

Face-Negotiation Theory's Role in a Loss of a Major: A Case Study

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The Paris Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In 2024 the Lithuanian Ministry of Education denied a small, Baltic liberal arts university reaccreditation of its communication program, meaning it can no longer offer an undergraduate degree in communication. Over the next several months the department reorganized and was granted reconfiguration as Global Business and Public Engagement, and then Global Business and Communication. At first the ministry said the program must end teaching existing students by December 2025, but later said the students in the existing major could be taught through December 2027. The newly developed Global Business and Communication program is a degree in the business study field and it follows all the requirements of a business degree but with a focus on communication. This qualitative research explores this case study using Face Negotiation Theory to explore the various stakeholders in their struggle to assist students from many countries in the completion of their academic work while retaining the essence of the study of communication. In addition, this paper suggests that administrators and faculty worked to save face with students and each other. The research suggests that deeper transparency may have helped the university with its stakeholders.

Keywords: accreditation, teach-out, face negotiation theory, situational crisis communication theory, communication, business, transparency, stakeholders

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Introduction

This research investigates stakeholder responses following the loss of institutional accreditation for a major. Employing a qualitative approach, this limited case study examines narratives among stakeholders who either accepted, contested, or accommodated the institutional change. Through the analysis among as many institutional actors who agreed to participate, this study explores how university leadership strategically framed messaging to mitigate reputational damage and maintain program viability for faculty, students, and staff at Lithuanian's LCC International University. This research uses Face Negotiation Theory to explore the competing narratives that emerged and examines how these narratives were deployed to shape the program's trajectory.

The Research Question

The small, liberal arts university in the Baltics suffered a devastating loss of its communication major in early 2025. How did it respond to the loss?

Hypothesis

While the university was able to rebound with a new major that incorporated communication principles, the university's lack of transparency contributed to suspicion among some stakeholders.

What is Accreditation in Lithuania?

In Lithuania, the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) reviews 13 colleges and 16 universities by evaluating institutions, their programs of study to ensure they conform to the mandatory national and international standards. SKVC is the official government agency that conducts external evaluations of educational institutions. Program review helps ensure that each university complies with Lithuanian laws and European standards. Typically, universities are reviewed every six years. Zinaida Manžuch, director SKVC, was contacted for background and wrote May 19, 2026, "In 2025, SKVC issued 69 accreditation decisions about specific study fields (several study programs may operate in one study field)." Of those, 58 decisions (84%) granted seven-year accreditation to study fields, eight (12 %) – granted accreditation for a three-year period with subsequent repeated assessment and 3 (4 %) non-accreditation decisions (Study quality, p. 16).

Founded to help students from former Soviet-bloc countries and elsewhere learn about freedom, the small university bills itself as the only faith-based university in Europe that uses a North American-style of instruction for the liberal arts. Students are from 40 or more countries. The university is known for its emphasis on peaceful resolutions to thorny issues (Smith, 2025).

The university had hoped to secure a generous teach-out plan when it lost the ability to award undergraduate degrees in communication, but it learned that students would have to finish the academic program in the same year that the university learned it lost accreditation—2025; however, SKVC later approved a teach-out plan through December 2027. A teach-out plan allows students to remain in the major and finish their requirements, in this case—communication. Students are permitted to transfer to another major or transfer to another university. While students may finish with a legitimate academic degree before the deadline,

some consider the loss of an accredited major to be less valuable as a job-seeking practice, which means that accreditation matters for personal enrichment and economic well-being (Understanding the risks, 2025).

History of the University

The university began in 1991 as a Christian-based, liberal arts university, established by a joint venture of Lithuanian, Canadian and American foundations. The mission statement on the web says the university “. . . provides Christian liberal arts education within a diverse learning community that transforms people for servant leadership.” <https://lcc.lt/about-lcc>). In addition, the university goes on to say its mission is “to be the leading Christian liberal arts university in Europe, renowned for its flourishing academic community, spiritual vitality, and global impact.” This research attempted to engage the leadership but it is in transition. The top leader is scheduled to retire and the other academic officers resigned for various reasons. All are from North America.

