Lessons Learned from a Bou
The Delgado College

BY ALEX B. JOHNSON, GAYLE NOLAN, AND CYNTHIA SIEGRIST
With Hurricane Katrina: Community Story

When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, it inflicted wind and flooding damage on all but one of the five campuses and centers of Delgado Community College, the oldest and largest two-year institution in Louisiana. Hardest hit was Delgado's main location, the City Park Campus in New Orleans, where three to six feet of flood water damaged or destroyed 20 of its 25 buildings.

For members of the Delgado community and residents of the city in general, hurricane season (from June to October) with its attendant warnings and occasional evacuations, is an annual occurrence. During the 2004 season, amid dire predictions of a direct hit from Hurricane Ivan, people fled New Orleans—only to be informed just two days later that it was safe to return to a community relatively unscathed by the storm. But with Hurricane Katrina last year, the customary few days' evacuation resulted in an exile of several months for most individuals. For other displaced people, the hurricane damage to their homes and communities was so severe that it has dimmed the prospects of their ever returning home.

As the Delgado faculty and staff left their offices for the weekend, nothing indicated that they might be seeing them for the last time. However, following Katrina's devastation, members of the Delgado community found that they could lose all their possessions and yet focus with great determination on providing, just a month and a half after the hurricane, education and nurturing for students.

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Colleges in the Gulf Coast states affected by hurricanes are not the only ones that may confront disasters. The threat of earthquakes, tornadoes, snow storms, volcanoes, or man-made catastrophes such as 9/11 looms large for many institutions. What we did and failed to do in our responses to and recovery from Hurricane Katrina taught us lessons that might benefit other institutions that want to improve their disaster-preparedness efforts. In particular:

**Identify an emergency headquarters.** Four days after the storm, Walter Bumphus, president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System, and Myrtle Dorsey, chancellor of Baton Rouge Community College (BRCC), helped Delgado establish an emergency headquarters at BRCC. The headquarters was home for the emergency leadership team and an oasis where displaced faculty and staff residing in the Baton Rouge area and beyond could gather and where the strategies designed to reopen the college were launched. The headquarters' few offices were equipped with a bank of computers, telephones, a donated fax machine, and a copier that at least 25 Delgado employees shared with staff from Nunez Community College—itself almost destroyed when St. Bernard Parish experienced severe flooding. An emergency bank account was established for necessities, such as wireless laptop computers and cellular telephones equipped with Baton Rouge's 225 area code.

**Assemble an emergency response team.** Our emergency leadership team was critical to the school's recovery. It included individuals in formal leadership roles, such as vice chancellors, along with others with needed knowledge and expertise (see Table 1). The foundation for the team effort had been laid well before the hurricane by means of a learner-centered organizational structure designed to promote collaboration, consistency, efficiency, communications, and accountability across a multi-site community college.

After determining the status of the college's facilities following the hurricane and locating temporary replacements, the team immediately developed strategies aimed at getting the college reopened quickly. They included:

- **Restoring information-technology functions,** including the college's Web site, online course capability, and student and administrative systems;
- **Launching a communications campaign,** so that everyone received regular status reports on the college's recovery;
- **Locating students and, when ever possible,** retaining them through the use of online courses or direct instruction at remote locations; helping others to enroll at different colleges; and
- **Implementing administrative processes** that expedited the reopening.

The leadership of the college focused on setting a positive tone and direction through a management style that was decisive but also reassuring. As leaders completed each step required for the college's recovery, faculty and staff were reminded often of the impressive gains at Delgado before the storm that would serve as the foundation for its rebirth.

**Recover information technology systems.** A week after the hurricane,
a Louisiana State Police trooper escorted a convoy of trucks and cars to Delgado's previously flooded City Park Campus to retrieve computers, file servers, and files, because the backup system was inaccessible. The backup system had been housed on the sixth floor of a building that was engulfed by water on the campus of the Health Sciences Center of Louisiana State University, in New Orleans' central business district. If the files at City Park and the backup site had been damaged, student and administrative records covering much of the college's 84-year history would have been jeopardized. But a determined and experienced information-technology team retrieved the equipment and restored the files at “hot sites” in Baton Rouge and Shreveport.

