



Writing the Storm Part I



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In the Wake of Katrina: A Brief Overview of New Orleans Colleges and Universities

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* Hurricane Katrina shut down nine colleges and universities
* in the New Orleans area right at the beginning of the fall
* 2005 semester, as students, faculty, and staff scattered across
* the country. Despite often severe damage from flooding,
* fires, and wind, all nine institutions reopened the following
* January, sometimes using FEMA trailers, hotels, and cruise
* ships to replace damaged buildings and lost housing. The
* stories of these campuses since Katrina are dominated by
* themes of loss, resilience, ingenuity, conflict, and renewed
* senses of mission and community.

If you teach at a college or university on the Gulf Coast, you expect the campus to close because of a hurricane from time to time.

Normally, the campus closes the day before landfall so that students, faculty, and other employees can prepare their house for the storm, help friends and neighbors, and perhaps pack and join the long, slow procession of cars, trucks, and vans headed for safer territory. If a hurricane is powerful enough and near enough, campus might be closed for a week while utilities are restored, debris is cleared, and repairs are made. Hurricane Katrina was big and strong enough to close the three campuses in Baton Rouge, LSU, Southern University, and Baton Rouge Community College, for a week, even though Baton Rouge was almost a hundred miles from Katrina's eye, and on its weak side. For me, fifty miles further west at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, August

29, 2005, was a cloudy day. A month later, Hurricane Rita would close UL-Lafayette for several days, but the eye would go through an evacuated Lake Charles, shutting down McNeese State University for a month, with some buildings closed for repairs into 2007. Those of us in Lafayette and Baton Rouge consider ourselves lucky.

I mention parts of Louisiana outside New Orleans damaged by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita because, if you live on the Gulf Coast, you feel obligated to remind people that two category 5 hurricanes beared down on Louisiana in the fall of 2005, washing away entire towns on the coast of Mississippi, in Plaquemines and St. Bernard parishes east of New Orleans, and in Cameron and Calcasieu parishes in the southwest corner of Louisiana and wreaking havoc along the coast from Alabama to east Texas. The combination of hurricanes strengthened by global warming, the massive erosion of the coastal wetlands, and government incompetence in maintaining levees and responding to the emergency devastated more than just New Orleans.

But, because of the length of time the city was under water, the number of people evacuated (many permanently), the threat to the unique culture of New Orleans, and the ways that the disaster exposed racial and class inequities in America, what happened to New Orleans was of a different magnitude. My assignment in this essay is to provide an overview of what happened to a small but important part of New Orleans, the college and university campuses in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

New Orleans is home to two state universities—the University of New Orleans, Delgado Community College, and the historically black Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO)—one two-year college—Delgado Community College—and five private colleges and universities—Tulane University, Loyola University of New Orleans, Our Lady of Holy Cross College, Dillard University (a historically black university), and Xavier University of New Orleans (the only

historically black Catholic university in the U. S.). When Katrina came ashore on August 29, the fall semester was just beginning on these campuses. Students were still making changes in their class schedules, and freshmen were still figuring out where their classrooms were and getting to know their roommates. A few days later, all eight campuses as well as Elaine P. Nunez Community College in St. Bernard Parish had announced that they would be closed until January and their students, faculty, and staff evacuated to locations throughout the U. S. along with several hundred thousand other evacuees.

The nine campuses suffered various damages, over \$1 billion dollars in property damage alone, with additional hundreds of millions in lost tuition and other expenses. The amount of physical damage to each campus, however, varied. The oldest parts of New Orleans were largely unflooded. New Orleans *Times-Picayune* columnist Chris Rose described this area, which extended from the Riverbend through Audobon Park and the Garden District to the French Quarter and into the Bywater, "a landmass the size of Bermuda, maybe, but with not so many golf courses." So Tulane and Loyola, near the Garden District, as well as Our Lady of Holy Cross, in Algiers on the side of the Mississippi River where the levees held, suffered comparatively little direct damage from Katrina, mainly wind damage and broken windows, although mold and mildew from weeks without electricity and air conditioning in the humidity of south Louisiana took a toll on library holdings and other facilities. The campus of the University of New Orleans was also largely above flood level, despite its location on the shore of Lake Ponchartrain in Lakeview, one of the most devastated areas of the city. UNO, however, suffered considerable vandalism and looting. A number of New Orleanians rescued from flooded homes were brought to the campus and abandoned there for days, locked outside the buildings, until, hungry, angry, and exposed to the elements, they forced their way into the buildings. A series of lootings followed over several days. Computers were stolen, and the campus bookstore was emptied of everything but its textbooks. Delgado suffered three to

six feet of flooding in 20 of its 25 buildings, over \$300 million dollars in property damage, despite the fact that the National Guard used the campus for its headquarters for several weeks.