Brief History of the Major

The university pioneered Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages and soon found that students wanted to explore topics more associated with communication including communication theory and practice along journalism and film studies. Over the years the Department of Communication went by the name Contemporary Communication or Communication and had a series of chairmen who allowed faculty, often short-term professors from North American and other places, to teach specialty courses related to their research interest.

As an institution with a student body that hovers around 500 to 600 students, the university operates with shared resources across departments. Historically, the university values professional and international expertise alongside formal academic credentials. However, Lithuanian higher education policy emphasizes doctoral qualifications and research productivity. The university therefore adapted while seeking to maintain institutional integrity. This reflects identity negotiation, where actors balance external pressures with internal values (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Other Challenges Impacting the University

The Ministry of Education found the absence of communication faculty with earned terminal degrees in communication and the dearth of research in the discipline to be among the weaknesses of the department. This churn was cited by the Ministry of Education as one of the many weaknesses in the program. In its evaluation, SKVC noted three areas that it considered unsatisfactory: Links to scientific (or artistic) research and higher education, the teaching staff and quality assurance and public information. The committee noted other areas as satisfactory with “substantial shortcomings” (p. 13).

Research by the faculty and the presence of faculty with an earned doctorate were also cited as problems (SKVC External Evaluation Report, 2024). The Ministry of Education said the Department of Contemporary Communication (hereafter communication) said no new students could enroll in the communication major, which is the reason the old program aligned itself with the Department of Business and began offering a business degree alongside of an existing business degree that uses the traditional model of classes including accounting and economics.

SKVC included a section on ways to address shortcoming, writing:

1. The university needs a wider view of the market, not only from stakeholders they collaborate with via internships or volunteer programs but also from independent market analyses and broader industry feedback.
2. The courses of the program should be grouped in semesters to show how progression is built from semester to semester.
3. The guidelines for thesis presentation, thesis defense and committee formation need to be articulated more clearly (2024, p. 13).

Work Around

According to Manžuch in her personal communication May 19, 2026, a new program is possible at institutions such as the university despite losing accreditation. “If the study field was not accredited, the higher education institution can submit a new study program in this field only in a year after non-accreditation decision came into force and was published in the Register of Legal Acts.”

The university pivoted to become the Department of Global Business and Public Engagement and then GB/C as a new major, it could have lost 40 students, according to Chair Shane Crombie (personal communication, Feb. 17, 2026). While some students still feel the university could have done more, faculty such as Crombie praised then the top leadership for salvaging the program and making a way for students from far-flung countries to stay in school. Because the university is an international university, students come from Europe and beyond to study. Crombie noted that it isn’t easy for many of them to simply transfer to another university because of issues with visas and for migration reasons.

The solution by the administration to put in place a business program may not have pleased all the students but it was a way to keep the hybrid program going. As a matter of fact, more than 50 students protested in the lobby of the classroom building. In April 2025, nearly 70 dissatisfied students responded to loss of the communication major by signing a petition protesting the ministry’s action (Smith, 2025). Students questioned the administration on its funding a new building program at their expense and the lack of transparency by the administration. The students presented a diverse collection—about one-quarter of the students were from Ukraine, others from European Union countries and many former Soviet countries. The solidarity suggested a kind of collectivistic group united in their desire to show their disappointment with the university; but their actions also suggested a kind of individualistic action. The students held their signs but they didn’t shout or chant; the protest was visible, not loud. It was an odd mix of two polar approaches to conflict where the stakeholders wanted to have a show of strength at the risk of embarrassing the administration.

Figure 1*Grim-Faced Students Hold Signs but Protest Silently*

Note. Photo by Michael Patrick, personal collection, 2025.

The situation amounted to a crisis and the organizations do what they can to return the campus culture of something approaching routine and normal (Holladay, 2010). The goal was more than just smoothing over the loss; it was about the reputation of the organization (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Identifying the stakeholders is crucial for an effective two-way flow of communication (Canny, 2016; Coombs, 1999).

