THE PRESIDENTIAL ROLE IN DISASTER PLANNING AND RESPONSE:

LESSONS FROM THE FRONT

The paper is based on the experiences and advice of presidents and other leaders who have led their campuses through a disaster — what worked, what did not, and what they wish they had done differently.

Advice is not attributed to any one campus or individual. This paper has the fingerprints of all of the leaders who generously shared their experiences in webcasts sponsored by the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) after 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina and in a panel at SCUP's 2006 Southern Regional Conference.

- Kendall Baker, President of Ohio Northern University and former President of the University of North Dakota. The Grand Forks Flood of 1997 damaged one-third of the 250 campus buildings at the University of North Dakota.
- David A. Caputo, President of Pace University. Pace University's campus in Lower Manhattan, a few blocks from the World Trade Center, felt the consequences of the terrorist attacks on 9/11.
- Louanne Kennedy, Provost at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). In 1994, CSUN experienced devastating damage and loss from a 6.8-magnitude earthquake centered in the Northridge community.
- Eric N. Monday, Associate Vice Chancellor for Finance and Administrative Services at Louisiana State University (LSU). Hurricane Katrina had a direct impact on LSU, which played a significant role in regional recovery.
- Brian Nedwek, Vice President of Academic Affairs at Maryville University and former Vice Provost at St. John's University. Like Pace University, St. John's University's Manhattan campus felt the consequences of the 9/11 attacks.
- Warren Nichols, President of Volunteer State Community College (VSCC). On April 7, 2006, VSCC was hit by a tornado that closed two buildings and inflicted significant damage to the campus.
- Michael Ralph, Assistant Vice President for Planning and Research at the Southern University System. This institution was also affected by Hurricane Katrina, particularly its Southern University at New Orleans campus.
- Richard Schinoff, President of the Miami-Dade Community College, Kendall Campus, and former Dean of the Miami-Dade Community College, Homestead Campus. In 1992, Hurricane Andrew heavily affected the Kendall Campus, the largest of the college's six campuses, as well as the Homestead Campus.
- Portia Shields, former President of Albany State University in Albany, Georgia. A 1994 flood of the Flint River covered two-thirds of the university's campus in water.
- Victor Ukpolo, Chancellor of Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO). The SUNO campus was completely submerged in water as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

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About SCUP

The Society for College and University Planning (SCUP), established in 1965, is a collegial community dedicated to sharing, learning, and teaching best practices in planning for colleges and universities.

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A major disaster is one of the most significant events in the life of the institution, so much so that most campuses that have experienced a disaster mark time in terms of the event for at least a generation: "Before the tornado; after the tornado" or "Before Katrina; after Katrina."

Responding to a disaster is a huge, unique leadership challenge, one that no president is ever really prepared to face. But it is possible to learn from others who have gone through disasters and to benefit from their hard-learned lessons.

The purpose of this paper is to give a concise reference for presidents and their senior campus leadership. While not a detailed manual on disaster planning and response, it provides the essence of what officials need to do now and in the event of a disaster.

LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned by presidents who have led their campuses through a disaster could fill volumes. However, the *most* important insights shared by individuals who have "been there" include the following:

1. Presidents must take the lead in developing a disaster plan as though lives, their campuses, and their careers depend on it.

2. Circumstances immediately after a disaster require the president to make a number of decisions quickly and relatively independently, which differs from the normal academic culture that stresses deliberation and consensus building.

3. Regardless of what the disaster plan says, following a disaster, the president is the chief public relations officer and the personification of the institution.

4. While not immediately apparent when a disaster strikes, the most important responsibility for the president is minimizing enrollment loss.

5. Once the initial safety and security issues are addressed, the president and board should define disaster recovery in terms of how to accelerate the long-term goals of the institution.

6. There are predictable stages to disaster recovery.

7. When a disaster hits, colleges and universities are often called upon to play a significant role in community and regional recovery.