The historically black universities, all located on lower ground, and Nunez Community College, closer to Katrina's eye in badly flooded St. Bernard Parish, fared even worse. The floodwaters at Nunez topped seven feet, damaging every building. Xavier had five to eight feet of flooding, with estimated losses of \$90 million, almost twice its endowment. Damage to Dillard, located near the London Avenue Canal breach in Gentilly, was more severe. The entire campus was under six to ten feet of water and had major fire damage, including the destruction of one building. Dillard's property damage is estimated at \$282 million with at least another \$64 million in tuition losses and other expenses due to Katrina, an amount that dwarfs Dillard's pre-Katrina endowment of \$45 million. SUNO's campus, located in the lowest part of New Orleans, was completely destroyed by flooding of ten to fifteen feet, followed by more flooding from Hurricane Rita's storm surge. SUNO's campus is being rebuilt from scratch and is not expected to reopen until Fall 2009.

Several New Orleans campuses chartered buses to evacuate their students as Katrina approached, but the students' evacuation did not always occur smoothly. One of Dillard's buses caught fire, destroying the possessions of 37 students, and 60 Xavier students were trapped in for five days in a dormitory when flood waters overtook the campus. Hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the U. S. mobilized to admit many of the 45,000 thousands of students evacuated from New Orleans, as their college administrators scattered across the country themselves worked out problems of transfer credits and financial aid. Thousands of evacuated students enrolled at nearby LSU, Southern University at Baton Rouge, and Baton Rouge Community College, with BRCC hiring displaced faculty from Delgado and Nunez and renting office space to provide classes for these students. Because damage

from Katrina delayed the beginning of the fall semester in Baton Rouge for a week, these students missed no class time. Students on other state campuses had to catch up with classes that had begun a week or week and a half earlier. Many students found it difficult to concentrate on their studies. Of the 850 or so evacuated students enrolled at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, only half completed the term, and many stopped attending within a week after enrolling.

Faculty and staff were paid their salaries throughout the fall despite the campus closures, with the notable exceptions of many adjunct faculty. Each school set up make-shift websites to inform students, faculty, alumni, and other employees and supporters about their plans and progress for recovery, and some established blogs so that students and faculty could communicate where they were and how they were doing and maintain some sense of community, especially since cell-phone and long-distance services in Louisiana were unreliable for most of the fall. UNO, Delgado, and Nunez organized on-line fall semesters beginning in October, somehow constructing electronic classrooms, training faculty, and enrolling students despite the scattering of technicians, faculty, administrators, and students throughout the country. Although only a small percentage of the fall enrollment took advantage of this distance learning, these classes were important in the schools' rebuilding efforts.

All nine institutions faced devastating financial losses and drops of enrollment, and several worried whether they would ever reopen. The historically black universities, SUNO, Dillard, and Xavier, were especially concerned about surviving the crisis. Xavier and Dillard faced devastating rebuilding costs with limited endowments. SUNO was vulnerable to arguments that a state-supported black university is a relic of segregated education and an unnecessary duplication of academic programs offered at UNO, despite SUNO's importance to New Orleans' African American community. College and university presidents worked to gather their key administrators

together in Houston, Baton Rouge, Shreveport, and other cities and towns, including little Grand Coteau, to organize campus repairs for January reopenings, raise funds, and reorganize their institutions in preparation for smaller enrollments and income.

Each institution declared *force majeure* or its equivalent to give the administration emergency powers to eliminate and reorganize programs and lay off or furlough faculty, including tenured faculty. Some institutions announced radical changes in their universities' mission, with the most far-reaching changes at Tulane and SUNO. Tulane president Scott Cowen announced what he called "the most significant reinvention of a university in the United States in over a century" when he unveiled Tulane's Renewal Plan. This plan eliminated many of Tulane's Ph. D. programs (including English), four engineering programs, its women's college, and eight sports, reorganized two of its colleges, and established a new Undergraduate College. With a new emphasis on undergraduate education, Tulane now requires all full-time faculty to teach undergraduate classes, requires community service work from all undergraduates, and requires all first- and second-year students to live on campus. SUNO eliminated 19 academic programs, mainly in the liberal arts (including the English major) but added seven new programs, including business entrepreneurship, medical records administration, and human development and family services as part of its new "community-based emphasis" to make the university more relevant to a rebuilding New Orleans. In effect, SUNO replaced much of its liberal arts curriculum with a career-oriented curriculum.

Although some faculty and staff retired or resigned rather than return to New Orleans, especially if their homes were destroyed, every campus conducted layoffs of faculty and other employees. Loyola, for example, laid off 19 professors. SUNO reduced its faculty from 161 to 91 after announcing furloughs of 55 faculty. Dillard cut the number of its faculty and staff in half. Tulane laid off 230 faculty (180 at the medical school and 50 at its Uptown campus) as well as

hundreds of part-time faculty and well over 200 support workers. Most of the program changes and faculty furloughs were decided with little or no faculty input or involvement, violating AAUP rules for dismissing tenured faculty. As a result, most New Orleans' colleges and universities are now under AAUP censure. Students and faculty vigorously protested many of the program changes and the lack of faculty governance in the decision-making. Some furloughed faculty have sued their institutions, and Loyola's College of Humanities and Natural Sciences passed a vote of "no confidence" in the president and the provost.