Despite the efforts of the university leadership, hard feeling ensued through the end of the fall 2025 year despite efforts by the administrations and others to put a good face on the loss. Early in the spring 2026 semester, faculty publicly questioned administrators about the departure of one of its top administrators. On January 19, 2026, the executive cabinet responded with an apology and an offer to be more transparent. All possess passports from North America. In an email sent to faculty Jan. 19, 2026, the executive cabinet wrote:

Based on your discussion at the recent faculty assembly, we want to acknowledge that the sudden resignation and departure of [Name withheld] raises questions. As we mentioned in our farewell words in December, we are grateful for the ways that [name withheld] helped strengthen [the university]. We agree that transparent communication is healthy and just. Yet complete transparency is not possible in this case. [Names withheld] mutually agreed not to talk about the details of his departure.

The inability to say more in this situation is especially difficult in the broader context of poor communication on past issues. We think particularly about past the accreditation process for the Communications department where [the university] leadership did not communicate with adequate openness.

We care deeply about [the university] and you, our faculty. We want to do better. Where we can be more transparent, where we can change processes or policies or ways of

working to improve collaboration and communication, we want to do so. And, we encourage you to continue to talk to members of the Cabinet Executive directly.

Literature Review

Face Negotiation Theory explores the tension between collective and individualistic cultures and used the idea of an interdependent self-image that defaults to giving others-face or mutual face vs. the independent self-image that tends to default protective posture “self face” (Griffith, 2023). Ting-Toomey “assumes that people of every culture are always negotiating face” (p. 343).

Saving face is an old concept popularized by Sociologist Erving Goffman in the 1950s and used this idea to explore the ritual elements in social interaction. As early as 1955, he wrote, “The term face may be defined as a positive social value a person effectively claims for himself . . .” (p. 213). More recently the idea is used in Face Negotiation Theory developed by linguists Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson in 1978 and later expanded by communications scholar Stella Ting-Toomey to examine cross-cultural communication, the need for acceptance and the need to manage conflict. While “face” is a metaphor for a public self-image, this research will use it to examine the approach used by various actors in the loss of accreditation and to protect or defend the action by the state and the reaction by stakeholders including administrators, faculty, students and others association with the Department of Communication ongoing changes. The theory outlines various conflict management styles, including avoidance, compromise, and domination, shaped by cultural backgrounds. For instance, Western cultures might emphasize individual rights and competition, while Eastern cultures often lean toward collectivist approaches, favoring compromise and accommodation (Ungvarsky, 2023).

According to Coomb’s Situational Crisis Communication Theory, organizations that respond best need to frame the situation, work on perceptions of the stakeholders and attempt to reduce the negative effects that result from the crisis (1995, 2007). The goal, he writes, should be to refute false statements that often circulate as rumors, reduce the threats by offering a hopeful take on them and rebuild the loss by helping stakeholders recall all the past good will of the organization. The LCC university leadership attempted to manage the crisis by holding town halls, adding a new major, offering to supplement the cost of various classes and assist students who opted to transfer to another university.

While not all stakeholders were pleased, the new major has its advantages, according to Crombie. Students were provided with a pathway to complete their degrees, which was especially important in an international context where transfer options are limited (Crombie, personal communication, Feb. 17, 2026).

Methodology

This study used a short survey that included closed-ended questions and open-ended questions to probe faculty members of the GB/C department and members of the Department of Business along with other stakeholders. The university’s Institutional Review Board approved the survey. The survey was distributed following spring 2026 graduation when students had left campus. Participants in the survey were selected to represent key stakeholder groups involved in or affected by the transition, including institutional leadership, program administrators, faculty from both communication and business disciplines. The entire faculty of the GB/C

department was surveyed. Of the six full-time faculty only two responded. At least one faculty member said the topic was too sensitive. In addition, select members of the Department of Business were contacted and most declined to respond. Some didn't complete the survey but responded with lengthy responses of 100 words or more where they reflected on the new business major. Business faculty hinted that the GB/C major intruded into an already overstretched business degree program and cited the leadership turnover as the central problem.