8. In the end, how presidents deal with matters of the heart is an important part of how they are perceived as handling the overall crisis.

LESSON ONE:

LEADERSHIP BEGINS WITH PLANNING

Presidents must take the lead in developing a disaster plan as though lives, their campuses, and their careers depend on it.

A disaster shines a spotlight on the president, both when the campus is reacting to what has happened and later, when people and the press analyze events and second guess what happened, what *did not* happen, and why.

Though it is mundane, *very* distant from what is important on a day-to-day basis, and earns little or no political capital, presidents must take the lead in developing disaster plans and response systems. They can delegate the details, but they must be personally invested in the effort as if lives, the future of their campuses, and their presidencies depend on them. They may.

Looking back, presidents and senior officers who have experienced a large-scale disaster say these elements are most important in planning:

- Address all types of disasters, but focus *especially* on those most likely to hit the campus, in disaster response plans.
- Form a disaster prediction team to monitor the weather and other conditions continually for potential disasters.
- Install an early warning alarm that can be heard both inside and outside and give clear directions on what people should do if it is activated.
- Develop a short version of the plan that focuses on the first 24 hours and make certain that all of the key players in disaster response have copies in several places, such as in their offices, their cars, and their homes.
- *Insist* on answers to questions such as "How will we communicate with key people if all of the usual forms of communication—e-mail, Internet, and cell phones—do not work?"
- Develop redundant supply storage areas and emergency operations centers(EOCs). One EOC should be portable; another should be at the president's residence, especially if it is off campus.
- Create a fail-safe backup system for storing information technology records.
- Push to make certain that plans assume the worst to counter the natural tendency of people to think, "It can't happen to us."
- Do everything possible to link campus disaster plans with the disaster plans of the surrounding communities. Important issues include
  - the ability to access one another's radio frequencies;
  - identification badges made in advance so that key campus personnel can get past security check points;
  - and mutual aid agreements describing how the campus will be used to address community needs for helicopter takeoff and landing areas, temporary housing, food service, medical care, and tents to house National Guard and aid workers.
- Develop mutual aid agreements with presidents of institutions *outside* the immediate area because many major disasters are regional. Address how both institutions would maintain vital activities, including accommodating students' educational and housing needs, if either must close for an extended period.

- Develop agreements and open purchase orders with vendors outside the area to supply modular units, portable rest rooms, phone banks, and other critical items needed in case of a disaster.

- Document everything so there is a clear record of events and recovery-related expenses when accounts are settled with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, insurance companies, and others. For example, videotape the damage and establish a separate chart of accounts for all recovery expenses.

- Although there are many important demands on the institution's budget — and much political power behind those demands — see to it that basic emergency equipment (such as satellite phones, gloves, first aid equipment, and generators) is funded.

- Put copies of the drawings of the basic infrastructure — electricity, gas, technology — in several locations so they are available if a disaster hits.

- Insist that disaster drills be held on a regular basis, particularly for campus housing, and participate in drills held by local and regional agencies such as the police and fire departments.

LESSON TWO:

WHEN A DISASTER HITS, TAKE THE LEAD

Circumstances immediately after a disaster require the president to make a number of decisions quickly and relatively independently.

Most disaster plans name someone other than the president to be the emergency operations executive. This works for limited events that affect one building or a small portion of a campus. However, for major disasters or consequences, such as a hurricane, tornado, or loss of life, presidents must step out front in the first few critical days. Those who have experienced a major incident report that they could actually *feel* people looking to them to take the reins and lead.

One of the most startling aspects of leadership after a disaster is how decision making differs from the normal deliberative and consultative process. In the first few days, presidents are called upon to make scores of decisions quickly and relatively independently. They must gather the best possible information and advice, follow their instincts, make judgments, and move on. Most presidents in that situation reported later that people, even their most vocal critics before the disaster, understood the emergency nature of the situation, resulting in very little second guessing later.

