

University of Illinois' Involvement in
Hurricane Katrina Efforts

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Introduction

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina, the third-strongest hurricane ever to hit the United States, made landfall on the Gulf Coast causing severe damage in New Orleans and among other places. At least 1,800 people lost their lives in Hurricane Katrina and in the subsequent floods, making it one of the deadliest U.S. hurricanes. The storm is estimated to have been responsible for \$81.2 billion in damage, making it the costliest natural disaster in United States history. For this reason, the University of Illinois has played an active role in community recovery efforts over the past year.

Motivation and Research Methods

As our motivation, we wanted to measure what kind of approach has the most beneficial impact on residents recovering from such a major disaster. Our initial research question was to find out whether groups or individuals in need benefited more from hands on involvement or monetary giving. The effectiveness of these methods directly impacts urban planning and community development. In our neighborhood planning course, we learned about many different community organizations and how their involvement can help create change. In order to answer our research question, we had to examine acts of community service. We decided to examine the university's approach in helping the residents of New Orleans recover from Hurricane Katrina. We conducted research by reading articles concerning the university's involvement in New Orleans and interviewing faculty and students. We attempted to interview university administration but were turned down when we tried to contact them.

Initial Efforts

Initial university recovery efforts directly impacted the citizens through donated basic needs such as food and clothing drives, fundraisers, and service projects such as Habitat for Humanity. Some participants within the university were The Student Bar Association, the Black Law Students Association, and the Women's Law Society at Urbana. They played a large role in donation efforts by collecting clothing, food, toiletries and other items to send to evacuees. The university also allowed students displaced by Hurricane Katrina to enroll in classes. More than 150 students transferred to the three campuses of the University of Illinois, including 47 undergraduates and several graduate students in law and business at the Urbana campus.

“The College of Medicine agreed to accept up to 30 students; the College of Law will accommodate up to 10 displaced second-year and third-year law students from Tulane University and Loyola University New Orleans law schools for the fall semester”(Forrest, 2).

Current Efforts

Over the past year, donations for recovery efforts that directly impact citizens have declined. Since then, a small number of professors have taken the lead in university's involvement in recovery efforts in New Orleans. Their involvement has been in consultation, research, advocacy, and academic advising.

An expert source at the university's urban planning department informed us about post disaster recovery operations. To him, the best strategy is two folded: Consult in the implementation of a post disaster plan for New Orleans and research a management plan for future natural disaster emergencies. Another member of the urban planning department who specializes in housing is acting as a consultant and an advisor for a housing class. The

university education program is also playing a role in the recovery efforts through a professor, originally from New Orleans, who is researching charter schools formed in the wake of the disaster. Lastly, other research is being conducted by the political science department. With each of these faculty, graduate students are involved to support their efforts and to conduct their own thesis research. Direct support from administration and alumni has been virtually non-existent. The faculty efforts are benefiting their own personal goals and the university's future research and academics.

Overall Recovery Efforts

Our research determined there were several key points in both the overall recovery effort overall and the university's effort. The first few years are critical to recovery in disasters such as what we see in New Orleans. As rebuilding policies and plans are implemented, both community and national involvement are vital for success.

Historically, when a natural disaster occurs, how recovery plans are put into place is dependent on individuals rather than a universal recovery plan. Disasters like tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes happen around the world and the steps for recovery are often very similar. An urban planning professor has been collaborating with a Japanese colleague, with whom he worked in the recovery efforts in the January 1995 earthquake that struck Kobe, Japan. They are researching the best strategy for management of recovery efforts. His hope is to provide a document that highlights processes that others can implement for future disasters.

As New Orleans rebuilds, so does the need for expertise. An urban planning professor noted local citizens need assistance and that they are eager for information. Experts can help recovery effort at the community level by providing them the answers they need and the residents feel involved with the recovery efforts.

It has been over a year since the hurricane made landfall and progress is slow for many low income areas. In contrast, many higher income neighborhoods have recovered much faster. These inequalities of rebuilding resources have led to increased racial segregation and outcries of racial bias with developers, lending institutions, and insurance companies.

University's recovery efforts

Our investigation on the University's involvement in the recovery effort has shown that the focus is on research in low income areas in New Orleans. Faculty are researching for future publications and academic courses. These courses would be workshop based and would address potential needs of the city of New Orleans. The courses could also involve inter-school collaboration with the University of New Orleans or the charter schools.