Among the few who were willing to share was Henrika Ruginė, Lithuanian, a lecturer in the university's Department of Business and a well-known lecturer and author in the field of international business and sustainability. In her survey response, she echoed that leadership was the problem, noting that the university didn't prepare well for accreditation. She went on to say the issue of hiring professors with earned doctorates remains a chronic issue at the university.

She wrote in her survey response, "To make new program work, (more is) needed to increase scientific publications quantity, and in good journals . . . for that . . . (more funding is) needed." She warned that if change doesn't happen, ". . . there will be no university after all."

Among the GB/C program full professor Michael Patrick, USA, wondered about the SKVC approach to accreditation in his survey response. In his survey response, he said,

The government agency offered no criticism of the course teaching or curriculum content. However, instead of punishing the school administration, they almost immediately cancelled all the students' ability to complete their degrees within a short window. Punishing students immediately did not fix or remedy the administration's or faculty's failure to publish enough research articles to meet the state's expectations. In sum, the punishment did not fit 'the crime.'

Formerly a dean at a popular graduate program in Virginia, Patrick teaches a strategic communication class including ones that deal with crisis communication. Patrick said the university missed an opportunity to use the crisis to demonstrate good will in keeping its stakeholders, including faculty and students, well informed. Their reserved posture, meant to be protective of stakeholders, was interpreted as unduly paternalistic and lacking in trust.

Outgoing assistant professor Dr. Emmy Irobi, Poland, taught at the university for nine years. He said in his survey response that the new program is going in the right direction but offered a caveat, writing, "Much has to be done to generate trust, communication, creativity, and transparency."

Guest business professor Dr. Donna Fallow, USA, offered hope in her survey response, saying, "Understanding communications and contemporary communications is crucial in organizations. Degrees that concentrate in these subjects are integral in helping students master the topics and related processes for effective use in any type of business or organization."

In her survey response, she also noted the danger of poor communication in organizations, saying,

Studies reveal that many businesses have had serious problems and some have completely failed as a result of ineffective communication with various types of

stakeholders. Businesses need and will benefit from employees who are skilled in communications. Concentrated degrees can support this critical need.

Discussion

Considering that the university involves students, faculty and others from as many as 40 countries, the intercultural dimension is prominent. As academic leaders including GB/C worked to adjust to the back-to-back changes, they encountered confusion by several stakeholders, students in particular who mounted a protest in the lobby of the classroom building. Some students went along with the changes while others resisted and noted dissatisfaction with their new identity as business students. The Department of Business made their own adjustments with the new alliance, but some in the business department, a mix of North Americans and non-North Americans, found the additional business degree too unduly difficult given its overstretched resources.

In a study of face-interpersonal conflict in organizations, Oetzel, Meares, Myers and Estefana (2009), found self-face concern was associated positively with affects that tended to be what they called dominating and emotionally expressive styles. “Other styles that they rated positively included integrating, obliging, and compromising styles. and mutual-face concern was associated positively with integrating, obliging, and compromising styles” (p. 106). In the case of the university, the leadership of the Chair Crombie may have made the most difference is stakeholders agreeing to the changes that confronted the department in its ongoing adjustments to the state’s changes.

Findings

This researcher acknowledges that this convenience survey sample was paltry and possesses only limited generalizations. Nonetheless, here are a couple of generalizations about the reaction to the loss of the major and the reaction of the stakeholders. Based on this qualitative approach using this modest survey, the hypothesis is supported—The university response and lack of transparency contributed to suspicion among some stakeholders.

Ting-Toomey noted, “When people tend to use the same type of facework no matter what the dispute, she refers to it as their conflict style” (Griffith, 2023, p. 343). Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998), suggests the conflict style employed by the university hurt its response. Furthermore, the leadership was slow to accept SKVC’s external evaluation, with Patrick and Crombie finding fault with the approach used to evaluate the major. Regardless, the hesitancy to inform students and other stakeholders of the academic upheaval risked of institutional reputation.