**Create communications procedures.** The emergency leadership team quickly established an emergency Web site, linked first to the Louisiana community-college system's Web site and then to the Delgado file server. The site was used to relay important messages, such as how to obtain a pay check and how specific personnel actions would be carried out, as well as to provide whatever student and em-

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**Table 1. Emergency Leadership Team Expertise**

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<th>Information Technology</th>
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<td>Communications</td>
<td>Facilities and Environmental Assessment</td>
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<td>Finance and Payroll</td>
<td>Government Relations</td>
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<td>Human Resources</td>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
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<td>State and Federal Compliance (e.g., FEMA)</td>
<td>Proposal Writer</td>
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<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Public Safety</td>
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*Source: Delgado Community College*
ployee information was available, including addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses. A weekly update from the chancellor offered encouragement to individuals accessing the Web site from computers in shelters, private homes, hotels, libraries, and colleges in the 37 states where they found refuge. The system established a call center that Delgado personnel staffed to ensure that questions would be answered immediately by a knowledgeable individual.

The call center, Web site, and telephones became the primary means of communications. The news media were kept abreast of developments through press releases, meetings, and telephone conversations. Along with the chancellor, members of the emergency leadership team went on television and radio to provide regular updates on the college's status.

Cultivate relationships with government officials and private foundations. Delgado's chancellor, Alex Johnson, appointed a small contingent from the emergency leadership team to coordinate aspects of the recovery effort with state and federal authorities, including issues involving facilities, finances, and compliance with requirements of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Louisiana's Office of Facilities Planning and Control. Immediately following the hurricane, Louisiana's Commissioner of Higher Education, E. Joseph Savoie, created the Louisiana Higher Education Response Team, consisting of the leaders of the affected institutions and other state higher education and government officials, to ensure a consistent and proactive response to the storm.

Delgado's chancellor represented the college on the response team and traveled to Washington, D.C., for meetings with federal agencies, including the Departments of Education and Labor, to petition for resources needed to offset revenue losses, make emergency repairs to buildings, and obtain needed equipment. Delgado thus far has received a share of a $95 million federal allocation to Louisiana's affected schools, $750,000 from the Bush-Clinton Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund, and $175,000 from Scholarship America, coordinated by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC). Along with other college leaders, Chancellor Johnson met with state and federal lawmakers, including the Chairman of the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee, to describe Delgado's status and to position it for future funding opportunities. Many of these efforts were aided by higher-education organizations, such as the AACC and the American Council on Education.

Take care of students. Our students enrolling at institutions inside and outside of Louisiana received assistance in identifying courses that would transfer to Delgado. A hotline was established to ensure that they received the benefits of more flexible federal financial-aid guidelines. Where possible, a faculty member was assigned to check on groups of our students enrolling at another institution. That was the case with 19 senior nursing students who enrolled at El Centro Community College in Dallas and completed their studies there in December 2005.

By October 2005 the college was able to offer a compressed semester for 160 senior nursing students at locations including hospitals, libraries, movie theaters, and Delgado's West Bank Campus. Free online classes for 2,500 students in 5,500 courses were offered by the college and the Sloan Semester, sponsored by the Sloan Foundation and the Southern Regional Education Board. Also available at no charge was an "intersession" held December 1-23 on the West Bank Campus that enrolled 250 students (who achieved an impressive completion rate of 95 percent).

Meanwhile, a number of students enrolled at other colleges around the state and as far away as Tennessee and California. Early on, the college registrar began receiving requests for their transcripts. But since our records system was down until the middle of November, the colleges receiving Delgado students enrolled them in good faith, waiving admission requirements and accepting whatever information the students provided. Our registrar had access to enough data to verify that students had actually been enrolled at Delgado for the fall 2005 semester, and she agreed to e-mail letters of verification to accepting institutions. After November 14, when our system became "live," the registrar sent transcripts to colleges that had been hosting Delgado students since September.

RETURN TO NORMAL

From October to December, faculty and staff from all college locations occupied workspaces in a computer laboratory on the West Bank campus, in some instances learning online course instructional techniques. At bi-weekly meetings they offered, among other things, ideas and suggestions about
publicizing Delgado’s scheduled reopening for the 2006 spring semester. Although none of the buildings on the City Park campus were accessible, faculty and staff volunteers sat under an awning in one of the campus parking lots in unusually frigid December weather to distribute to students information on how to register for the upcoming semester. Faculty and staff also posted “Come Home to Delgado” signs throughout the region, recruited students in shopping centers and department stores, and called students whose telephone numbers they could find, all to publicize Delgado’s reopening.