Once the immediate danger is over, presidents must meet with key members of their leadership teams, identify the highest priorities, and *delegate*—with frequent meetings for follow-up and communication. At first, meetings must take place daily, but they can occur less frequently as the situation dictates. Experience shows that the customary administrative structure works quite well in helping to make and implement recovery decisions:

- The academic vice president, with the assistance of faculty committees, can address matters related to class scheduling and academic policy.
- The vice president for student affairs can address matters related to student health and housing.

- The vice president for administrative affairs can address matters relating to safety and campus recovery.
- The vice president for advancement can address matters related to communication and raising funds to support recovery.

Finally, presidents must expect the unexpected and be prepared to play multiple roles. No matter how well developed an emergency preparedness plan is, *dozens* of issues will arise that are not covered, time will accelerate, and Murphy's Law will come into play. Sincerely caring about people, making the best decisions possible, and constantly communicating are the best presidents can do.

LESSON THREE:

INSPIRE AND COMMUNICATE

Regardless of what the disaster plan says, following a disaster, the president is the chief public relations officer and the personification of the institution.

Presidential leadership just after a disaster is more than making decisions. When a disaster hits, the president becomes the personification of the institution. The president must convey a sense of hope and optimism, establish an inspiring vision, and assume the role of chief public relations officer.

In the moments after the crisis, the press and, especially, parents want to hear *directly* from the president and know that he or she cares, is present, and is in charge. From these initial interactions comes public confidence that the institution cares, the students are in good hands, and campus leadership is up to the task.

Consider the public's negative reaction to President Bush after Hurricane Katrina. The first impression is critical. Even a slight delay or *hint* of disengagement has devastating effects from which a college or university president will likely never recover.

Presidents should not be afraid to make bold initial statements such as: "Serving students will be the centerpiece of our recovery effort." "Classes will resume as soon as possible."

Once the facts are in and initial recovery plans are in place—no more than two to three days after the event—the president should communicate plans through an all-campus town hall meeting, webcast, news conference, or whatever medium can reach the most people. This major communication event should:

- Inform everyone of the facts.
- Provide a venue for everyone to grieve as a community and to help move through the trauma.
- Educate people about where they can go for help, including post-trauma counseling.
- Set an ambitious opening date that takes people beyond the moment, challenges and inspires them, and serves as a call to action.
- Identify who will lead each area of the recovery.
- Announce something the campus and the community can do together as a community, such as a special day to clean up, plant flowers, or collect food and clothing for students and colleagues who were hit the hardest.

The call to action becomes more powerful if the president gives the recovery effort a name and uses confident phrases in all public statements. Titles like "Operation Restoration" and "The New Renaissance" and expressions like "Not Just Back, but Better" capture the spirit of the effort and communicate a sense of confidence and optimism that leads and inspires.

Following the major communication event, the president must take advantage of ongoing opportunities for other communication, such as:

- holding live, interactive television broadcasts on the university station or commercial stations to inform and answer questions;
- establishing a toll-free hotline with a bank of volunteers to answer questions;
- placing ads in the local newspaper to provide regular summaries on what is happening and the progress made; and
- creating an Internet website to provide information about the recovery and to communicate with students, faculty, staff, and family members.

LESSON FOUR:

TAKE STEPS TO MINIMIZE ENROLLMENT LOSS

While not immediately apparent when a disaster strikes, the most important responsibility for the president is minimizing enrollment loss.

Strategies for dealing with enrollment loss should be part of the disaster plan. Following the event, the president, senior administrators, faculty, and board members must be prepared to become recruitment officers.

Presidents should take the following actions to minimize enrollment loss in every aspect of disaster planning and recovery:

- Develop mutual aid agreements with institutions outside the region that include accommodating students in the event of a disaster.
- Identify in the plans potential locations in the community where selected academic programs can take place (schools, churches, meeting halls).
- When the institution reopens, spread the word that the campus is ready for both returning and new students. A few strategies that presidents should consider include visiting high schools, churches, and civic groups; making television and radio appearances and talking to the press; and keeping the campus constantly in the news by communicating the vision and announcing and celebrating small victories that are on the path to full recovery.

