

Disasters: It's a Matter of When, Not If

By John C. Cavanaugh, President, University of West Florida



Suppose a major disaster happened on your campus today. Would you be ready to respond? Although hurricanes Katrina and Rita have dominated the headlines for the past several months, many types of disasters affect colleges and universities—among them, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, fires, blizzards, ice storms, chemical spills and

armed intruders. It is not a matter of *if* a disaster or emergency scenario will confront a campus, but *when*.

This article shares some lessons learned by my experienced executive leadership team. Between September 2004 and September 2005, the University of West Florida (UWF) experienced Hurricanes Ivan, Dennis and Katrina, as well as tropical storms Arlene and Cindy. During the three years I served as Provost at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, I also experienced three major hurricanes. Similarly, other members of my leadership team have experienced major disasters. Consequently, I and my team have confronted numerous emergency situations requiring rapid decisions, such as campus evacuations and extended closures that threatened the institution's academic program. As a result of Hurricane Ivan, for example, on UWF's main Pensacola campus, 95 percent of all buildings and 110 of 114 classrooms had to be partially or completely rebuilt, while the campus and community infrastructure—water, electricity, sewage and communications—was completely lost for extended periods. The consequences of disasters are not measured in dollars alone; the long-term emotional trauma people face must be recognized and confronted.

Based on this experience, I believe that to be successful, your campus leadership must demonstrate four elements:

- *Planning* that is comprehensive and fully integrated.
- *Decisiveness* through a willingness to make tough choices.
- *Execution* based on extensive knowledge of the plan.
- *Personal touch* in remembering that people and their safety are primary.

Planning. Does your campus have a comprehensive disaster plan, emergency operations plan and continuity of operations plan? Do you know where they are located? When was the last time these plans were discussed, revised and tested? As an auditor, check for the following key elements that maximize the likelihood of a successful plan:

- *An experienced leadership team.* Who among the leadership team or other key personnel have been through a major disaster? What experience or lessons can they offer that will strengthen the plans? UWF has key personnel experienced with disasters and other crises.
- *The plan envisions a situation worse than the worst conceivable outcome.* What would you do if your campus has no water, sewer, electrical, phone (land or mobile), postal and courier service and e-mail for an extended period? Too few campuses plan for extended outages of *all* infrastructures and communication. Imagine it. At UWF, we consulted with former military commanders of logistical operations; it made our plans much better, and we were ready when the worse-than-imagined disaster struck. In short, *unpredictable is not an option*. And it won't be if you seek advice from a broad range of experts and discuss possible scenarios across a wide variety of potential disaster types.
- *Essential personnel are clearly identified and informed of their designation.* If senior leaders fail to communicate the information to the people who need to know, it won't help. In the midst of a crisis is not the time to be asking whether Joe or Anne is considered essential personnel. Instead, Joe and Anne need to be certain of this so that when a crisis occurs, they head straight for their assigned locations.
- *A comprehensive campus and community communication strategy before (if possible), during and after the event.* Hurricanes, floods and blizzards provide some warning. Use the available time to communicate clearly and concisely the steps people should or must take. During and after the event, provide people with a link to the campus, which may be the only constant left in their lives. In the case of

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extensive damage and extended closure, students, faculty and staff need to get basic information about the campus. At UWF, senior officials realized the need for people to keep in touch with one another, so we developed a Web site for that purpose. Finally, campus leaders must be in touch with the local county emergency management team. Information exchange between them can be critical, particularly in coordinating evacuation, response and recovery operations.

- *There are clear criteria concerning campus closure and evacuation.* In a case of a single-site campus, the criterion may be as simple as a certain weather forecast or a declaration by the local county emergency management office. For multicampus institutions, the process may be more complex, especially when significant distances and multiple county emergency management offices are involved. In either case, consistency in the decision triggers is the key; students, faculty and staff can learn these decision triggers and plan and behave accordingly.
- *The evacuation plan ensures the safety of resident and international students.* Does your plan merely suggest that students evacuate to wherever they choose, or does it include a formal process of matching students with local host families whose contact information is passed on to the student's family? Will you create an on-campus shelter for students who cannot evacuate because of distance to home or the lack of financial means? Does the campus provide long-term shelters for students in the event of an extended campus closure?
- *A backup for key business operations is in place and can be operated remotely.* Essential records such as student transcripts and the employee payroll not only must be backed up, but copies stored at sites far from campus that are unlikely to be destroyed simultaneously with the primary copies. These backup copies must be accessible in such a way as to serve as the primary data if needed to continue operations.
- *Full recovery of expenses is highly unlikely, so have a cash cushion.* Insurance and federal funds will not provide full reimbursement of expenses. The impact on cash flow must be considered.
- *Contracts for repair, debris removal, fuel and related needs are in place.* In the wake of a major disaster, the need for these services is acute, and they are often unavailable to those without prior commitments.
- *A regular review and revision cycle and practice sessions.* Disaster and emergency recovery plans must be considered dynamic documents that require discussion, review and revision on a regular basis. Including them as part of the ongoing campus planning process is essential.

