

Back to College during Hurricane Recovery: Faculty and Students Navigating the New Semester Together

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Abstract: The arrival of Hurricane Harvey brought a city to a stand-still, leaving unforeseen destruction in its wake. As based on the perspective of three social work educators, this narrative recalls the process of not only experiencing the storm but also a need for creatively finding ways to transform despair into opportunities for growth. Significant and specialized organizational resources are often necessary for post-disaster recovery; however, everyone, including faculty, can play equally important roles in helping one another and students transition back to campus after the disaster. The authors conclude with six key recommendations faculty members from all disciplines can utilize and integrate into post-disaster recovery efforts.

Keywords: disaster recovery, higher education, student transition

It was the start of a new university fall semester, and social work faculty were feeling the usual excitement and anxiety that comes with preparing for the first week of class. The final touches were being put on syllabi, and between committee meetings, we found short moments of time to catch up with one another to share the highlights of our summer travels. Returning students excitedly spent a few minutes walking the hallways to check in with their favorite professors; we always enjoyed preparing them for yet another successful semester. We left committee meetings on August 24, 2017, with no expectation of our city not seeing the sun for the next five days. Similarly, we left campus that night curious about what new issues would be discussed in the following day's opening faculty meeting, although not realizing our expectations would never come. Then, on August 25th the first of 50 inches of rain began to fall. Over the next several days, fear gripped us as Hurricane Harvey kept us hostage in our homes and shelters, resulting in an estimated \$70-\$108 billion in damages (Quealy, 2017). As water continued to rise, it drowned our belongings, memories, daily routines, and any hope of a normal semester.

The sun shone on our faces for the first time late afternoon on August 29th, and it felt like warm beams of hope. As flood waters slowly receded in various places, we started the journey from crisis to recovery. Amid the rescues, mud-outs, volunteering, completing FEMA and insurance paperwork, and frantically trying to find open and stocked grocery stores, the reality of returning to campus post-hurricane began to surface. Frantic student emails started rolling in: "I lost my textbook in the flood. What do I do?"; "I see the online quiz just closed for the first week. Can you re-open it?" A department faculty composed of seven individuals anxiously sent one another check-in texts and emails, only to discover that many within our small team also experienced tremendous loss in the flood. We learned that both students and faculty had flooded homes, apartments, and cars, and they had lost textbooks and, even, electronics. Some of the public K-12 schools, which our kids attended, were flooded so badly that they either weren't going to open or anticipated opening several weeks late. Then the email arrived that made us really panic, which informed us that classes were scheduled to resume September 5th. How would we return to campus if our children's schools were closed? How would we get to campus if we didn't have working cars? How could students do well in courses if textbooks had been washed away? And, the most anxiety-provoking question that many faculty members worried about was what they

would need when classes began.

Hurricane-Related Losses and Impact

Tangible Losses

There were many needs that had to be met in order to successfully begin the fall semester. The first was a need for a cohesive, well-structured department. This required ensuring someone was always available to answer questions and tend to last-minute administrative requests, and that everyone collectively acclimated students to college and classroom environments. Post-hurricane recovery planning efforts that were normally taken for granted were suddenly in total disarray. In between needing to sort through damaged items, finding suitable housing and childcare, spontaneously meeting with disaster inspectors, caring for distraught relatives and friends in surrounding disaster areas, and tending to our own mental and physical health, the thought of faculty having to put all of that on hold to focus on a semester seemed almost inconceivable. Those losses not only affected our personal lives but also our professional roles as faculty members.

Within the confines of a well-organized department, a second need pertained to students since they almost always required assistance with academic advising and registration, both of which were necessary for securing financial aid and scholarship money. All of these last-minute functions were delayed due to the disaster-related system and personnel disruptions. Approximately 84% of our total student body required financial aid (Texas Southern University, 2016) to even remain in school, and those types of delays added another unaccounted-for layer of stress in light of students having faced many of the same disaster-related crises faculty were struggling with. For many students, the prolonged lack of accessible funds almost certainly meant needed supplies, such as textbooks and computers, fell further down the list of priorities. For others, it also meant an inability to pay rent, an inability to secure reliable transportation, and the requirement to choose between essential needs.

