

Innovation Amidst Crisis

Tulane University's Strategic Transformation

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.

—The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

When Hurricane Katrina swept ashore in New Orleans on August 29, 2005, the destruction left in its wake was unparalleled in U.S. history. In the months and years that have followed, the fallout of this disaster has been well-chronicled, including its tragic effects on individuals, communities, and institutions in the Gulf Coast region. While the impact of the storm was devastating, the challenges of recovery also have served as a crucible for social innovation and entrepreneurship. These stories of survival and renewal are the focus of this issue of *Innovations*; they are also the stories that have reshaped Tulane University and its relationship to the city of New Orleans over the past five years.

Tulane's journey from the brink of ruin to a flourishing institution transformed by its commitment to community engagement has at times been harrowing and difficult, but also inspiring. In the days following Katrina, the university was faced with major physical damage, staggering financial losses, and the displacement of over 20,000 students, faculty, and staff. The storm also exacerbated problems that had long plagued the surrounding community—deficiencies in the city's education and health care systems and its infrastructure. However, amid this crisis came unexpected opportunities. For the city, the attention generated by Katrina brought resources and ideas to problems that had been too long ignored. For Tulane, the storm was equally important in raising strategic questions about the mission of the institution, its interdependence with the local community, and the role of universities in producing engaged citizens and future leaders.

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Historically, Tulane University's mission was focused on research and learning. Like other major research universities, we believed these activities were our primary vehicles for improving the world, and so we focused heavily on the international reach and impact of our work. The aftermath of the storm brought into sharp focus; however, the extent to which the well-being and success of individuals and organizations continues to be profoundly shaped by the health of local communities.

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This insight transformed the university's strategic focus. Our Katrina experience convinced us that building vibrant and sustainable communities is essential to addressing many of society's most pressing issues in the 21st century. Universities, therefore, must see community engagement as a critical component of their missions. This belief has given rise to the Tulane Community Engagement Mission, which is to identify and empower individuals who have ideas for building

better communities locally and around the world. We now aspire to become the leading university in the country with respect to community engagement and its integration with research and education. In the pages that follow, we recount the journey that led to this strategic transformation and share some of the innovative initiatives the university has undertaken to forge lasting social change in Gulf Coast communities and beyond.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS: HURRICANE KATRINA AND ITS AFTERMATH

Tulane's response to Hurricane Katrina began well before the storm arrived. On Friday, August 26, three days before Katrina made landfall, our first challenge was what to tell a group of entering first-year students and their parents gathered on campus for orientation. At convocation, we normally welcome them to Tulane and to New Orleans and offer advice about their college years. Instead, we found ourselves telling students to leave their belongings in their dorm rooms and either return home with their parents or board one of several buses that would take them

out of harm's way until the storm passed. Given our past experience with hurricanes, we were confident they would be able to return to campus in a few days.

We did not see these students again for five months.

At the time, Tulane's hurricane response plan called for the president to remain on campus along with other members of Tulane's emergency team. The team's experiences during the week following the storm and the levee failures have been recounted many times over the past five years. First, being trapped on a flooded campus; then a helicopter rescue; and then the long, dark days that followed in a Houston hotel suite, where a handful of people tried to figure out if, and how, Tulane University could survive.

When the floodwaters receded and we were able to assess the damage, we faced grim numbers. Seventy percent of our main campus and our entire health sciences center had been flooded. Our financial losses would eventually exceed \$650 million. Tulane became the first major U.S. university since the Civil War to close its doors for an entire semester, resulting in 13,000 students and 8,000 employees being displaced for five months.

The numbers faced by the city of New Orleans were even more sobering: 1,836 deaths, 400,000 jobs lost, 275,000 homes destroyed, and over \$110 billion in damages. With city services in disarray and conflicting political entities hampering relief efforts, New Orleans's recovery was even less assured than Tulane's.

SURVIVAL AND RECOVERY

Our earliest post-Katrina efforts focused on the practical aspects of survival. We had to find our students, let them know Tulane would not reopen in the fall, and find a place for them to study for the semester. This was done in an amazingly short time, through an emergency website and the cooperation of hundreds of colleges and universities. We established an online student registry and published regular information updates. Universities across the country stepped up and took our students in for the fall semester, in many cases allowing Tulane to retain tuition payments that were essential to our survival. Thanks to the incredible support of the higher education community, Tulane students attended approximately 600 colleges and universities in the fall of 2005.

The other immediate need was to locate our employees and reconstruct our payroll records. We felt it was imperative that we continue to pay our employees, even though the university was closed, so that they would have time and resources to devote to addressing the hurricane's impact on their homes and families. We reestablished contact with faculty and staff through our emergency website, and, using a single campus phone directory, our small Houston team worked tirelessly to re-create our payroll. The decision to continue paying our employees cost Tulane approximately \$30-\$35 million a month at a time when we had very little cash coming into the university, but we believed it was the right decision for both business and moral reasons.

