



Students from Loyola University help construct a new house in New Orleans.

A Year Later

PHOTO BY AP/WIDEWORLD

New Orleans institutions take recovery efforts off campus.

BY SCOTT DYER

NEW ORLEANS

Like the resilient residents, city leaders and community boosters battered and displaced by Hurricane Katrina, officials from the Big Easy's colleges and universities vowed early on to come back.

But for Tulane University, one of the biggest challenges to overcome before resuming classes in January was finding schools for the children of the institution's faculty and staff. There were also questions about whether grocery stores, dry cleaners and other businesses would be open in the uptown area of New Orleans where Tulane is located.

With the public school system showing few signs of recovery, Tulane donated \$1.5 million to make sure a K-8 charter school —

the nearby Lusher School, which had a well-established reputation as one of the state's best — would be open in January.

"We were pretty sure the bars were going to be open, and we were right," jokes Paul Barron, Tulane's interim provost and senior vice president for academic affairs. "We had to build a village for Tulane to be a part of."

Tulane is just one of the many colleges and universities working to rebuild not only their campuses, but their surrounding communities. The higher education institutions are working to improve their individual neighborhoods, hoping to convince more of the city's 455,000 residents to return home.

A year after Hurricane Katrina flooded 80 percent of this city, colleges and universities are recovering more quickly than the neighborhoods around them, and have become beacons of normalcy in a landscape of devastation. Xavier University of Louisiana, Southern University at New Orleans, Tulane and Delgado Community College are all looking to recapture more than 70 percent of their pre-Katrina enrollments this fall.

Training 10,000 Workers

Katrina destroyed an estimated 125,000 buildings, so it's perhaps no surprise that a shortage of skilled construction labor has been among the city's biggest rebuilding obstacles. In response, the Louisiana Community and Technical College System is fast-tracking a new program aimed at training 10,000 workers as soon as possible.

"The most bizarre situation that I've heard about happened just recently, where we had one contractor who called and hired every student in one of our classes, and the faculty member who was teaching the class," says outgoing LCTCS President Walter G. Bumphus.

The Louisiana Reconstruction Team workforce program is funded with a special \$15 million appropriation from the state and a \$5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

While much of the demand for construction workers is in the New Orleans area, Bumphus says the demand is so great that LCTCS is offering the programs in other parts of the state, and at schools that wouldn't ordinarily offer such programs.

Construction training programs have started at DCC in New Orleans, Baton Rouge Community College and Sowela Technical Community College in Lake Charles, which was hit hard by Hurricane Rita last year.

Meanwhile, Bumphus says, LCTCS is having problems retaining faculty at its 42 technical campuses because the private sector is hiring them away at double or triple their state salaries.

Leading the effort to rebuild New Orleans one neighborhood at a time is Xavier President Norman C. Francis. Francis chairs the Louisiana Recovery Authority, an arm of Louisiana state government charged with coordinating the federal- and state-funded hurricane recovery efforts.

"Our problems are tied to New Orleans. And the perception of New Orleans, while not totally accurate, has been enough to create what I call the 'mama factor.'" Francis' term refers to the impact a parent's trepidation about sending their child to devastated New Orleans has on enrollment at New Orleans colleges.

That's part of the reason colleges have stepped up. Xavier, which reopened its campus in January, "is the only heartbeat pumping away

right now in our area of New Orleans, but we're hoping that will change," Francis says.

The LRA runs the Road Home program, a federally funded, \$9 billion program aimed at helping more than 100,000 Louisiana homeowners decide whether to rebuild or relocate. The LRA is also coordinating efforts by cities to repair roads and other infrastructure, Francis says.

Francis says one of his greatest concerns about New Orleans' recovery is the rising crime rate.

"We've still got some major gaps in the chain that drives the justice system — not enough prosecutors, the public defenders office has been just about decimated, and judges trying to hold trials in different places," he says, adding that criminals are "operating without any fear of arrest or conviction."

Francis' counterpart at SUNO is stepping up rebuilding efforts in that part of the city. Officials are not only working to reach students who have been displaced by the storm, but are also scrambling to help its community combat a sharp increase in drug- and gang-related violence. As of early August, there had been 77 homicides in New Orleans. Although that number was far higher in the years before Katrina, the current lack of consistent law enforcement has many residents concerned about their safety.

SUNO Chancellor Victor Ukpolo says he decided in June to organize a crime prevention summit after five teens were gunned down not far from campus. The summit is set for Sept. 16.

"Within 48 hours of the killings, we went to the city council and the mayor and offered to help them put together the summit that will feature national, city and state leaders," Ukpolo says.

SUNO had already converted from a commuter campus to a residential campus of 400 trailers, providing the housing for students and their families and overcoming the biggest barrier for returning students. The school also offered workshops for area business owners on how to work with FEMA.

Over at Dillard, officials are working with the New Orleans Community Development Council to help plan the recovery of its Gentilly neighborhood, says university president Marvalene Hughes.

Reopening her campus this fall, with more than half of the pre-Katrina student population returning, will also provide a major economic shot in the arm for the Gentilly area, just as it did downtown.

When Dillard started classes in January, the campus was so heavily damaged that faculty and staff operated out of the Hilton Hotel on the downtown riverfront. Downtown New Orleans was limping along at the time, and the relocated Dillard students, faculty and staff provided much-needed patronage for restaurants and other businesses that were struggling to get back on their feet.

"There wasn't much activity in the downtown area at the time, and we brought it back — and are going to do the same thing for Gentilly," Hughes says.

Francis has the same resolve about Louisiana, in general. He says he decided to serve on Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco's LRA because he saw it as an opportunity to rebuild New Orleans and coastal Louisiana, better and stronger.

"I really believe we have an opportunity," Francis says, "to build better housing, education and medical care." □

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High-Tech By Necessity

In an effort to reach out to students who were forced out of Louisiana by Hurricane Katrina, Delgado Community College, Dillard University and Southern University at New Orleans are beefing up their online courses.

SUNO Chancellor Victor Ukpolo says his campus was almost totally destroyed by Katrina's floodwaters, but received trailers from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to establish a temporary campus.

According to Ukpolo, SUNO has also arranged to have several entire bachelor's degree programs placed online to help those students who are having trouble returning to New Orleans because of the housing shortage.

"We were offering some classes online before Katrina, but we had so many students impacted by the storm that we had to come up with creative ways to reach them," he says. "It's only since Katrina that we started offering entire degree programs online."

SUNO plans to offer online bachelor's degrees in fields such as general studies, criminal justice and early childhood education, as well as an online master's degree in museum studies. More programs are in the works, Ukpolo says.

Delgado Community College Chancellor Alex Johnson says that prior to Katrina, only about 10 percent of DCC's students chose the online option.

Johnson says the college has received a boost from federal and state programs that have provided funding for three programs designed to fill post-Katrina work force shortages — construction arts, allied health and shipbuilding.

But Johnson says Delgado is also expanding its offerings in a number of technical and scientific fields.

"Before Katrina, New Orleans' work force centered primarily around the service industry," he says. "Now, we're seeing new jobs in emerging fields that deal with technology and microtechnology."

Dillard University President Marvalene Hughes says she's also expanding her school's online offerings.

"We weren't prepared for the students to be out for an entire semester. I don't think it had happened ever before," she says. □

— Scott Dyer

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