Faculty and students have made connections in New Orleans and are serving as information sources. Some of these groups include: Unified Planning Group, University of New Orleans, Tulane University, Cornell University, community development corporations of ACORN and Goody Clancy, Charter schools, and local friends.

Faculty and students have received universal support for their efforts within New Orleans. Currently, there are no critics for the effort and the faculty and students are seen as

a helping force within the local community. Within the confines of the university, the University media has shown support with press releases of their work and the financial grant staff has dug around for funds to support research trips down to New Orleans. This current passive approach by the university administration is also reflected in alumni involvement. There is no known involvement or support at this time by alumni. With the lack of support by administration, faculty have bonded together across disciplinary fields to provide the support and to pass information on research findings.

Implications of the University's Approach

Although early on, the university's involvement with the cleanup efforts was via charitable donations, their focus shifted almost entirely to research. The three professors who we interviewed focused on their individual areas of expertise. All of the professors have acted behind the scenes with authorities; some have contacts at higher levels locally. None of the professors are directly involved with ordinary local citizens, but do believe that they, as outsiders, need to influence people locally. Their strategy is to advocate as an impartial consultant and reinforce positive change.

The plan of these professors is to test ideas to prepare for future disasters, and to apply their ideas locally once refined. This is particularly the focus of the professor involved with disaster recovery, who has applied data collected from the Northridge and Kobe earthquakes from the mid 90's. The education professor has been studying what he considers to be "one of the most massive experiments in public education ever conducted". His studies show the inefficiency and inequalities of the current school system and how to remedy the

problems. Ultimately, the studies will result in delayed benefits for the residents of New Orleans.

These professors, while they do honestly want to help in the recovery effort, want also to promote the university's expertise. In addition, they want to be able to receive centralized funding for their research. For example, one professor lists his timetable to continue for just one more year, while another professor has a three-year timeline. Knowing that New Orleans' recovery is a long process, long-term centralized funding is needed to keep university's involvement going. Current lack of funding limits the time professors can spend in New Orleans.

Reflections on the EOTU experience

The ethnography experience was a new way to approach a research topic. By asking questions, gathering data, and investigating solutions we were able to provide analysis on the university's involvement in New Orleans. Through the interview process, we learned that interviews can be challenging. People generally have hesitations to conducting an interview and they require before the interview an explanation of the subject matter usage. We found that a good explanation can break down the fear and get you in the door for the interview. During the interviews, we discovered limited information is provided unless asked and the interviewees go on a tangent subjects that are unrelated. An organized interview that includes introduction and a set number of questions can help direct the interview process. Lastly, people's schedules are very busy so persistence in obtaining the interview is needed.

Reflections on relationships with the neighborhood planning

Throughout the semester, we have learned that hands-on community involvement is important to local residents and city planners. The process though, should not be just about cleaning up an area, but rather getting people involved. The power of accomplishing a goal must be provided to local citizens. All they need sometimes is a little knowledge or a push. The results can be amazing once the control is provided to them over what they are doing. The value of this control to planners is that their technical expertise is a valuable commodity. We need to tap that commodity and accomplish tasks that the residences have in mind. The sharing of ideas and putting minds together can overcome many obstacles. As future work in New Orleans continues, the expectation of the university's involvement will be more toward citizen participation and tapping their potential as a community.

Conclusion

If we were to continue our research on this subject, we would focus on three areas; participation in the workshop courses, help advocate for a centralized funding source, and promoting alumni involvement. Within the workshops, we would evaluate the successes of students' personal involvement and their contributions in New Orleans. Advocacy of centralized funding would enable future trips by faculty and students. Alumni involvement is essential because they are a pool of untapped resources.

We need to see if the university would be more active on other levels besides research, which has been nearly the entire focus since two months after the hurricane. We

feel that while the research has been effective, direct participation with local citizens has been limited. Also, we will need to measure the level of success and the time frame needed to achieve that success with the local residents.

Ultimately, the research reveals, “Who is benefiting from the process?” Although we expect in the future there will be many tangible benefits to the residents of New Orleans, we feel that the university, through the promotion of its research efforts, has been the main beneficiary.

Sources

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