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## Facing the Flood: The English Department as a High Axle Vehicle

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Departments of English are generally known for the storms within and their failure to calm the seas with minimal casualties. Even in times of fair weather, they often appear rudderless. What can be said about English can at times be said about other disciplines. What happens to a department, really a university, when external forces completely overwhelm internal ones? On August 29, 2005, the flood in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina laid waste to university campuses in New Orleans. What this paper will do is to indicate how it affected a single department of English, what steps were taken toward recovery, and how using the strengths of the discipline could have carried faculty and students through the waters to higher, more secure ground.

Departments of English are generally known for the storms within and their failure to calm the seas with minimal casualties. Even in times of fair weather, they often appear rudderless. What can be said of English departments, however, can be said about many academic departments. What happens, then, to a department—really, to a University or college—when external forces completely overwhelm internal ones? On August 29, 2005 the flood in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina laid waste to several university campuses in New Orleans.

My intent here is to establish a context for the disaster that disproportionately affected campuses of historically black universities,<sup>1</sup> indicate how the disaster affected the Department of English at Xavier University, chronicle the steps taken toward recovery, and show how, by employing its strengths, the discipline has the capacity to carry faculty and students through the waters to higher, more secure ground

Education has been important to New Orleanians of African American descent since early in the nineteenth century. Prior to the Civil War, they produced *Les Cenelles*, the first anthology of poetry by their race in the United States, most of the contributors having been taught at small private academies and religious schools. In the long aftermath of that conflict, three universities were established for the educating African Americans in the city: Southern University, Dillard University, and Xavier University. Their philosophies were closer to the academic views of W.E.B. Dubois rather than those of Booker T. Washington. My own institution, Xavier University, was established by Philadelphian St. Katharine Drexel and her order, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament.

These institutions originally had campuses on the outer borders of the city, but as it has grown, they now occupy areas well within it, but are in areas considered less desirable by the upper middle class. Every one of the three campuses flooded in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Water levels ranged from 5 to 10 feet, and Dillard University had two buildings destroyed by fire. Before the storm, these campuses provided stable green environments amid encroaching concrete and commercial interests. Xavier University lies between an elevated highway and a drainage canal, next to which is now a somewhat abandoned poor African American neighborhood. The University is trying to maintain its art department and social service operations there, part of a long-term effort to bring an improved architectural presence and more planted spaces amid the jam-packed and rundown cottages.

On the western side of the campus lies a commercial and retail district that includes tire stores, a bakery, food stores, cleaners, low-end clothing stores, and fast food outlets. Prior to the flood, the 4500 members of the Xavier community were active patrons of these businesses. Sadly, many of these are still shuttered, but the 3000 students who have returned are inspiring more openings. Of course, the recovery needs of the University have brought contractors and their employees into the neighborhood. Beyond that, the faculty and staff are investing in the city with their taxes, especially important in the loss of taxes from three destroyed middle-class neighborhoods.

The aftermath of the flood has emphasized the importance of the University in assisting the displaced. Like the instructions for oxygen masks received on board aircraft, the institution must place ensure its own survival before administering to its less able companions. As a result, trailers for staff, contractors, and workers fill parking lots and the convent on campus is housing faculty and staff. From her Virginia exile and then from the campus, Sr. Donna Gould has been organizing students to work with Habitat for Humanity. Graduate education courses are now on line to reach the teachers who are away from the city.

What does it mean to New Orleans that Xavier is back? It is a signal to families that higher education is returning in force to the beleaguered city. As important is the symbolic value that a major part of the city's African American culture has not disappeared: Michael White is playing his clarinet; *Xavier Review* has published a flood-themed issue; our President Norman Francis is chairing the state's recovery committee; our students are once again part of the milieu who walk on Royal Street in the French Quarter and on Magazine Street uptown. The other HBCUs are also making their marks—Southern University in New Orleans is assisting the recovery of the historic black, middle-class neighborhood Pontchartrain Park near its campus, and Dillard University, holding its spring 2006 classes in the riverfront Hilton

Hotel, reminded downtown visitors and office workers that African Americans are at the center of life and culture in New Orleans. These three universities, like the green that has replaced the dried and matted brown grass and muck, are offering hope in the face of devastation.

