

When Emergency Strikes: Lessons From College Closures

The area surrounding Howard-Tilton Memorial Library on the campus of Tulane University remained flooded in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.



‘Plan for the Worst and Adjust Quickly to Changes on the Ground’

By KELLY FIELD

When the Iowa River overflowed its banks 12 years ago, inundating the campus of the University of Iowa, Donald Guckert, associate vice president for facilities management, learned some important lessons in adapting to climate change.

The university had been prepared for a 100-year flood like the one that had hit the campus in 1993; it wasn't ready for the 500-year flood it got, Guckert said.

“We fought the flood for 10 days — it kept building and building,” he recalled.

After the unprecedented flood, the university stopped relying on sandbags stacked by crews of volunteers and started using machines and trained staff members to put up barriers quickly. It stockpiled critical equipment and supplies such as pumps, generators, and shovels to get ready for the next flood.

But the most important things that Guckert learned during the catastrophic flood of 2008 were to plan for the worst and adjust quickly to changes on the ground.

Those lessons could come in handy today, as the University of Iowa and campuses nationwide confront the coronavirus, a pandemic of uncertain severity and duration. It's a threat that — like the historic flood — keeps “building and building.” Dozens of colleges have already canceled in-person classes and sent students home; many are shifting to online learning.

As more colleges contemplate such moves, it's worth hearing from some institutions that

have lived through closures resulting from natural disasters. Though the circumstances are different — there's never been a pandemic that's shut down so many of the nation's colleges — the strategies for responding are, in many cases, the same.

1. COMMUNICATE

This may seem obvious, but in the midst of a crisis it can be easy to overlook a constituency or to send mixed messages, college leaders say.

When Rice University conducted a review of its messaging in the aftermath of 2017's Hurricane Harvey, it found that some of its communications weren't clear, and that faculty members wanted messages specifically for them. This time around, the university is crafting its messages centrally, to ensure consistency, while customizing them to specific audiences.

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“You have multiple groups that have to be communicated to differently,” says Jerusha Kasch, director of institutional crisis management, noting that undergraduates have concerns distinct from those of graduate students.

As students ask questions of the cri-

sis-management team, via social media or a [web page](#) dedicated to Covid-19, leaders post the answers so everyone can see them.

Regular, transparent communications reassure the campus community that “you’ve got a grip on the situation and you’re managing it as well as you can,” says Scott S. Cowen, who was president of Tulane University when Hurricane Katrina hit, in 2005. During the semesterlong shutdown that followed Katrina, he sent emails daily.

“People are anxious, they are uncertain, and the more they hear from you, the better off they are,” he says.

Samia Yaqub, president of California’s Butte College, which closed for 18 days during and after the extensive Camp Fire, in 2018, agrees. “Communication is critical, and we find it’s never enough,” she says. “You might send something out on Friday and then get a message on Monday saying we haven’t heard from you in years.”

But Mary Anne Nagy, vice president for student life and leadership engagement at Monmouth University, which lost eight teaching days following Hurricane Sandy, in 2012, says crisis communication is a balancing act. Communicate too much, and you run the risk of people tuning you out; stay silent, and they may become worried and stressed.

And remember, she says, “nothing is more powerful than having face-to-face conversations” — so communicate in person as much as the rules of “social distancing” will allow. “You can never, ever, forget about the human element.”

2. COLLABORATE

When disaster strikes a region, disruptions to the supply chain can make it hard for colleges to secure critical supplies.

That’s why the [Universities & Colleges Caucus of the International Association of Emergency Managers](#) created a “national intercollegiate mutual aid agreement,” says David J. Hubeny, the caucus’s chair. The agreement, reached in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, allows colleges to share resources and services across state lines, “with all the rules and reimbursement policies worked out ahead of time,” says Hubeny, who is executive director of emergency management at Binghamton University.

It’s not that colleges weren’t sharing resources before. After Sandy, one college sent diesel fuel to the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (since absorbed by Rutgers University), to counter a shortage there. But such arrangements were more informal. With the agreement, “we already have the framework, so we can move a lot faster at getting resources to campus,” says André P. Le Duc, chief resilience officer and associate vice president for safety and risk services at the University of Oregon, which sent a team to Umpqua Community College after the 2015 mass shooting there.

But making use of the agreement in a global pandemic could be tricky, Le Duc adds. “In hurricane season, we might be able to aid somebody on the Eastern Seaboard. The challenge today is that everybody is in the same boat.”