Tulane as a Social Innovation Laboratory

Tulane's strategic transformation has led to the development of several innovative community-based initiatives that are closely aligned with the university's strengths and core mission. Four of the most notable are briefly described below.

Public Service: In 2006, Tulane became the first major research university to integrate community engagement into its core undergraduate curriculum. The process required a sea change in how the university community approached academic program delivery and content. To facilitate this, Tulane established the Center for Public Service (CPS). To date, the CPS has developed approximately 300 service-learning courses. It has also forged relationships with more than 100 community-based organizations that serve as worksites for our students. In the past four years, 5,600 undergraduate students have participated in unique courses, such as Aristotle in New Orleans. This undergraduate English course educates students in rhetoric and logic, skills they then use to coach students in debate at three New Orleans public schools.

Tulane students are now spending about 300,000 hours a year rebuilding the community in novel and valuable ways. The community service initiative has also had a profound impact on the growth of undergraduate applications (from 18,000 to 44,000), as well as student retention and quality.

Public Education: Following Hurricane Katrina, Mayor Ray Nagin established the Bring New Orleans Back Commission (BNOB). The commission was charged with addressing the city's most pressing recovery issues, such as health care and education. The goal of the education subcommittee (chaired by this paper's first author) was to develop a plan to rebuild and transform New Orleans's public schools, historically among the worst in America.

After a six-month study, the BNOB education committee proposed a new system of schools centered on the creation of autonomous, but accountable and connected, schools. This system creates a greater sense of engagement between schools, parents, and the community. Under the plan, the vast majority of public school children attend charter schools, and significant investments have been made in human capital and curriculum reform. To date, this model has led to meaningful improvements in student achievement and graduation rates while fostering a sense of hope about the future of public education in New Orleans.

Tulane is actively involved in school reform. The university's faculty, staff, and students now operate 70 programs that serve local children in four dozen Orleans Parish schools. These initiatives range from mentoring school-age children, to piloting Advanced Placement courses in high schools, to enhancing the

An interesting thing happened, however, as we began to move past the initial crisis and plan for the university's reopening in January. Although Tulane is a global institution, in confronting the realities of a post-Katrina New Orleans, we learned the true extent of our *local* interdependencies. Before the storm, Tulane

variety and content of afterschool programs. The university also established a Public Education Institute, which engages in applied research, policy formulation, incubating educational programs, and convening those interested in the advancement of public education.

Delivery of Health Care: In the days immediately following Katrina, medical residents and faculty from Tulane established urgent-care facilities on the streets of New Orleans. Their efforts were especially focused on meeting the health care needs of the indigent population. Since these early initiatives, Tulane University School of Medicine has been at the forefront of building a community health system that provides all citizens with access to high-quality, neighborhood-based primary care.

Tulane Community Health System now operates eight clinics and runs several others in partnership with other organizations. These facilities employ over 50 medical professionals and help to teach the next generation of physicians, nurses, and technicians the best practices of health care reform. Currently, the Community Health Centers serve 16,000 people, with an anticipated annual growth rate of 20 percent. Most patients are low-income, uninsured working adults from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (e.g., 60 percent African American, 12 percent Latino, and 6 percent Vietnamese American).

Physical Revitalization: Tulane's School of Architecture is helping to rebuild the city through the Tulane City Center (TCC) initiative. TCC matches architecture faculty and students with local nonprofit groups to provide design and "visioning" services to underserved segments of the New Orleans community. To date, students and faculty have collaborated on the design and construction of more than 50 projects in support of the city's recovery. These projects include six ecologically sound single-family homes, several green markets and related "urban agriculture" facilities, shade and water collection pavilions, and cooperative "healthy grocery" stores in low-income communities.

All TCC projects focus on improving the environmental quality of urban life and reducing the carbon footprint of buildings and their landscapes. The bioremediation of contaminated sites, the recycling of urban rainwater runoff, and the use of experimental construction systems are just a few examples of TCC's environmentally progressive work. TCC is also running innovative projects that allow flood-prone areas of the city to function more effectively in concert with their low topography, rather than struggling to overcome it. TCC hopes to ensure a gradual and positive transformation of low-lying communities and their residents, many of whom bore the brunt of Katrina's destruction.

was New Orleans's largest private employer. As such, we viewed the institution as an economic catalyst and a local resource for research and service-learning programs. However, although we'd been *in* New Orleans for 175 years, we were not quite *of* New Orleans.

