings, impedes the development of consensus, and paralyzes coordinated response efforts. These intertwined phenomena are influential because they directly obstruct the objective assessment, shared situational awareness, and unified interpretation essential for accurate crisis diagnostics. The following sections trace the evolution of higher education systems, define the crisis conceptually, provide theoretical grounding for cognitive dissonance and narrative conflicts, and explore their critical convergence within the institutional learning environment, setting the stage for understanding their impact on diagnostics.

### **Tracing the Roots: How Higher Education's Evolution Fueled Modern Crises**

The extraordinary journey of higher education is essential to comprehending today's issues. The closed-off elite structures of the past are outdated. Institutions

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