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Still, collaboration is continuing in the current crisis. The [Disaster Resilient Universities](#) network, which Le Duc leads, has created a “virtual emergency-coordination center” where its 800 institutional members can post plans, messages, and real-time information about their status.

Members of the Universities & Colleges Caucus have made use of its email list to share resources and a spreadsheet tracking how colleges are responding to the virus, says Eric Hodges, the caucus’s vice chair and director of emergency management at Illinois State University. “We have been leaning on each other through the listserv,” he says.

3. CRAM — OR GO ONLINE

Many of the colleges that have canceled classes so far have announced that they’ll shift to online learning. Others will have to figure out how to fit a semester’s worth of material into a shorter time frame.

That’s what the University of North Carolina



ROBYN BECK, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, GETTY IMAGES

A man leaving Santiago Canyon College in Orange, Calif., looks back as the Canyon Fire 2 sweeps through the area on October 9, 2017.

at Wilmington did after Hurricane Florence destroyed 13 apartment-style residence halls, tore a hole in the roof of the main science building, and toppled 400 trees in September 2018. During the cleanup, the campus was closed to students for four weeks, cutting the semester from 15 weeks to 11.

To make up for lost time, the university added weekend classes and online programs

and eliminated the fall break. With permission from its accreditor and the governing board to make “substantive changes” in its programs, it refocused lessons on core material, says Jose V. Sartarelli, the chancellor. “We chose to be intensive on those things that are critical and not bother on the things that are supportive, explanatory, additional,” he says.

Pepperdine University, which closed for

several weeks following the Woolsey Fire in 2018, took a different tack, putting its classes online. The university, which canceled classes last week because of the coronavirus, is now in the enviable position of having already trained its faculty members to teach online.

President James A. Gash's advice to colleges now moving their courses online: Be patient and be flexible. Faculty members accustomed to the "chalk and talk" style of teaching may take some time to adjust to online learning. And they may need to reschedule courses for personal reasons or family illness.

"Be patient, be nimble, and give people the benefit of the doubt when challenges arise," Gash says. And faculty members, remember that students will pick up on your cues, he says: "If faculty appear frustrated and confused and bitter, that will rub off on students."

4. PLAN FOR THE WORST

In the 12 years since the Iowa floodwaters receded, Mr. Guckert has traveled the country, advising other colleges on how to prepare for the worst. His message: "Plan for your next disaster, not your last one."

"The lesson is to think really big on where disaster might take you," he says. "In the case of coronavirus, we have to be imaginative about how big this could be and how quickly it could get there."

Cowen, the former president of Tulane, suggests starting "with the worst-case scenario that you could come up with." Consider not just the immediate impact but the longer-term fallout as well: "What if we have to close campus to students for an entire year? What if a significant portion of students do not return to campus? What if the size of next year's entering class is smaller than expected? Do we have enough cash to get through this crisis?"

Gayle E. Hutchinson, president of California State University at Chico, which closed for 18 days because of the Camp Fire, says colleges "can never practice enough for emergencies." After the wildfire struck, Chico conducted more "tabletop exercises," with staff members meeting in groups to discuss their roles during an emergency and their responses to particular situations.

"It feels more real now," Hutchinson says. "Before, there was this sense that the chance of it happening was remote. Now we know it could happen at any moment."

5. PIVOT

One thing that sets the coronavirus crisis apart from those that affected higher education in the past is the uncertainty. Natural disasters are discrete events, each with a clear beginning and end, and they're generally confined to a relatively small geographic area. Colleges prepare if they can, and then respond in the aftermath.

With this global pandemic, "it's a much more fluid situation," says Gash, the Pepperdine president. "We have new facts and data not just every day, but every few hours."

That means colleges will have to adapt — and readapt — their plans as the situation evolves, says Monmouth's Nagy: "There is almost no playbook for what is happening now."

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And two last pieces of advice:

First, pay attention to student needs. When Butte College closed, its leaders learned that "many of our students depend on school for more than their education," Yaqub says. "It was their place of safety, it was there they eat." Colleges should keep food pantries and other services running as long as they can, she says, even if they cancel classes.

Most important, take care of yourself, says Nagy. Eat right, get some sleep, take a break.

"There's something called 'compassion fatigue' — you can't take care of others if you don't take care of yourself," she says. "People who are managing crises have to take time to clear their mind and re-energize, so they can continue to do the work they have to do."

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Lee Gardner contributed reporting to this article.