Upon our return to campus, we found that many more than previously anticipated had either lost their books in the flood, couldn't purchase textbooks because financial aid was delayed, or were not in a position to replace previously-purchased textbooks, supplies, and electronics. The delayed opening meant students who had not yet registered for classes or been advised by a faculty member were in a more precarious situation due to the extra stretch in time. Many faculty members found classrooms half full or online classes with almost no activity during the first several weeks of the semester. We learned that students were spending a considerable amount of time trying to find temporary affordable housing and standing in emergency food assistance lines for up to eight hours. Trying to balance the reality of securing resources to assure basic needs with coursework demands was a real challenge, and it was one we anticipated would last not just for the first few weeks but throughout the academic year.

Intangible Losses

Hurricane Harvey not only swept away basic and tangible needs, but it also damaged things that

were abstract and intangible. Spending days or weeks in crisis while simultaneously being forced to respond to the same took a toll on our physical and mental well-being. In the days following the storm, many of us lost our sense of time. According to Rosalie Hyde, a trauma-based social worker, a lack of time orientation is one way the brain tries to manage stress (as cited in Kolker, 2017). We started most days not knowing what day of the week it was, and during the day we frequently lost track of time. Many had trouble falling asleep or staying asleep. Those in our homes anxiously went to bed at night wondering if we'd feel cold water when we stood up in the middle of the night. Those in shelters could hardly sleep at all. The constant noise and lights in addition to worrying about children, getting to work, and accessing resources all haunted our sleep.

The hurricane also took our sense of predictability and control. As human beings, we look forward to some sense of predictability. We depend on this because it reduces the level of anxiety in our daily lives. Both during and after the hurricane, small things and events we usually predicted would happen were replaced with uncertainty. And, with both predictability and control as cornerstones of effective classroom management, these uncertainties were most pronounced in the academic environment. It was at this juncture when we dug deep to find predictability and control reserves we may not have even known existed within us. At every opportunity, we shared bits of our strength with one another to simply help our colleagues get through the day. As a department, we recognized that no matter the uncertainties, our reality was that we had to return and begin classes in the midst of recovery while we were going through recovery ourselves. As faculty members listened attentively to students describe their particular circumstances, we grappled with not minimizing their situations because we knew others, including ourselves, were dealing with what we perceived as worse. As we gently encouraged them to create small task assignments so as to not fall too far behind, we wondered if they realized we were sacrificing for our families to be there with them. With both faculty and students meeting at the four-way intersection of life—natural disaster, individual coping, professional obligations, and required deliverables—navigating the new semester became akin to a very delicate dance.

Hurricane-Related Recovery Response and Facilitation

Similar to Hurricane Ike in 2008, Hurricane Harvey was traumatic, leaving us feeling powerless during the crisis. In contrast to Hurricane Ike, Hurricane Harvey hit our city and university at a point when fall student enrollment exceeded 10,000 students for the first time in over a decade, and many of them were first-time freshman and transfer students (Austin A. Lane, personal communication, September 28, 2017). We were very excited because quite a few of these freshman and transfer students identified social work as their academic major. Yet, we were also worried because oftentimes these are the new students who sometimes need extra guidance to start strong and remain on track. During the crisis, the most accessible form of communication with students was posting messages through the department's information portal. For those with access to electricity and the internet, this kept them abreast of the information we had to share. For those without access, messages remained on the board with contact information in the event of intermittent connections. Fortunately, we weren't the only ones thinking this way, as we were pleased to observe efforts our university made in striving to assist both students and faculty

during and after the crisis. Under new administrative leadership, the university implemented a series of steps demonstrating what our department recognized as concern for the whole person or intentional efforts to address needs beyond the classroom. Organizational responses such as these reinforced and bolstered our ability as a department to better support ourselves so that we could better identify ways to support our students.

Organizational-Level Responses

The university played a large role at the organizational level toward helping alleviate crisis-related stress during the transition back to campus. What an organization chooses to do or not do sets the tone for other entities, such as faculty and staff. University administrators engaged in several tasks meant to address the most urgent needs and tangible losses experienced by both students and faculty members. The first task was ensuring student safety for those already on campus for the fall semester. During the crisis, campus police and food service staff ensured those students were taken care of with food and basic needs while the campus was closed. The campus police also posted pictures of students in their dorms eating and talking with officers so that the out-of-state parents were reassured of their safety and care.