But what was the situation immediately following that terrible Monday when the winds ceased and the waters rose to historic heights from the edge of Lake Pontchartrain to within a few blocks of the levees of the Mississippi River? The Department of English was surrounded by five feet of water for nearly three weeks. The first floor Writing Center and offices were raised just enough to prevent water from damaging equipment and furniture. It was also dry enough that mold was only a minor problem. Our second- and third-story offices and facilities suffered some wind damage and rain driven leaks. The rest of the campus was not so fortunate. Power and water were not available anywhere. The campus was off limits to faculty from August 29, 2005 until January 9, 2006 when the President authorized access to offices. From October through this date, only recovery workers in the building trades were on campus.

English faculty and students were scattered across the country. Late Friday afternoon before the arrival of the Monday storm, the University administration had closed the campus and alerted everyone to check an emergency website and an out-of- area phone number for further instructions. Most people planned for three days away and a return to classes. It was soon evident that the cessation of the fall semester would be much longer than that. When I left on that Friday, it was for a last weekend away on the Gulf Coast before the semester really occupied me fully—the storm was in the Gulf but heading for the Florida panhandle. I had not been on campus for the late warning and as a result had neither phone nor address records of faculty and staff.

Unable to return to New Orleans because counter-flow from the city had been established by Saturday afternoon, my wife and I headed

for North Georgia to join our family. Rather than the usual three days away for a tropical event, we were gone for over two months. The month of September involved acquiring a laptop computer and working via phone and e-mails to contact the English faculty and staff. Professor Biljana Obradovic, our departmental webmaster, who was in Asheville, North Carolina, really helped us establish a "who's where" list. Because New Orleans—even Baton Rouge area codes—were not working or inconsistently working and because many faculty only had University e-mail addresses, it was difficult to establish and maintain contacts.

September involved answering basic questions of life, death, injury, property loss, and work interruption. Thankfully, no one suffered death or injury.

By October it was clear that the fall semester had been postponed or even cancelled. Many faculty were in contact with students via e-mail and phone. I suggested that faculty think about the incorporation of this experience in courses when we resumed classes. Some e-discussions followed. The University administration had begun debating plans on a reduction of faculty and staff. Some chairs, but not all, were asked to advise the Vice President for Academic Affairs on reduction plans. After working- hours on the last Friday in October when many faculty members were at SCMLA in Houston, e-mail was sent from the University to those faculty who were not being retained. The effective date was one month earlier, and thus there was no October paycheck for these faculty. There was no appeal process. The University had declared financial exigency and under Louisiana's Napoleonic code the usual AAUP procedures—committees to establish criteria for dismissals and establishing a process for appeals—did not have to be followed. A quasi-committee of academic administrators did recommend specific faculty reductions—50% in English—and as a result, it could be argued that there was a committee who set criteria and made recommendations accordingly. What stunned so many was

the manner in which the university President cancelled the contracts of all faculty and then invited specific faculty to sign extensions of their original contracts.

I returned to New Orleans in early November and administered the English Department from two coffeehouses—one with wireless connections and the other for meetings. Meanwhile, the University was being administered from three locations—one in Texas and two in Louisiana. After much confusion over financial aid implications for schedules, the administration decided to begin the second week of the fall semester in late January; the semester schedule had to be reconstructed to allow for students to continue in courses they had begun and for many students to change to new courses as a result of courses they had undertaken at different universities in the actual fall semester. Several English faculty volunteered to help advise students by email; course confirmations and new registrations by e-mail followed.

