

Social Work Education and Hurricane Florence

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Abstract: The article explores the educational experience at the University of North Carolina Wilmington School of Social Work before and after Hurricane Florence in September 2018. The article covers topics of teaching with a condensed curriculum and how to best work with social work students to ensure success. The article also ties in the concept of emergent volunteering as a part of the social work field internship. Finally, the article proposes ways of utilizing the unique expertise in social work to prepare for future disasters.

Keywords: social work education, condensed curriculum, student success, emergent volunteering

Media coverage on tropical storm Florence began early September 2018. It was the peak of hurricane season and other storms were forming. Three years ago, my family and I moved for the first time to a coastal city. We quickly adopted the attitude of the locals, who dismissed hurricanes and at the same time made preparations should any make landfall. As days passed, Florence grew quickly from a tropical storm to a Category 1, then Category 2 hurricane, while heading toward the US mainland—the realization (and fear) that Florence would make landfall near Wilmington, North Carolina, became the lead weather story.

In North Carolina, each county and city decides whether to evacuate in the event of an approaching storm. Counties around Wilmington were under mandatory evacuation orders, but in Wilmington evacuation was voluntary. This forced me and my wife to make a decision. We had to consider the impact of living through the storm, not to mention the potential risk it imposed, which could be a traumatic experience—especially for our five-year-old daughter. Our neighbors, an older couple, were sheltering in place; had it just been a choice for me and my wife, we might have done the same, but our daughter’s safety and well-being was paramount. It was nearly impossible to find lodging within a 200-mile range of the city. Fortunately, we found an Airbnb in Atlanta and left, leaving behind students, colleagues, neighbors, and friends.

This narrative is my personal experience as a faculty member in the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. I focus on topics of ensuring student emotional readiness to successfully complete a condensed curriculum after a disaster while maintaining academic integrity. Further, I examine the learning and volunteering opportunities that arose from a crisis. Finally, for the future, I propose responses and recommendations by drawing on the experience and expertise of the University of North Carolina Wilmington College of Health and Human Services, where the School of Social Work, School of Nursing, and School of Allied Health reside.

As the week of September 10, 2018, approached, Hurricane Florence was upgraded to Cat 4 with Wilmington, NC, its likely landfall. The phrase *direct hit* was prominent in conversations. The University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW) is situated between Wrightsville Beach and the Cape Fear River, approximately four miles in each direction. It is a picturesque campus with Georgian architecture and beautiful landscaping forested with mature pines. With a

population of over 17,000 students and more than 2,000 faculty and staff, closing campus and evacuating students was the safest choice. On September 10, 2018, the university administration issued a voluntary evacuation, followed by a mandatory evacuation order the next day. Hurricane Florence made landfall in Wilmington on September 14 as a Category 1 hurricane but lingered over the area until September 16th. In total, Florence deposited 8 trillion gallons of water, rain up to 35 inches in some parts of North Carolina. Over a million people lost electricity, 50 people died, and the initial damage was estimated to be \$22 billion. Florence caused widespread damage to the city of Wilmington and surrounding counties. As Florence slowly crawled northeast, it left behind thousands of damaged homes and businesses and thousands of downed trees. A local school district in the next county closed for 27 school days due to mold damage in school buildings; 9% of the student population became homeless and 70 employees of the school district were displaced. An estimated total of 2,500 roads in the state were closed, many severely damaged or washed away. Some of these roads were major thoroughfares connecting Wilmington to surrounding cities. People were unable to return to their homes and supplies were not delivered for days. Wilmington became an island. At the time of this writing three months later, there are still areas in Wilmington where debris is gathered at the side of the road and has yet to be picked up. From the sky, one can see many houses with blue tarps due to roof damage.

The UNCW campus suffered extensive damage and closed for a month. Over 225 trees had fallen, several academic buildings with expensive scientific equipment had been badly damaged, and several dormitories had suffered severe water damage. The shutdown resulted in 600 minutes of lost instructional time for a three-credit hour course, creating a challenge to deliver 75% of the instructional semester in about 50% of calendar time remaining. The university administration worked feverishly to move students back into dorms, ensured buildings and classrooms were safe for classes to resume, and brainstormed ways to make up classes while maintaining curricular integrity. Websites were created to provide daily updates, financial and emotional support, and volunteer opportunities. As the university resumed classes one month later there were still off-campus students who were homeless as apartments were not safe to inhabit and on-campus students still unable to return to their dorms due to water damage. Though the university added additional hotel rooms in the area to accommodate these students, there were not enough, and many had to sleep in the gymnasium on cots when they returned to class.

As we resumed classes, another hurricane, Michael, landed in Florida as a Category 4 storm. Though landfall was far away, there was fear of Michael bringing additional rain to the Carolinas. Anticipating more flooding due to the already saturated grounds, the UNCW administrators made the decision to close for one day. This created more challenges for the campus maintenance crew, who were still cleaning the campus and getting facilities to be habitable. This also affected faculty and students who were already working to deliver the curriculum in a shortened semester. Fortunately, Hurricane Michael passed farther to the east than predicted, sparing Wilmington from more rain, more problems.

