

# UNPREDICTABLE IS NOT AN OPTION

*Having a disaster or emergency operations plan isn't enough. Success depends on decisive, experienced leaders who can execute a comprehensive plan—and do so with a personal touch.*

**I**T'S A SUNDAY NIGHT IN SEPTEMBER. You're checking the weather on the Web, scanning computer models that show a Category 4 hurricane rumbling through the Gulf of Mexico. The models show possible landfall over an area of several hundred miles. You are in the landfall zone in some models but not others. The storm is projected to hit in about 72 hours. You are the university president. What do you do?

Similar situations confront higher education leaders more often than you might think. Although the Hurricane Katrina and Rita cataclysms have dominated the headlines for the past several months, disasters of many types affect colleges and universities—among them, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, fires, blizzards, ice storms, chemical spills, armed intruders, and various other types of attacks. It is not a matter of *whether* a disaster or emergency scenario will confront a campus but *when*.

College and university trustees have important responsibilities in planning for, responding to, and recovering from disasters. In their oversight role, especially in the areas of planning and finance, they need to ensure that the institution has taken the prudent and necessary steps to reduce risk to the extent possible and to maximize the likelihood of a successful recovery.

The purpose of this article is to share some lessons learned by an experienced executive leadership team. While holding senior leadership positions at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and the University of West Florida (UWF) in Pensacola, I experienced six major

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hurricanes and several situations involving, among other things, threats from individuals (some claiming to be armed). Between September 2004 and September 2005, UWF experienced hurricanes Ivan, Dennis, and Katrina, as well as tropical storms Arlene and Cindy. Consequently, I have confronted numerous emergency situations requiring rapid decisions, such as several campus evacuations and extended closures that threatened the institution's academic program. After Hurricane Ivan, for example, 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. Dealing with the long-term trauma people faced was a humbling and daunting experience.

What does it take for campus leaders to deal successfully with disasters? If your answer to the question in my opening scenario was to ask whether a disaster or emergency operations plan exists, it's a sure bet that a successful outcome is highly unlikely. Instead, campus leaders must be certain that four elements are fully in place:

- *Planning* that is comprehensive and completely integrated.
- *Decisiveness* and a willingness to make the tough choice.
- *Execution* based on deep knowledge of the emergency operations plan.
- *Personal touch* in remembering that people are at the core.

**Planning.** Do you know whether your campus has 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? Obviously, having up-to-date plans is essential. But senior officials must not stop there—they must make the plans a regular topic of discussion and revision. What are the “must haves” for these plans?



Based on my experience, the following elements may mean the difference between a successful recovery and a devastating outcome:

- *Look to the leadership team for experience.* Who among the leadership team or other key personnel has been through a major disaster? What experience or lessons can they offer that will strengthen the plans? UWF is fortunate to have such key personnel in place.

- *Plan for a situation worse than the worst conceivable outcome.* Imagine a sequel to “The Day After Tomorrow” or “War of the Worlds” being filmed on your campus. Using that scenario as a standard (and still imagining something much worse) will get closer to reality than most standard risk-management methods. Too few campuses plan for extended outages of *all* infrastructures and communication—phone, postal, and courier service and e-mail.

Does your campus have its own water wells? If you maintain them on generator power, your campus may end up having the only potable water in a large geographic region after a major disaster (as was the case at UWF following Hurricane Ivan). 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. 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.

- *Clearly identify essential personnel and ensure that they know they are classified as such.* This obvious point may be overlooked because senior leaders fail to communicate the information to the people who need to know. The middle 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.

- *Plan to communicate with the campus and the broader community before (if possible), during, and*

after the event. Potential disasters such as hurricanes, floods, and blizzards provide at least some warning. Use the available time to communicate clearly and concisely the steps people should or must take. During and after the event, it is critical to provide people with a link to the campus, which may be the only constant left in their lives.

In the case of extensive damage and extended closure, students, faculty, and staff need to get basic information about the state of the campus. A common practice today is to provide this via Web sites. At UWF, senior officials realized the need to keep in touch with one another, so we developed a Web site for that purpose. But after Hurricane Ivan wreaked havoc on our campus and key personnel needed to communicate with one another in the total absence of our normal communication infrastructure, UWF purchased several satellite phones, as well.

Finally, campus leaders must be in touch with the local county emergency management team. Information exchange between the two can be critical, particularly in coordinating evacuation, response, and recovery operations.

- *Establish clear decision-making 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.

- *Be certain 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

## VOICES FROM KATRINA

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, *Trusteeship* attempted to contact the chief executives and board chairs of AGB-member colleges and universities in the disaster zone, seeking information about how their institutions reacted. Some were unreachable; others said they needed to continue to focus on dealing with the tragic events. The responses of these four officials open a window into the challenges facing higher education leaders across the Gulf Coast.