BRIAN TAYLOR FOR THE CHRONICLE

I Led a College Through Katrina. Here's How Colleges Should Handle This Crisis.

By **SCOTT S. COWEN**

“Disaster advice” became a part of my role after my team and I led Tulane University through the most disruptive time in its history after Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005. The questions that I’m fielding these days in light of the novel-coronavirus pandemic mainly boil down to this: What to expect? What to do?

The challenge with the current crisis is the amount of uncertainty. After the floodwaters had receded in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the immediate threat was over. There was despair, disorientation, and panic, but the storm had passed. We could focus on rebuilding and healing. Those of us at Tulane and our fellow New Orleans

citizens quickly had a sense of the physical damage and human toll, and we knew it would take years to fully recover.

The coronavirus pandemic is very different. It is affecting our entire society, and we don’t know when it will be over, how long it will take until we feel safe again, or when we’ll be able to return to business as usual. But nonetheless, day by day we must build a pathway for recovery and renewal. This is what leaders do. If they don’t, they are not up for the task. In times of crisis, you do not have the luxury of ineffective leadership. What the higher-education sector needs now more than ever is an abundance of resilience, courage, and sound decision-making.

So what is the plan for a crisis



JENNIFER ZDON

Scott S. Cowen

that is intensifying before our eyes every day and causing increasing uncertainty and disruption? My four-part answer is this:

First and foremost, focus on the welfare and safety of your faculty, staff, and students; nothing is more important. A widespread health crisis requires extreme measures. It obviously comes at a cost to cancel events, move classes online, provide flexibility and financial support to faculty and staff, postpone travel, and shut down campuses altogether, but there is no reasonable alternative.

Second, make sure you focus on what you can control (e.g., online learning) and embark on extensive scenario planning for things you cannot control (e.g., the end of the crisis). Prepare for the worst; hope for the best. This means that all institutions need to plan for various scenarios in each functional area of the organization under different assumptions regarding the duration and impact of the crisis, including a stock-market crash.

Third, continually communicate with the campus community in a way that balances reality with hope and empathy. Crises create anxiety, but keeping people informed helps reduce stress. Be honest and transparent while looking for silver linings; every disaster has them. After Katrina, my staff and I were in constant contact with the Tulane community through the extensive use of technology. The tone was personal and intimate, and it let people know we were all on the journey together.

Some of the other strategies we used, such as traveling to cities with clusters of Tulane students to make face-to-face connections, will not be an option anytime soon with this public-health crisis. However, the importance of actively creating a sense of community beyond living and learning in close proximity cannot be overstated.

Keeping in touch via technology is critical. Video conferencing and messaging tools and apps, as well as social media, play a big role in bringing a campus closer together in times like these.

The college leadership has to establish a rhythm of communication that responds to the different needs of various stakeholder groups in terms of frequency, format, and channel of communication. And while communitywide communication from the top is essential, institutions should also ensure that groups within the larger campus community

— such as individual programs, clubs, and student organizations — remain in close dialogue and find ways to still pursue their interests and plans.

Fourth, seek feedback that can provide insight into how you are doing and what other things you could be doing. As an example, we monitored the chat rooms used by our students, faculty, and staff to see what was on their minds so we could respond to their concerns in our decision-making and messaging. Share knowledge across the sector and reach out to the higher-education associations for support and guidance. These associations played a significant role in Tulane's survival during and after Katrina.

In the end, community is about a sense of belonging and trust. Open, responsive, and reliable communication is the foundation, but there are many other ways for colleges to help build community. As Tulane learned in the fall semester of 2005, it requires ingenuity and experimentation, but it can be done even in the most challenging context. In fact, I would argue that the extraordinary conditions and the collective experience of adapting to a new normal deepened our sense of community. To this day, Tulane's "Katrina class" is known for its loyalty and special bond with the university.

What makes the coronavirus crisis so terrifying is simultaneously a source of comfort: We're all in this together. Not only can we empathize with each other on a human level, we can also rest assured that resulting economic and operational challenges will apply to all. It will be a more or less level playing field of chaos, but also of co-learning and innovation. Katrina put Tulane (and other New Orleans-based institutions) at a serious disadvantage in an already fierce arms race with its peer institutions across the country. This time, Tulane is scrambling with everyone else.

Finally, it's important to keep in mind that the disruption will be temporary — even if it lasts six months or more. The bottom line is this: We are all concerned and we will all feel the impact.

But we will persevere if we plan for the worst, hope for the best, and look for the silver linings.

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