This effort resulted in a spring 2006 credit enrollment of 10,002 students, 60 percent of the spring 2005 enrollment and 20 percent higher than the projected return rate following the hurricane. Twenty-five percent of the students took one or more online courses during the spring 2006 semester, compared to less than 10 percent before Katrina. In every area of the college’s operations, people had to invent and implement new ways to accomplish ordinary day-to-day operations.

LOOKING BACK

Focused leadership from the emergency response team, open lines of communication, flexibility in college operations, and the involvement of a steadfast faculty and staff all united at the right moment to reopen the college. Despite these achievements, looking back several months later we can see several ways in which the college could have improved its response. We suggest that the disaster-preparedness and recovery efforts at other institutions include the following steps:

- Identify, prepare, and equip the emergency leadership team early. We were fortunate that most members evacuated to Baton Rouge or other areas within driving distance of that city. But even before the emergency arose, they should have been issued laptops with wireless capability, provided with alternate e-mail addresses, and supplied with cellular phones with pagers capability and area codes outside the region. For Delgado staff, receiving or making calls using southeastern Louisiana’s 225 or 504 area codes was chancy during the month following the hurricane. Although expensive to operate and prone not to work well indoors, satellite phones should be provided to maintenance and public-safety staff before disaster strikes.
- Select in advance a headquarters where the emergency response team can gather to carry out its work. Since housing will be at a premium, it is also important to arrange, well in advance, lodging for selected members of the team. For example, in the event of another evacuation during hurricane season, three sites throughout Louisiana, including provisions for lodging, have been secured in advance for the team.
- Secure information technology at a distant site. Our backup site, approved by state officials as a part of our Emergency Preparedness Plan, wound up in the hurricane zone. We recommend that campuses identify an easily accessible alternate operations site well outside the range of a possible disaster. When feasible, contracting with another college to store the emergency Web site until needed is a wise precaution, as is providing faculty with CDs to store course outlines, syllabi, and class rosters that include the addresses, cellular phone numbers, and alternate e-mail addresses of students.
- Have a well-established communications protocol. Since the emergency Web site will be the primary tool for managing communications, easy access to important notices is crucial during a crisis. We suggest that institutions equip it and the regular Web site with directions for employees and students and information on how the college has prepared for, will operate during, and will recover from a state of emergency. It is important to test the communications system periodically.
- Provide access to facilities for workers. In hindsight, we also came to realize the importance of having a designated person with keys to every building who could provide access to the college and government workers.
- Provide group and individual counseling immediately. Given the variety of difficult personal and interpersonal challenges that accompany a catastrophic event, it is important to offer help immediately to employees and students. Counseling may be delivered on-site—if possible—to individuals or groups and through referral to external agencies. Reputable online sources for help are the American Psychological Association’s Managing Traumatic Stress: After the Hurricanes and the National Mental Health Association’s Hurricane Katrina: Coping Strategies for Staff and Volunteers.

MOVING FORWARD

While we have made impressive strides, much work remains to return Delgado Community College to its pre-hurricane condition. The college’s budget, which has experienced a $16.25 million shortfall, must be restored. Information-technology systems must be expanded to support more students taking classes online. Facilities must be renovated as soon as possible to serve individuals moving back to the New Orleans area more quickly than anticipated.

There are signs that these challenges will be met. Louisiana’s governor, Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, included in her executive budget for 2006-2007 increases for higher education that include a pay raise for faculty and an appropriation to cover the costs of the employee health and retirement benefits that are usually borne by the institutions. The governor allotted $15 million to support training in the construction trades, of which Delgado received $1.2 million. Congress has earmarked another $50 million in grants for affected institutions to retain talented faculty and staff, provide aid to students, secure urgently needed material such as library books and computers, and renovate or construct facilities.

Members of the Delgado community are preparing for what lies ahead. Their training began as they united to reopen the college in late fall 2005. A commitment to collective action was formed, and from it new leaders emerged who were eager to take on responsibility. Individuals from separate administrative units dealing with curriculum, information technology, human resources, finance, and workforce development joined to begin the arduous task of rebuilding the college.

This collaboration is the framework for our continuing recovery, which will challenge us to develop and introduce new approaches to education and training. We have no roadmaps for this effort. But what we do possess is collective wisdom, creativity, and experience. And it is these attributes that will serve us well as we produce learners for a new and revitalized economy.