In the midst of this activity, displaced faculty were seeking positions and requiring letters of recommendation. In addition, I was checking on certain institutions for possible positions for these faculty. Because local land phone service, cell phone service, and US mail were often not available, queries and recommendations were sent via e-mail. By early December preview approvals of over 2000 transcripts had begun via e-mail, an activity that kept me in a coffeehouse for up to seven hours on most days through the middle of the month. During this time e-mail exchanges with remaining faculty to plan for the upcoming semester began. By January 9, 2006, the English office on campus had become available, but with no phone service and inconsistent e-mail. Classes began on the 17<sup>th</sup> to resume the first of two abbreviated semesters, the spring semester beginning in May and the concluding one in August.

Army Humvees with their high axles patrolled a city that slowly began to add population. Those high axle vehicles seemed to suggest that all along there was another way of addressing emergencies that might bring a city and its educational institutions to stasis. What could the University have done to prepare for a catastrophe? What could a single department do? For the Department of English the answer lay in the chief weakness that everyone involved experienced: failure of communication. What suggested a direction were the emergency procedures involving phone pyramids that I observed as a visiting professor at the United States Air Force Academy and that often amused this civilian. The department developed a form with contact information for faculty and staff to include local address, local phone, cell phone, University e-mail address, alternative e-mail address, a contact information for a person outside the local area, and an indication whether in an emergency evacuation the person might need transportation. This completed form would be kept as an e-document and a hard copy at a location other than the University. The Dean of the College and Vice President for Academic Affairs would receive updated versions of this data. It is obvious that the department chair should try to have regular contact with the academic administration of the University during emergencies. It is important to note that text messaging turned out to be far more consistently effective than voice communication on cellular transmissions.

During emergencies and evacuations, faculty and staff have now received directions to take office keys, grade books, and laptops with them. If there is enough warning, computers and other equipment should be moved away from windows, and if possible, above the first floor, perhaps some items only being elevated above the floor. And all should be covered with plastic sheets or bags. Vulnerable resources like books should be protected as well.

Course syllabi, especially during storm season, should reflect advice and direction for at least a week of work should there be

an interruption. Each semester all syllabi are now placed on the English website at the University, and all courses are registered in the Blackboard program. The University now has the capacity to place all network operations at a site distant from the institution.

During an evacuation, it is helpful for faculty and chair to be in contact after three days of class cancellations, and all should check the available University website daily for instructions and information. Since all students have a University e-address, faculty may be able to be in touch with their students directly during long interruptions. Lastly, one or two off-campus meeting sites should be established in case the campus is closed for an emergency. These should be generally accessible and likely not to be affected by a natural disaster—a hotel or a café on high ground, for example. It would also be helpful for disciplines to make arrangements with professional and scholarly groups to provide meeting space at conferences being held during an emergency evacuation. SCMLA was extraordinary in its efforts to help our department during the annual meeting last year in Houston, as we had conference participants as well as faculty and staff living temporarily in the Houston area.

While it is rare for disasters of this magnitude to occur frequently, they do occur, and when they do, the results can be chaotic in the short and long term. As uncomfortable as it might be, chairs of departments should plan for the process of a drastic reduction of faculty over a short time. Reluctantly, the primary criterion must be to retain the professors who are necessary for a functioning department with the basic fields and specialties covered. In addition, pressure should be brought to bear on the academic administration to have an AAUP-approved plan in place to address staffing reductions in an emergency. Even though the particular circumstances of the emergency will limit the full effect of that planning, the department and the institution will come closer to doing their best for the people involved by having a plan in place.



The essays and commentary that follow come from professors who wrestled with the confusions wrought by this disaster and how they made the disaster both a resource and a text for their students. In our readings we often speak of the heroic motifs found in the ancient narratives like the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. Our students, faculty, and staff have their own stories that rival those set in the Aegean and Mediterranean worlds in fact if not in art. Rarely has it been clearer that the ability to speak and write and be understood might be the high axles academics and others need to prevail during a disaster.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The section on historically Black colleges and universities first appeared as part of the introduction in Eugenie L. Birch and Susan M. Wachter, eds., *Rebuilding Urban Places After Disaster: Lessons from Hurricane Katrina*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2006.