LESSON FIVE:

USE THE RECOVERY TO ACCELERATE ACHIEVING LONG-TERM GOALS

Once the initial safety and security issues are addressed, the president and board should define disaster recovery in terms of how to accelerate the long-term goals of the institution.

Most campuses will have unfulfilled plans when a disaster strikes: new programs, improve relationships with the local community, new or better facilities. Recovery from the disaster provides a once-in-a-life-time opportunity to accelerate fulfillment of campus needs, and the president should not be shy about seizing the moment when the spotlight is on the campus and individuals with both power and means are looking for ways to help.

Once the immediate danger to life has passed, attention will turn to recovery, and the president must connect the recovery to the vision, i.e., "Not Just Back, but Better" or "The New Renaissance."

There is often a natural tendency to focus on bringing the campus back to what it was. Do not let this happen.

Presidents should use their long-range landscape plans as the blueprint for campus restoration and their long-range facility plans as the guide for restoring damaged buildings. If plans do not exist, presidents should charge key faculty and staff with developing the planning principles and characteristics needed in the new facilities. This will conflict with the many other things that these key people have to do, but it will also inspire them, particularly if they have additional support.

On the programmatic side, presidents should look for opportunities to move programs and services in desired directions. For example:

- If teacher education classrooms have been damaged, hold classes in local schools after K–12 instruction is over. Do the same for science education. This will draw your faculty and local teachers closer together as well as help in student recruitment.
- Accelerate online instruction, resulting in a "virtual university" for students.
- If buildings are damaged and consolidation is required, use the opportunity to associate departments and functions that belong together but could not be moved before the event.

The disaster can also accelerate fund-raising by articulating the vision; defining needs; developing case statements that connect the need with recovery and recovery with long-term vision; and generating meetings with major donors, foundations, and government agencies while attention is focused on the institution.

LESSON SIX:

UNDERSTAND THE PHASES OF RECOVERY

There are predictable stages to disaster recovery.

Presidents who have experienced a major disaster cite the following three distinct phases of recovery:

- **PHASE ONE: Universal cooperation**, when need and fear pull everyone together.
- **PHASE TWO: Reality**, when people realize that recovery will be lengthy and space and working conditions will be poor for a long time.
- **PHASE THREE: Reemergence of old issues**, when predisaster concerns and conflicts reemerge, exacerbated by conditions.

How quickly a campus moves from one phase to another depends on many things, including the campus culture, how well the president manages the initial steps in the recovery process, and the extent of the disaster.

An informed, inspired, and engaged campus remains in phase one much longer than one where these qualities are absent. However, phases two and three are inevitable when a disaster has done extensive damage and the recovery period is lengthy. Presidents who understand this and lead accordingly have a much better chance at success.

The president and his or her leadership team can generally lead Phase One. In fact, the more hands-on campus leadership is at this time, the more successful they and their campus will be. But once a campus moves into phase two—generally after a few months, when the recovery plan is developed and timelines are known—the president must prepare for the long haul.

One approach to successfully working through phases two and three to recovery is appointing special assistants in each of the major sectors of the institution—president, academic, administrative, student affairs, advancement. This enables the senior officers to lead the day-to-day business of the institution while the recovery is taking place. This does not mean that these key individuals will be separated or aloof from the recovery. Quite the opposite: it will enable them to give appropriate attention to both tasks.

Presidents and leadership teams who choose to go it alone and lead disaster recovery and day-to-day business without the assistance of special staff make themselves vulnerable to burnout and campus turmoil.

LESSON SEVEN:

A MAJOR DISASTER WILL ELEVATE YOUR PUBLIC SERVICE ROLE

When a disaster hits, colleges and universities are often called upon to play a significant role in community and regional recovery.