- **Richard Holland**, president of the University of West Alabama
- **E. Joseph Savoie**, commissioner of the Louisiana Board of Regents
- **Kevin W. Wildes, S.J.**, president of Loyola University, New Orleans
- **Michael H. Woods**, chair of the Board of Supervisors of the University of Louisiana System

### 1. What unique challenges did your campus face as a result of the storm?

**Holland:** Our greatest challenge was to notify students about travel conditions and give on-campus students time to go home. On Friday [August 27] at noon, we sent e-mails to all faculty and staff, asking them to check their e-mails no later than Saturday, 8 p.m. This early notice of the possible closing helped us greatly as the storm passed through on Monday evening. In the Saturday message, we informed everyone of our closing and provided Web addresses, phone numbers, and a list of radio and television stations.

The second challenge was to locate the approximately 250 students remaining in university housing. The housing staff kept track of the students during the storm and moved them to shelters afterward. We also had the dining services prepare bag lunches, bottled water, and fruit ahead of time to distribute to the housing units. This was an essential step as the rain and wind were so strong that students could not go to the dining rooms.

**Savoie:** The Louisiana Board of Regents, in cooperation with the state's four system management boards, needed to assure the approximately 75,000 students enrolled at New Orleans-area colleges and universities that they could continue their studies elsewhere without additional financial burden *and* to locate 14,000 displaced faculty and staff. The second challenge was to assess the extent of damage and disruption the schools had suffered—damage to the physical facilities and assets as well as the dislocation of faculty and staff. We also faced the logistical challenge of having thousands of evacuees sheltered at our campuses across the state. The Red Cross, FEMA, utility companies, and other emergency response entities needed to use university property and facilities for equipment staging, worker housing, and so forth.

**Wildes:** The deep underlying problems have been to make the university "work" while all our communications and business infrastructure are broken, and our staff and faculty have suffered great personal losses.

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create an on-campus shelter for students who cannot evacuate because they live far from home or lack the financial means to travel? Does the campus provide long-term shelters for students in the event of an extended campus closure?

- *Ensure that key business operations are backed up and can be operated remotely.* Essential records such as student transcripts and the employee payroll not only must be backed up, but copies should be stored at sites far from campus that are unlikely to be destroyed simultaneously with the primary copies. Also, these backup copies must be accessible in such a way as to serve as the primary data if needed to continue operations. Plan on which members of the senior leadership team will relocate to a safe remote site and when they will do so; they'll need the security codes and authority necessary to continue key campus operations.

- *Recognize that full recovery of expenses is highly unlikely.* Insurance and federal funds will not provide full reimbursement of expenses. The impact on cash flow must be factored into the plans.

- *Create standing contracts for repair, debris removal, fuel, and related needs.* In the wake of a major disaster, the need for these services is acute. They often will be unavailable to those without prior commitments.

- *Regularly review and revise the plans, and conduct practice sessions.* Disaster and emergency recovery plans must be considered dynamic documents that require discussion, review, and revision on a regular basis. Including this as part of the ongoing campus planning process is one way to ensure this outcome.

**Decisiveness.** Having a comprehensive plan is one thing; actually implementing it requires clear and decisive decision making. Key aspects here include the following:

- *People's safety comes first.* All decisions must be based on this principle.
- *Be clear, concise, and consistent—and do so*



*repeatedly.* 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.* A crisis is not the time to invoke an elaborate, inclusive process. Demonstrate leadership. For example, be willing to risk defending a decision to evacuate a campus two or three days before a major storm even when the storm ultimately takes a different path. Or defend your decision to keep a campus closed if conditions indicate it is unsafe to return. In short, always be ready to make and defend decisions based on safety.

- *Be present.* Even if the plan does not address this issue explicitly, the president or chancellor should chair all of the meetings of the emergency operations team. It shows leadership and is the best way to stay informed about developments during and after the crisis.

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

- *Clearly and unambiguously invoke the plan and charge the emergency teams.* When a disaster or crisis hits, no one should wonder whether the emergency plans have been triggered. Moreover, the various emergency response and recovery teams need to be charged with their responsibilities as soon as possible, even before the disaster hits, if that is an option. These teams should meet daily in a “situation room” until the crisis abates.

- *Be flexible, but establish appropriate management oversight.* Each emergency team has a specific function; let each execute it without being micromanaged. 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 FEMA will 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.

- *Engage key constituents in academic and service recovery efforts.* When the time comes to make decisions about restructuring the academic calendar and providing necessary services, including the faculty and staff in the process will improve these decisions. For example, UWF staff suggested creating a single account for all hurricane-related expenses (rather than charging them to the existing accounts) to make tracking and verifying them easier.

**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. In the year after Hurricane Ivan, the UWF Foundation provided more than \$50,000 in grants to students and \$22,000 in no-interest loans to faculty and staff.

- *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 faculty to do the same during the first few class meetings.