Shortened Semester, Flexibility, Emotional Readiness

A large university is a city unto itself, composed of interdependent entities and populated by thousands. Academic units work in tandem with auxiliary units (Registrar, IT, Financial Aid, Facilities, Dining, Human Resources, etc.) to support the needs of faculty and students. A major disruption cascades throughout the entire system, affecting each and every unit and requiring careful planning to bring every unit back in a coordinated and controlled fashion. In sum, Hurricane Florence was a major disruption to the academic calendar, educational process, and administrative functions at UNCW.

Rollo and Zdziarski (2007) define a crisis as “an event, which is often sudden or unexpected, that disrupts the normal operations of the institution or its educational mission and threatens the well-being of personnel, property, financial resources, and/or reputation of the institution” (p. 27-28). Though Florence was not a sudden crisis (like a tornado or earthquake), its impact was unpredictable. The Provost’s Office worked with the North Carolina Department of Education and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to reduce the number of instructional hours while maintaining the integrity of the curriculum. To make up for such a large and unprecedented loss of time, UNCW Academic Affairs developed a diverse and flexible plan. This plan proposed adjustments to the academic calendar like having classes when breaks were scheduled, changing the daily class schedule by extending instruction time, and giving students the opportunity to make up time through outside-of-class and/or online assignments. In some cases, faculty and students decided to hold make-up courses if necessary. Overall, the university was able to keep its timeline for Fall graduation.

In the School of Social Work, in addition to the loss of instruction time in class, many of its students also lost time at field internships; multiple area agencies where social work students intern suffered great damage and closed for a time. Additionally, some field instructors suffered personal loss and were unable to return to work immediately, leaving students without supervision. The school’s field coordinator was able to assign task supervisors for a few students who did not have their field instructor. The school director worked with the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) regarding instruction time and field internship hours. As a result, social work students had the option of working extra hours at their internships upon their return and were allowed to count field hours through volunteering with various recovery efforts. This volunteering option allowed the students to participate in disaster relief efforts and be exposed to different populations and issues. It was touching to hear from multiple students that they appreciated the counting of volunteer hours, but would have helped with the recovery process regardless. Additionally, students also had the option of completing field hours the following semester if necessary. The weekly field seminar class where students come together to process field internship became a crucial space to assess students’ emotional states as they moved forward. It allowed us to discuss the many clinical and macro lessons about the aftermath from the perspective of students, clients, agencies, and community. For example, we discussed case management concepts as most students volunteered at local agencies to connect hurricane victims with community resources. Several were excited to recite their triage experience with an interdisciplinary team. Many were amazed at the opportunities to translate the social work interviewing and assessment skills that they had learned in social work practice classes to real

life situations. The students also witnessed the emotional toll of those affected by Hurricane Florence. Despite the pervasive melancholy, many expressed feeling rewarded by helping others and, at the same time, easing some of their own “post-hurricane trauma.” In particular, I loved hearing so many indicate that the volunteering experience affirmed why they chose social work as a career. Overall, the field seminar was a perfect place where students received support from one another and discussed the hardships faced by some of the clients at their internship or volunteer venue while serving as a teaching venue for social work crisis intervention.

In addition to structural changes in curricula such as instructional time and revision of the university calendar, it was essential for instructors to be sensitive to the emotions of returning students. Hurricane Florence had direct and indirect effects on everyone. Many students were affected directly by being displaced from loss or damage of home, apartment, or dorm. Meanwhile, others were concerned by knowing a classmate or family member who suffered damages. In addition, many students suffered financial hardship from being unable to work when businesses remained closed. The witnessing of the devastation, direct and indirect impact, financial hardships, and the condensed semester culminated in emotional distress for days and weeks after Florence. I realized the emotional toll, if left unacknowledged, would greatly hinder student focus as the semester progressed. It was therefore extremely important for instructors to be sensitive to the emotional state of students and to assess their readiness upon return. In the first class after reopening, in my social work diversity class, I intentionally used class time with the students to survey and get a sense of where they were emotionally. I found many were eager to return to school as a way to regain a sense of normalcy. When asked what they needed from me as we resumed classes, many expressed it was important for their instructors to be flexible with classes and assignments given the shortened semester. It is worth noting that while students indicated a need for flexibility and understanding from instructors, it was important for students that the integrity of the curriculum be maintained. Due to the shortened time, I spent more time meeting with students outside of class to guide them through the assignments and arranged for our Writing Center to have one consistent tutor to work with my particular class. This hands-on approach from me and consistent writing advising played a great role in comforting students as well as optimizing their learning. Further, I collaborated with students to modify some class assignments and topics to relate to Hurricane Florence. For example, some assignment topics included exploring the effect of Florence on vulnerable populations such as older adults or impoverished groups. I also collaborated with students on the revised due dates of assignments. This collaborative effort of revising class assignments and due dates, processing students’ emotions, and assessing their readiness was based on an effort to heal and have a successful semester. It was a genuine effort to empower students to have input and assert control over their lives as they struggled for normalcy. In short, I utilized the principles of Universal Design, which focus on eliminating and adapting learning barriers by being flexible and considering the needs of the students and current circumstances (Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley, & Abarbanell, 2006).

