

Saying You're Sorry

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For college and university presidents, the process of apologizing after high-profile missteps can seem to take as long as a tortoise walking a mile.

As a result, the actions Wednesday of University of California, Irvine, Chancellor Howard Gillman stand out as noteworthy. Days after news broke that the university [revoked admission offers](#) from 499 students, Chancellor Howard Gillman [issued a public statement](#) offering a personal apology. The university would admit all accepted students except for those who dropped below its academic standards, he said.

The relative speed and decisiveness with which Gillman acted raise the question of why more university presidents don't step in so swiftly. Higher education's recent history is littered with instances of leaders who seemingly hesitated to offer forceful apologies. Instead of pleasing the public by uttering two little words and a promise to fix things, such presidents have been seen as incompetent, stonewalling or hemming and hawing.

For presidents, however, apologizing isn't as simple as saying "I'm sorry." At a complex institution like a college or university, a sincere apology can only come after a process of gathering information and weighing risks to the institution, according to experts who have been in crisis war rooms. That process is under strain in a world where rapid societal changes collide on college campuses and where students have a louder voice than ever because of social media.

And then there is the human element. Sometimes, highly successful leaders have a difficult time looking beyond their tried-and-true playbooks, which might not apply to a particular situation and might not include apologizing. Other times, top brass can't look beyond their own ego.

Many of those factors don't appear to have applied to Irvine's admissions situation, of course. The university was the subject of a July 28 *Los Angeles Times* [article](#) describing soon-to-be freshmen who had been planning to attend its campus only to have their admission offers yanked two months before the fall semester started. More than half of the offers had been rescinded due to transcript issues, and the others had been revoked for poor grades during students' senior years.

Colleges and universities sometimes revoke admission offers over the summer in cases where students don't file required paperwork on time, pay deposits or keep up their grades as they finish high school. But 499 revocations was unusually high for a UC institution. And a university spokesman confirmed that UC Irvine had been stricter than usual with its requirements -- at the same time that more students than expected had accepted its offers of admission.

The university had been anticipating 6,300 freshmen. About 7,100 accepted offers.

Stories surfaced from students who said their acceptance had been rescinded even though they met the university's requirements. Some reported having difficulty reaching anyone at the university to discuss their status. The situation drew outrage from students and families. More than 600 signed [a petition](#) from the Associated Students of the University of California, Irvine, demanding apologies and equal admissions requirements for students.

The same day of the *Times* story, the university's vice chancellor of student affairs, Thomas A. Parham, issued [a public letter](#) to prospective students apologizing to those who felt ignored or mistreated. He urged students to appeal the withdrawal of their admissions offers.

On Wednesday, a week after the *Times* story, the university's chancellor issued his own statement, pledging to

reverse the withdrawals for more than half of the affected students. Only those whose transcripts did not meet the university's academic standards -- for grades, courses taken and test scores -- will not be fully admitted. An expedited appeals process will be set up for students who did not meet those requirements so they can make their case for extenuating circumstances.

"In closing, the students and their families have my personal, sincerest apology," Gillman wrote. "We should not have treated you this way over a missed deadline."

No one was available for interview for this story, an Irvine spokesman said. The university reinstated 290 admission offers that had been revoked for missed deadlines and because of similar requirements.

Gillman's apology didn't placate everyone. Comments on the university's Facebook page wondered whether students in an overenrolled university would be able to take the classes they need to graduate in four years and complained about no dormitory space being available. One commenter said the chancellor was trying to blame the admissions office and pretending to be a savior for students. A *Los Angeles Times* [editorial](#) likened the university's rescinding admissions to a sucker punch, even if UC Irvine did move to correct the issue.

"Still, the administration hasn't said who conceived of this less-than-bright idea and how far up the UCI chain it went for approval," the editorial said of rescinding students' acceptance because of overenrollment. "As a public institution, the university owes a full explanation."

Yet many supported Gillman's move. Other comments on the university's Facebook page called it the "honorable thing to do" and "the best decision for new students." *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt [called it](#) an "all-too-rare instance of people in power being willing to change their minds -- to decide that the embarrassment of changing course is better than doubling down on a mistake."