After a disaster, an institution's pubic service role often becomes preeminent among its three-part mission of teaching, research, and public service, and can remain so for a long time, depending on the extent of damage to the region.

When an event is limited in its impact and area, residents of the surrounding neighborhoods will go the college or university seeking temporary shelter, medical assistance, and other basic needs until local relief agencies can find alternate accommodations.

When a disaster is regional, the institution's involvement can be long term and extensive.

- Athletic and recreation fields may be used for a helicopter landing and take-off pad and for tents and staging areas for National Guard troops and relief workers.
- Arenas and other large indoor venues can be used for food, shelter, and hospital services over an extended period.
- The campus health center may serve as an emergency room until local hospitals are able to reopen.

As noted earlier, many of these details should be worked into a mutual aid agreement as a part of the institution's disaster plan.

However, when a disaster is of major proportions, such as Hurricane Katrina, it affects an institution in other ways. For example:

- Its public safety officers, medical staff, counselors, and others are drawn into as sisting community members on the campus, in addition to tending to their own students, for an extended period.
- Faculty and professional staff are asked to sit on committees on recovery topics related to their areas or expertise.
- The institution may develop academic programs to provide training in key areas to long-term regional recovery.
- It can be called upon to create charter schools to assist with K–12 education.

Presidents play an important role in the community recovery whether the damage is limited or is major and regional. They almost always become a part of an overall leadership team overseeing regional recovery, alongside the mayor, county executive, and other public officials. As such, presidents' initial public statements should reflect empathy for the community as a whole and state that they and their institutions are willing to assist in any way they can. Following this, they must actively engage all aspects of their institutions in the recovery effort, however possible and appropriate.

While it is important to play a role in regional recovery, presidents must also remain aware of the importance of bringing their own campus into full recovery as soon as possible and gently push for timelines on the use of campus space. They must also be aware of liability issues and be certain that their campus has the right coverage for outside use of the campus. Additionally, all costs for the disaster recovery and special circumstances should be recorded in a separate chart of accounts to assist in reimbursing the institution for expenses it incurred.

LESSON EIGHT:

PAY SPECIAL ATTENTION TO MATTERS OF THE HEART

In the end, how presidents deal with matters of the heart is an important part of how they are perceived as handling the overall crisis.

For the most part, the major issues in the days immediately following the disaster appear to be technical, tangible, and logistical. Yet people will see them in *very* personal ways, and the challenges quickly become more and more personal as time moves on. In the end, the way presidents handle matters of the heart play a large part in creating the lasting impression of how they handled the crisis.

Following are some insights and advice from experienced presidents and senior leaders:

- Not all disasters are predictable. But if there are clear warning signs of an impending disaster, the president should close the campus, letting students go home and enabling faculty and staff to take care of personal matters. If done, faculty and staff will more likely to be available to take care of campus matters later. This especially applies to senior leadership and key staff in physical plant, safety, housing, health services, and counseling.

- After the disaster, presidents must be prepared for faculty and staff to be pulled between campus and home/family responsibilities. Some presidents reported that faculty and staff experienced "Velcro children," youngsters so traumatized that they panicked if separated from a parent. Therefore, presidents must be flexible on policies affecting staff, faculty, and students. During the initial days of disaster recovery, presidents should try to allow people to work from home, using technology (when operational) to link to the campus.

- Include a provision for post-disaster psychological counseling in the plan and arrange to outsource it if necessary.

- Be particularly sensitive to the need for faculty to return to their offices and laboratories to recover computers and papers or manuscripts in process and to try to salvage active, ongoing research.

- When the campus reopens, the president and senior staff should personally greet those arriving on campus.

- At some point, when the recovery is approaching completion, the president should hold a special event where people are appropriately thanked for their contributions and some type of memorial — a plaque or artwork—is placed on campus to remember the event and celebrate the recovery.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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