According to Muindi & Kiarie, 2021, SCCT is inspired by Weiner’s (1985) Attribution Theory, “that explains how people search for the causes of events in their lives. Attribution theory posits that people make attributions to the causes of events, especially the events that are negative and unexpected” (p. 82). Coombs (2007) notes the theory highlights anger as a dominant emotion that can occur, which was evident in the student protest.

In most cases, the reaction by the students reflected a Western, individualistic bent that favored their personal success over other considerations. A part of Face Negotiation Theory, identity suggests that people resist looking anything but their best; nonetheless, when sides appeared to be drawn, polarity can result and rebuilding mutual trust takes commitment (Griffith, 2023, p.

343). As for the academic leaders, all from North American, their response may not anticipate the push back. Could a greater sense of cultural sensitivity make the difference?

Ting-Toomey (2017) noted that “The goal of the FNT theory is to provide a culture-sensitive lens in explaining some of the key constructs in cross-cultural comparative conflict situations.” She (1989) also noted the interpersonal relationship dynamic is complicated and changes with many factors within and beyond the relationship.

According to interim vice president of academic affairs, the future could be bright, according to an interim university leader who wrote in personal communication, May 20, 2026, “What I know now is that the current Global Business and Communication program is gaining momentum and students who are in it seem satisfied and even excited by it . . .”

Recent work in higher education points to similar patterns, where institutions adjust programs in response to accreditation frameworks and policy pressures that shape how legitimacy is assessed (Misra, 2024; Ski-Berg, 2024). In this case, however, the response was not only structural but involved how the university explained and positioned the transition, both internally and externally. As other studies suggest, institutions often rely on forms of positioning and framing to align with external expectations while maintaining a sense of continuity (Buckner, 2025; Coşkun & Arslan, 2023). While the survey response from stakeholders in this research was limited, the tone of those who participated suggested that the university leadership model could improve along with a renewed commitment to transparency.

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Appendix

Survey instrument approved by LCC's Institutional Review Board May 8, 2026.

May 9, 2026

Please consider participating in a study about the aftermath of the LCC International University losing its ability to grant undergraduate students a degree in communication. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate in the study and, if you do decide to participate, you may stop at any time. There will be no consequences for deciding not to participate or for deciding to stop participation in the study. Your name and title may be used in this research as a matter of accuracy. Should you like to participate but without being identified, please make that wish known. We can use your comments and note that you didn't want to reveal your identity. For instance, we can say, "One faculty member reported." The sample will be small so it is possible that the audience can guess the identity but please know that we are doing research and we want your input and we can avoid identifying you if you so desire.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to respond to the questions below, which will take about five minutes to complete.

There is no cost to participate in this research project.

Name, e-signature of student researcher, date

Survey instrument

Background

I am scheduled to present original research at the Paris Conference on Arts and Humanities for The International Academic Forum June 15, 2026, at the Sorbonne University in Paris. Shane and I are working on a journal article on the same topic--Resetting a major when it loses its academic accreditation.

Would you mind helping by answering a couple of questions?

If possible, would **hit reply** and send me your answers by **May 15, 2026**?

It will take fewer than **five** minutes to complete this questionnaire.

If you'd like to remain **unidentified**, just say so.

As a courtesy, I submitted an IRB request and revision May 8, 2026. I am not affiliated with LCC these days so IRB approval may not be necessary; nonetheless, I have been in touch with LCC's IRB committee.

Shane will work on the journal paper but he is **NOT** working on the presentation June 15, 2026.

Your participation is completely **voluntary**. I am probing the intensity of reaction to the loss of the major by faculty and a couple of others. I would be very grateful for you to participate in one or all the questions and responses.

If you want to participate but not in this way, please let me know and I can do an interview. writingsmith@yahoo.com

Survey Questions

Demographics

Name

Title

Country of passport

Number of years teaching at LCC

Opinion scale questions

On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being strongly disagree to 10 being strongly agree response to the following statements.

1. In 2025 the program was headed in the right direction.
2. In 2026 the program was headed in the right direction.
3. In 2025 the program let you down.
4. In 2026 the program let you down.

Open-ended question

5. What would you like to see happen with the program now?
6. Do you have anything to add?