Next, the university prioritized financial needs by focusing on payroll and student financial aid as early as possible. Although the institution wasn't officially open, to ensure faculty and staff experienced minimal disruption in receiving their monthly pay, direct deposits were made on time, and those receiving paper checks were directed to a designated place to retrieve their checks the same day. Students were provided with specific dates for the following week that they could expect their refunds to be available. On August 30th, the university announced that its disaster relief program, University Cares: A Pathway to Healing from Harvey, was scheduled to start accepting applications on September 5th, the same day the university was due to re-open. The relief fund was immediately established for simultaneously accepting donations; providing financial relief for all faculty, staff, and students who were severely impacted by Hurricane Harvey; and maintaining active, available community-based resources (Austin A. Lane, personal communication, August 30, 2017).

To further minimize the likelihood of Hurricane Harvey becoming a long-term barrier to student success, additional organizational-level steps were taken to establish stabilization and assist in creating a new normal. For example, class registration deadlines were extended by two weeks to accommodate students who were displaced. Additional Hurricane Harvey-related scholarships were made available to students reporting a severe need. And, midterms were delayed by one week, giving students more opportunity to prepare for scheduled exams.

As social work faculty, we recognized that the offering of organizational resources and accommodations was one thing, but the ability to take advantage of those was entirely another because trauma affects everyone differently. Mental health services are often needed by natural disaster survivors because it is a type of exposure to actual or threatened serious injury or death (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Kolker, 2017), and this is no exception when considering the academic environment. However, another reason this service is paramount is because of the cumulative effects of negative life stressors that we encounter in absence of

natural disasters. For many, these stressors may not necessarily meet the DSM-5 trauma criteria; however, evidence suggests these particular stressors are more closely related to college students' overall physical and mental health functioning (Anders, Frazier, & Shallcross, 2012). The variability of individual life events compounded by natural disaster-related exposure is what creates unique experiences for all. It is at this point when social workers, counselors, and psychologists are frequently called upon to deliver post-crisis mental health interventions in educational settings. In fact, our university, like most campuses, has a counseling center, and during the crisis, their trained counselors, in partnership with a local disaster relief organization, conducted outreach in person, by phone, and via text message. Similarly, the university routinely promoted its counseling services for everyone in addition to its Employee Assistance Program for faculty, staff, and their qualified family members to discuss ongoing hurricane-related and other stressors. All of those relief services were made available in multiple languages and for the hearing impaired.

The university's efforts during and after Hurricane Harvey set the tone for approaching disaster recovery as a continual restorative process. Within this context, faculty members from all disciplines were in a unique position because while they were restoring their lives they were also the ones coming into daily contact with students restoring their lives and needing guidance too. The overall sheer scope of the university's post-disaster response might have left faculty wondering: What part can I play in helping students' post-disaster transition if my role is that of a teacher instead of a mental health provider? The role of mental health providers was usually acknowledged and well-defined. The role faculty could play in contributing to students' post-disaster transition back to campus as non-mental health providers was not defined. When this is not clearly defined, it can contribute to faculty members feeling powerless and being less likely to acknowledge students' needs as related to a crisis.

Faculty-Level Responses

It was important that the university address difficulties that arose during recovery, ensuring hurricane-related delays and losses had minimal effects on the transition back to college for everyone. It was just as important that the faculty did its part in the recovery process by helping students stay on track throughout the transition. Social work is a strengths-based discipline within the helping profession, and its faculty members typically originate from a variety of settings focused on different aspects of mental and physical functioning. As based on our professional and post-disaster related experiences, we offer six recommendations for all faculty—those in and out of the helping professions—to enhance student transition back to the classroom during recovery.

Recommendation 1: Post Community Resources on Blackboard

Faculty can utilize Blackboard (or similar electronic platforms) to post campus, city, county, state, and federal resources to assist students with recovery. These can include links to the campus counseling center, contact information for FEMA, local financial resources, shelters, scholarships, and so forth. These should be announced in class, online, and whenever a new resource is added to the list.

Recommendation 2: Secure Free Textbook Copies

Faculty can take creative steps to increase student access to textbooks until they are able to purchase a book or replace the book that was destroyed. For example, the university library has an eBook database from which many books and textbooks can be downloaded or accessed for free. We were able to find some of our textbooks in the eBook database and send that link to our students. Faculty should consult with librarians on their campuses to find out if they have a similar online resource. Faculty can also contact textbook publishers to inquire about one or more free copies that can be put on library reserve. Publishers may be willing to send a hard copy as a result of a natural disaster or provide students who are in need with a temporary link to an online copy for the first few weeks of the semester. We also offered students opportunities during the first few weeks of the semester to schedule appointments during office hours to sit and read our desktop copy.