Leaders can rarely, if ever, please everyone when reacting to public missteps. But they should follow a crisis playbook of acknowledging a mistake, owning it, saying what they will do to prevent it from happening in the future, fixing the issue and then moving on, experts said.

"The challenge is, it's not always very easy," said Rae Morrow Goldsmith, who is a former vice president for advancement resources at the Council for Advancement and Support of Education who has spoken frequently about crisis management over the years. Goldsmith is currently chief marketing and communications officer at Southern Illinois University, but she specified she was not speaking for the university or in her capacity there.

"There are lots of barriers institutions face when you're trying to figure out what to say," she said. "They may not have the facts. They may not know what the facts are yet, because they may have to do a look internally. They may know the facts but they're prevented from releasing them."

Institutions might be prevented from releasing facts in cases that involve personnel issues or the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. They also have to weigh legal considerations. Presidents have to balance their legal responsibilities against their responsibility to be transparent with different university stakeholders.

They also have to resist the urge to speak out strongly before they have all the facts. Gathering those facts can take more time than members of the public realize, experts said. Universities are complex institutions with many employees making decisions on multiple levels -- sometimes one hand doesn't know what the other is doing.

Those issues [played out](#) very publicly this summer at the University of Southern California after serious allegations surfaced that the former dean of the university's medical school -- who was still a faculty member -- had been associating with a group of criminals and drug users while also using drugs himself. The university at one point said it had only recently received firsthand information about the former dean's behavior, but the *Los Angeles Times* documented instances when it tried to interview university leaders about the situation over the course of a 15-month investigation.

University leaders have frequently cited privacy concerns in a series of responses, but President C. L. Max Nikias said in a letter last week that the university “could have done better” in its response. A university [news article](#) posted Tuesday on the issue laid out key facts, including that the university had started the termination process for the former dean. The article also highlighted plans to examine policies and procedures going forward. But it did not once use the words “sorry,” “apology” or “regret.”

Other presidents have also been inconsistent about apologizing for issues that boiled over into the public eye. Former University of Louisville President James Ramsey [apologized multiple times](#) after he posed in 2015 in clothing that some labeled racist for stereotyping Mexicans. But after he was later ousted from the university, he issued a defiant response to a [scathing audit](#) of his management and practices while leading the university’s foundation.

“You are simply wrong,” he wrote while refuting one point in a six-page response to the auditor’s report.

College sports are also filled with examples where leaders either refused to apologize for scandals or were seen as being slow to do so. Take, for example, sexual assault scandals involving the [Baylor University](#) football team.

The human element is also an important part of leaders not apologizing, said Daniel Swinton, managing partner at NCHERM Group LLC, a law and consulting firm. Leaders in the war room are often trying to evaluate the lowest-risk response to a situation -- and when faced with multiple high-risk situations, they sometimes try to protect their own employees.

Or they are worried about the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights getting involved. That’s a pertinent point with the current focus on sexual misconduct.

“What’s been happening recently is people have seen the biggest risk is OCR coming after them,” Swinton said. “I think they have made decisions that have tried to keep OCR out of their backyard, which have actually landed them in court. And they're getting beat up in court, which to me is a bigger risk.”

It’s important to take a step back and manage situations in a way that is transparent and fair, rather than a way that won’t spark further investigations or student protests. Another issue is ego, Swinton said.

“You see, particularly, more elite institutions tend to have more hubris that gets in the way,” he said.

But do those who have experience as the president of a college or university think it is hard to issue an apology?

“I think the answer is no, not when you’re pretty sure you’ve gotten it wrong or there’s a better answer out there,” said Keith Miller, past president of Virginia State University and president emeritus of Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania. “You know, sometimes things become a lot more clear after you’ve had a lot more input.”

It can still be tricky to get to that point.

“A little humility goes a long way,” Goldsmith said. “I think people really do understand that higher education institutions are not perfect. If they can acknowledge that and just make sure they’re setting a course to make sure they learned from it, people will forgive.”