- *Accept that post-traumatic stress disorder is*

**Woods:** First and foremost was the safety of our students, both during the evacuation process and afterwards. In addition, we had to accommodate thousands of victims of the hurricane, which overloaded our facilities. We had to meet their basic needs and continue to run our schools [the system has no campuses in the New Orleans area], as all but Louisiana Tech had started the semester.

We had requests from families to live in dorm rooms with their students, as they had lost their homes. We had thousands of extra “visitors” on our campuses, with nothing to do, no place to go, and wondering every day when they could return home and what would they find when they did. We had to deal with the sudden media interest, visiting dignitaries, the Red Cross shelters, food issues, water issues, and much more. In addition, we had an influx of students from New Orleans who wanted to enroll without transcripts. Some had already paid tuition at another school and wondered whether their credits would transfer. I could go on, as we are still facing new challenges every day.

## **2. How did the president and board leaders communicate before, during, and after the storm? What were the key decisions that needed to be made?**

**Holland:** The president has a committee for such emergencies that includes key administrators as well the county director of emergency management and the city police chief. All of us communicated through e-mail, when available, and then by cell phone.

Key decisions: When to close? How to secure the campus? How to notify the university community throughout the period of time?

**Savoie:** I convened a meeting of system presidents and campus representatives the day after the hurricane made landfall. We created an initial damage assessment, produced a list of primary and secondary issues, and assigned the following priorities: (1) providing students an ability to continue their education, (2) locating displaced faculty and staff and assuring them of employment stability, (3) fulfilling our civic mission to the citizens of Louisiana, and (4) institutional recovery.

We met daily for the first week following the disaster, and the group continues to meet two to three times each week. Student leaders and board members are invited, and an audio bridge to all campuses statewide provides every campus leadership team the means to participate as well.

**Wildes:** I have communicated with the board each week by e-mail, sending them weekly updates so they can be informed about what is going on and the decisions we have made. The board had reviewed our disaster recovery and business interruption structures and insurance in advance.

**Woods:** A lot of the land lines and all of the cellular lines were either knocked out by the storm or jammed because of the evacuation. Our system office is in Baton Rouge, which was the staging area for FEMA, and communications were sporadic. E-mail sometimes worked, and an occasional phone call could go through. The state offices were closed after the storm passed, and Baton Rouge was without electricity many days after the storm.

We asked FEMA and others helping with the evacuation not to

allow our schools to be overrun by the folks leaving New Orleans, so that we could continue to help those who had been relocated and at the same time run our universities. We canceled football games scheduled for the first weekend after the storm. Many of schools could not have handled an influx of fans, the hotels were full, and the police force was already taxed, many having gone to help in the southern part of the state. It was our intention from the outset to do whatever it would take to accommodate students.

### 3. What lessons have you learned that would be valuable for other boards facing emergencies or disasters?

**Holland:** We had a checklist of responsibilities and who was responsible. This helped. One problem: We needed to have alternate people to contact for certain responsibilities. We could not contact three key people immediately—the person in charge of telephone service and our inclement-weather hotline, the person in charge of on-campus computer services, and the person responsible for contacting radio and television outlets. Without the proper codes or passwords, most stations would not release our official announcement to close the institution. We now have a list of the key people and two alternates for each of these, and the passwords are kept in three different offices.

**Savoie:** Communication is key to a successful response, and broad participation is essential to avoiding conflict. Planning for these types of disasters should specifically address communication strategies.

**Wildes:** Planning—detailed and careful planning in advance—is crucial.

**Woods:** It is imperative to have great lines of communication between the staff and the board. Many board members lost their homes and businesses, and for the first few days we did not know what had happened to them or their families. As communication improved, we discovered one by one that all of them and our staff were okay. Many stories of hardship, but no lives lost.

### 4. Complete this sentence: We would have been better prepared had we...

**Holland:** ...followed up on our discussions from Hurricane Dennis. We failed to implement plans following Dennis.

**Savoie:** ...established in advance the logistical and administrative plans for enrolling displaced students and reassigning displaced faculty across multiple institutions and systems. We had to do this in the days immediately following the storm. The emergency plan needs to address such issues as tuition and financial-aid reciprocity and portability as well as acceptance of credit for electronic courses.

**Wildes:** ...thought about actual locations from which to operate after an evacuation.

**Woods:** ...been able to envision the need to evacuate more than one million people with their pets and possessions. How do you plan for something of that magnitude?

*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.

- *Connect with trustees.* Communication with and among trustees throughout the crisis is critical to keeping them informed and enabling them to provide support.

**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.

The University of West Florida has successfully overcome two tropical storms and three major hurricanes in a single year. When we created our plans in 2003 and 2004, we had not experienced a major disaster since our founding in 1963. 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.

College and university campuses on the Gulf Coast and elsewhere can recover from major disasters. Trustees can help 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 them. Board support is essential when the president or chancellor must confront not the case study but the real thing. ♦

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