Hurricane Florence’s devastation provided many teachable moments for social work students. I integrated social justice topics that relate to natural disasters into lectures and class discussions. Students were asked to reflect on parallels between their lives and the lives of their clients, especially oppressed populations or clients from their internships. For example, I asked students

to compare the uprooting of their lives at last-minute notice and how that may be similar to the everyday life of those living in poverty and always in danger of eviction. I asked them to reflect on the lives of undocumented immigrants living in daily fear of deportation, especially in the current political climate. Other examples included economics or aging where students were asked to contemplate the resources required to evacuate or the plight of the older adult population that depends on others. Finally, topics of mental health such as trauma, stigma, and access to treatment were discussed. Throughout the discussion of these topics, the social work students were able to use their own situation and reflect to empathize with the lives of those who suffered losses from Hurricane Florence. These were lessons and feelings that could not have been generated from assignments or lectures, but rather from real life experiences.

Emergent Volunteering

Crises create adversities, but also present opportunities, especially for those of us in helping professions such as social work. Hurricane Florence had all-around social, physical, economic, and emotional effects on Wilmington, its surrounding counties, and UNCW. As a result, there were many people who needed help as soon as the rain subsided, for weeks thereafter, and will need support for months to come. There were ample volunteer opportunities for UNCW students organized by the University Office of Community Engagement and academic colleges. UNCW students joined organizations such as FEMA, churches, and local government and non-profit agencies to participate in search and rescue efforts, distribute relief supplies, aid rescue workers, work with displaced families and children, and help with animal shelters. For example, some students volunteered with Catholic Charities to advocate on behalf of people who lost their homes by gathering the required paperwork to apply for FEMA rental assistance. Others volunteered at shelters where homeless people and people who lost their homes were housed.

Because the School of Social Work received permission from CSWE to count volunteer hours as part of internships, there were many opportunities for the social work students to participate in real life crises with first responders and affected clients. In many ways, Wilmington became a live simulation lab for social work students. Twigg and Mosel (2017) wrote that after a catastrophic event such as a hurricane or earthquake, the immediate response from the community is spontaneous and self-organized. Those involved in the recovery efforts are coined *emergent* groups or spontaneous volunteers such as family members, friends, and neighbors forming a *therapeutic community*. Many UNCW students who stayed participated in recovery efforts immediately after Florence left and were joined by students who returned to campus later. My social work students indicated the combination of the flexibility and understanding by the instructors and the opportunity to help the community was the optimal formula to moving forward after Florence. Furthermore, the students also stated they grew closer to each other and bonded even deeper as they helped each other and the community. This sentiment concurs with Twigg and Mosel (2017). They stated:

There can be positive emotional and psychological benefits to individuals from being involved in response activities. Involvement often has a transformative effect on volunteers, stimulating self-esteem, interconnection, healing and empowerment; supporting individual recovery from trauma; and helping volunteers to build new relationships in their communities.

It may also lead to greater involvement in community and voluntary work, and a stronger sense of community solidarity, as well as to changes in individual life choices such as seeking work in more caring and community-oriented professions. (p. 450)

Hurricane Florence presented an unexpected dimension of learning and helping for students that could never be offered in a typical academic internship. Through volunteering, social work students had an opportunity to discover existing concerns beyond their primary area of internship interests. Along the way, they also found it to be healing as the process of helping others was therapeutic for them.

Aftermath

There will be other hurricanes. As this is being written, devastating wildfires ravage California. The School of Social Work is in a unique position to collaborate with the other units in the College of Health and Human Services, the School of Nursing and the School of Allied Health, to prepare for disasters. Due to the unique expertise of each school, it would be worthwhile to create a class focusing on the responses and coordination of the three units to natural disasters. Further, because the College of Health and Human Services has an extensive network within the community because three of its units have internships as part of the curriculum, it is equally important to include community partners and utilize these resources as part of the response. In particular, the School of Social Work has already planned a training with Red Cross to train the faculty.

The mental health impact from a natural disaster can be detrimental and long-lasting. The School of Social Work can partner with the university counseling center and field agencies to help university employees and people in the community recover long after a disaster. In addition to providing counseling, the School of Social Work can use its community organizing principles and take the lead to mobilize students on campus and community members to tackle social inequalities that came to light during and after Hurricane Florence. In short, the School of Social Work and university should take advantage of opportunities to work with and serve the community in the midst of a tragedy.

Coda

Through difficult times people find common bonds and unite to help each other. I had a front-row view of the resilience of students and the community. It was a chance to see a united community at a time the division of politics seems to dominate the daily news. There was no red or blue, only “We—Wilmington Strong.” Though not surprised, I was amazed to have witnessed the giving and helping spirit of social work students who helped one another and reached out to the community. I admired their insistence on maintaining the integrity of the curriculum by doing extra assignments and attending additional classes. It was their *can-do* attitude and optimism that reminded me of the reason for entering academia and for giving hope to the social work profession and the lives our students will touch.

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