Classes resumed at every one of New Orleans' colleges in January 2006. SUNO, however, reopened on a temporary campus of 45 FEMA trailers a mile north of its permanent campus, where it continues to operate. Dillard University reopened in the Hilton Riverside Hotel near the French Quarter. The severe decline in New Orleans tourism enabled the hotel to provide Dillard with classrooms, housing, and offices, with some classes also meeting in the New Orleans World Trade Center. The other schools were all able to open their campuses, although the ground floor of Xavier's buildings were under repair and many parking lots and sports fields at UNO, Xavier, Tulane, and other campuses were filled with FEMA trailers housing university students and employees. Tulane arranged for some students to live on a cruise ship on the Mississippi River because of the expense and short supply of off-campus housing after Katrina. Although most schools had cancelled their fall semesters, Xavier and Our Lady of Holy Cross instead delayed the "fall" semester until January and began the spring semester almost immediately afterward, in May. After a long enforced "holiday" from classes, students and faculty at Xavier and OLHCC would not enjoy a substantial break again until Christmas 2006.

Total enrollment on the New Orleans campuses dropped from 45,000 in August to a little over 30,000 in January, with the public universities suffering some of the steepest declines in student populations. SUNO's

enrollment dropped from 3700 students before Katrina to 2037 in January 2006 and 2300 for Fall 2006. Dillard's enrollment decreased by 54%. Tulane's enrollment, in contrast, declined only 15% from the fall. Because it depends entirely on students living in the New Orleans area, Delgado Community College anticipated a 60% drop in enrollment and was pleasantly surprised that it lost "only" 35% of its enrollment when classes resumed, due to a strong Come Home to Delgado campaign; the establishment of tuition-free programs in construction technology, allied health, and shipbuilding funded by federal grants and corporate donations; and a recent increase in state university admission standards.

Considering the state of New Orleans' infrastructure at this point, the lack of housing, stores, restaurants, and even working traffic lights in much of the city and the work needed to repair campuses and return faculty and staff, most of New Orleans schools were pleased and relieved by these enrollment figures, especially at the number of first-time freshmen who returned to campus. UNO reopened in the middle of a largely deserted Lakeview, which became especially eerie at night because of the lack of off-campus street lights. The university added food services and other facilities to make up for the lack of restaurants and stores near campus. Campuses hired more counselors in response to the increase in post-traumatic stress syndrome, depression, and suicide in New Orleans after Katrina.

Although the schools were pleased with the number of returning students, they worried about the size of the freshman class for fall 2006. Each school faced what Xavier's President Norman Francis called "the momma factor" in recruiting high school seniors—their parents' fears about sending their children to a New Orleans with rising crime rates and uncertain hurricane protection. And, in fact, most experience steep enrollment declines in fall 2006. For example, Loyola's fall 2006 freshman class, at 447, was less than half the size of its pre-Katrina class of 950. Tulane's freshman class dropped from 1375 before

Katrina to 882 in fall 2006. SUNO's total enrollment dropped from 3700 in fall 2005 to 2300 in fall 2006. But every school experienced significant enrollment increases in fall 2007. Loyola recruited 670 first-time freshmen for fall 2007, for example, achieving 75% of its total enrollment before Katrina, while Tulane's 2007 freshman class grew to 1200. These increases have allowed the schools to rehire some of their furloughed faculty and staff and to advertise for new faculty. As a group, the enrollment increases at the nine campuses are outpacing the growth of New Orleans, whose population at the end of 2007 neared 300,000, almost 65% of its size before Katrina.

One of the most notable changes in the New Orleans colleges and universities is a much stronger sense of mission among the students, faculty, and staff on these campuses and a stronger bond between the general community of New Orleans and its colleges and universities. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of these institutions of higher education to the economic and cultural recovery of New Orleans (and of Nunez Community College to the recovery of St. Bernard Parish). Most campuses, on reopening, initiated new community service programs and alliances with other organizations, such as Loyola's NOAH Project and Tulane's Partnership for the Transformation of Urban Communities, to help rebuild New Orleans. A number of new students decided to go to school in New Orleans to become part of the rebuilding effort, often after spending a week or two in New Orleans with Habitat for Humanity or another charitable organization, and many returning students have become serious about community service. Many faculty also found their Katrina experiences transformative, their research, their teaching, and their service now shaped by a need to contribute to the recovery, a need to study what has been happening in New Orleans, and a need to tell its stories of New Orleans.

The faculty and students of the colleges and universities in New Orleans have gone through—and are going through—a wrenching experience that I find difficult to imagine from just 130 miles away.

It will take at least a decade we know the results of the rebuilding process of New Orleans and its colleges and universities and how the city and its culture will be changed by Katrina. If you are interested in helping one of these schools with their recovery, you can find information for contributing to a hurricane recovery fund on many of their websites.