Decisiveness. Having a comprehensive plan is one thing; implementing it requires clear and resolute decision making. Key aspects here include:

- *People's safety comes first.* All decisions must be based on this principle.
- *Repeated clear, concise and consistent communication.* In a crisis, people may not be at their best because they are preoccupied with their own safety. This means that communications need to be unambiguous, to the point and reliable. And say it again and again and again.
- *Make the tough decisions.* Demonstrate leadership. Be willing to defend logical and necessary decisions about contracts, for example, when the normal bidding process makes no sense.

Execution. No one really knows how good a plan is until it is actually set in motion. Successful implementation strategies include the following:

- *Clearly and unambiguously invoke the plan.* When a disaster or crisis hits, no one should wonder whether the emergency plans have been triggered. If certain processes are waived temporarily, make certain this is unambiguous.
- *Be flexible, but establish appropriate management oversight.* Each emergency team has a specific function; let them do it without micromanagement. Additional flexibility may be required—spending limits on credit or debit cards may need to be raised temporarily, for example—but with appropriate accountability mechanisms. The key point here is that although the various plans may lay out specific processes, the reality of the situation and good judgment must prevail.
- *Restrict access to unsafe areas of campus.* Following a natural disaster, consider extensively damaged parts of the campus as you would a crime scene. Insurance agencies and the Federal Emergency Management Agency require careful documentation of the damage, and it is far easier to obtain and protect the evidence if access is restricted to essential personnel. Restricted access also will make response, repair and recovery efforts much easier and safer to accomplish.

Personal Touch. Nothing matters more before, during and after a disaster than people. Following are keys to success in dealing with the human dimensions:

- *Meet basic needs.* After a hurricane or similar disaster, consider providing food, clothing, shelter and money for the families of essential personnel. Doing so will ease their minds and enable employees to focus on the job at hand. Colleges and universities (and their foundations) can help through various relief efforts and by establishing grant and loan programs. After Hurricane Ivan, the UWF

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Plan Ahead for

2006
and
2007!

- 2006 Midyear Seminar
April 9-12
San Antonio, TX
- 2006 Annual Conference
September 8-13
Louisville, KY
- 2007 Midyear Seminar
March 25-28
Costa Mesa, CA
- 2007 Annual Conference
September 28-October 3
Atlanta, GA

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Foundation provided more than \$50,000 in grants to students and \$22,000 in no-interest loans to faculty and staff in the past year.

- *Encourage people to tell their stories.* Hold an event to allow people to reconnect. UWF held an all-employee convocation on the first day back after Hurricane Ivan and encouraged staff and faculty to do the same during the first few days back.
- *Accept that post-traumatic stress disorder is likely.* Many months after experiencing a highly stressful event, people will still feel the emotional effects. Be sensitive to this by reminding everyone of these long-term consequences and by providing the necessary counseling services.

Leadership Lessons Learned. The recommendations in this article are among those I have implemented at UWF largely in response to hurricanes. Regardless of the type of disaster a campus faces, applying these suggestions will set the stage for success in preparing for and recovering from emergency or catastrophic situations. They will also minimize the financial impact and maximize the ability to recover.

When we created our plans in 2003 and 2004, we had not experienced a major disaster since our founding in 1963. Since then, UWF has successfully overcome two tropical storms and three major hurricanes within a year. I believe our decision to create comprehensive plans with the assistance of consultants, and to continually monitor and update these plans has proved to be one of the best uses of our time and resources. With decisive leadership and superb implementation by a great team, our experiences may serve as a national model. Auditors can play a key role by providing support for

the development of the plans, asking tough questions and showing visible support for the leadership team when it becomes necessary to implement the plans.

The assistance of Dr. Christine K. Cavanaugh in preparing this article is gratefully acknowledged.

About the Author

Dr. John C. Cavanaugh (jcavanaugh@uwf.edu) is the fourth president of the University of West Florida and the first selected by a local board of trustees. President Cavanaugh received his baccalaureate degree in psychology with high honors from the University of Delaware and his master's and doctoral degrees in psychology from the University of Notre Dame.

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