Recommendation 3: Add Flexibility to Due Dates

In our social work department, syllabi are detailed and thorough—lecture topics, specific readings, and due dates are all detailed in a daily course calendar. It is difficult, even in a typical semester, to keep on schedule. After factoring in great class discussion, any missed days of teaching due to emergencies, conference presentations, or school closures due to inclement weather makes it easy to get behind in the lecture schedule. The impact of Hurricane Harvey compounded this challenge even further by resuming operations a week late. We decided to add flexibility to quiz and assignment deadlines to ease stress and increase the probability of success on these assessments. Instead of closing our weekly quizzes on each assigned date, we either extended deadlines or opened weekly quizzes for the entire semester, which meant that students who started behind were not at a disadvantage for not completing those assessments.

Recommendation 4: Increase Reminders about Assignment Due Dates

Many of our students had to balance—and remember—appointments with social service agencies, insurance adjusters, FEMA representatives, and so forth. In a typical semester, we encourage student accountability by making it their responsibility to stay on track with syllabus deadlines. In light of Hurricane Harvey, the social work faculty decided to significantly increase reminders about assignment due dates. We sent weekly reminders via Blackboard announcements and email, as well as announced upcoming due dates several times a week in class and online. These extra reminders helped students remain aware of what deadlines were coming up, thus encouraging and increasing the likelihood of completing assessments on time.

Recommendation 5: Re-Orient Students to Time and Date

Faculty can implement a few simple yet key changes in classes to re-orient students to a sense of time. For example, in face-to-face classes we can begin each day by referring to the time: “It is now 9:30 a.m., and we’ll begin class.” It is also recommended to re-orient students to time near the end of class. For example, “It is now 10:30 a.m., and we now have 15 minutes left of class.” Bringing a small wall or desk clock can help with this in that students can visually see the time

while in the classroom. For online classes, similar changes can be made by frequently highlighting and referencing different points in the semester. For example, announcements, notifications, and online class lectures can start and end with references to calendar weeks or commonly known periods of activity: “We are now in our second week of the semester.”; “In the next two weeks, we will be taking our midterm exams.”

Recommendation 6: Increase Predictability during Class

As faculty, we can help our students regain a sense of predictability through simple additions to our teaching styles. For example, in a face-to-face class, faculty can write a few things on the board: announcements, what the lecture will cover for the day, and any in-class activities that will be accomplished. Faculty can review that at the beginning of each class. At the end of each class, faculty can briefly describe the objective for the next class meeting. The same can be replicated for online classes through the use of weekly modules placed in the same learning system location or as a regular feature of your online lecture. This all takes just a few minutes and is a simple technique to reduce anxiety by effectively adding predictability within the classroom environment.

Conclusion

When we wrote this reflection—while still in the thick of recovery—we not only remembered the warmth on our hands as we reached up to touch the sun rays for the first time after the hurricane, but we also remembered the warmth in our hearts after seeing community members helping neighbors in need. They used boats to rescue neighbors, turned their homes and businesses into shelters, volunteered to serve the displaced, and helped mud-out the homes of strangers. The beauty in this was that it was not just the first responders who helped through the crisis and recovery but also everyday people working within their competencies to help others meet their basic needs.

During the transition back to campus work after any natural disaster, everyone is working to establish a sense of normalcy in their own lives. However, the academic environment is by design about nurturing our future leaders, and this is where college administrators, mental health counselors, and faculty can do their part by playing different yet equally key roles in facilitating that transition. The organization as a whole might set the tone for recovery, but faculty can make small meaningful adjustments to the class structure and process to support students. Student support has been found to be a protective factor following traumatic events (Norris, Baker, Murphy, & Kaniasty, 2005; Phillips & Herlihy, 2009). Faculty who provide supportive resources to students can have a positive impact on their mental health, increasing the likelihood that students will complete that semester successfully. For us, Hurricane Harvey contributed to post-traumatic stress. However, stress can become growth when students actively engage in effective response coping (Cook, Aten, Moore, Hook, & Davis, 2013). During recovery, we hope that as faculty members address and overcome their own post-disaster losses, they can also contribute to students’ post-traumatic growth by engaging in and adapting these recommendations as based on our experience with Hurricane Harvey. We encourage social work faculty members to share these approaches with faculty in other departments, during meetings,

and during trainings, and include them as part of the campus disaster plan.

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