It was clear that this relationship had to evolve if the university had any hope of surviving and flourishing in the difficult years that lay ahead. Tulane's recovery was inextricably linked to that of the city. Our students and employees lived in its houses, shopped at its businesses, participated in its rich cultural life and history, and depended on its utility and transportation services. We were not an island unto ourselves, but had a symbiotic relationship with this city we called home.

With this perspective in mind, we began to think more broadly about the January reopening. We focused not just on how to repair our institution, but also on how to begin restoring the community on which it depended.

- Remediation teams were hired to tackle the laborious process of ripping out waterlogged floors, walls, and even ceilings which had molded as they sat for weeks in nearly 100-degree heat. Working without electricity and relying on generator-powered equipment, the teams rebuilt damaged facilities, repaired roofs, and hauled off fallen trees. Five months and over 800 workers were required to get the campus ready for students again.
- Most New Orleans public schools had been badly damaged, and the school system did not plan to reopen until the following year. Knowing that our employees' children would need schools when they returned, we worked with the Orleans Parish School Board to transform a local elementary school that was damaged into a K-12 charter facility sponsored by Tulane.
- Modular housing was set up on university property to house students, faculty, or staff members who had lost their homes or rental units. We also purchased an undamaged apartment complex and even leased a cruise ship to provide additional housing for employees and students.
- All of our students had to be re-recruited. They were leery—and their parents downright afraid—about returning to New Orleans after the frightening images they had seen on television. This was accomplished through online forums, town-hall meetings in locations around the country, and, as recovery progressed, visits to campus.

Tulane University reopened for business on January 17, 2006. Approximately 85 percent of our undergraduate students and virtually our entire full-time faculty returned for the spring semester. It is estimated that within 72 hours of our reopening, the population of Orleans Parish increased by 20 percent.

BEYOND SURVIVAL TO RENEWAL

Of course our challenges did not end in January. Tulane's long-term financial viability was still in question, and we needed a plan for how Tulane would move forward in the coming years. Rather than ignoring the potential for future financial shortfalls and crises, we decided to address these issues head on by restructuring the university to save costs and maximize efficiency, while ensuring that it would continue to grow in academic stature and quality.

This required making some tough decisions, and shortly before reopening we unveiled the "new" Tulane—a smaller university that would build on its strengths

by focusing resources in areas where it could truly excel. We revamped the undergraduate experience, streamlined academic programs, and joined forces with three other New Orleans universities—Xavier, Dillard, and Loyola—to launch cooperative projects.

The most far-reaching aspect of this renewal plan came in the form of a commitment to community engagement that permeated every facet of university life, and which made our ideals of social innovation and service a reality. A core component of the plan was to elevate the importance of community engagement and to link it more effectively with our research and teaching missions. This strategy was intended to further distinguish the university while also helping to rebuild the New Orleans community, and eventually other communities around the world.

We realized that our commitment to the revival of New Orleans had to extend beyond areas that impacted Tulane as an institution, such as housing, health care, and public schools. To truly invest in the city's renewal and instill in our students a passion for social change, community involvement would have to be more than a "lip-service" component of the Tulane experience. This commitment had to be a strategic priority for the entire university and an integral part of our daily activities.

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FROM TRAGEDY TO OPPORTUNITY: THE IMPLICATIONS¹

Universities have long thought of themselves as global organizations. Before questions of international expansion became common in corporate boardrooms, academic institutions focused on having an international reach and impact. Since intellectual capital is at the heart of teaching and research activities, it was easy to forget the enduring influence of local communities on universities and their successes. However, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the institution's local interdependencies had never seemed more salient or critical to its mission. Despite

the cultural diversity of Tulane's faculty and students and the strength of their ideas and research, there was little we could do to leverage these assets in a community devoid of adequate housing, infrastructure, health care, or public education.

The extent of our local interdependencies prompted a greater commitment to community engagement, but it also forced us to think more explicitly about the communities on which the university depended. We found that the university was embedded in a diverse set of communities bounded by geography (e.g., New Orleans), by industry (e.g., higher education), and by shared experiences and values (e.g., Tulane alumni and friends). Although the storm had recently exposed the threats posed by our local interdependencies, it became clear that Tulane's membership in each of these communities presented both strategic risks and opportunities. As a result, we began to pay more attention to Tulane's roles in these communities and how they should inform our strategy, resource commitments, and activities.

In undertaking this analysis, we learned several important lessons. First, we recognized the inherently dynamic nature of all communities. Hurricane Katrina altered New Orleans in a matter of hours, and although a dramatic shift like this may be rare, the evolution of communities is inevitable. The implication was that we must constantly monitor the communities to which Tulane belongs, be aware of our interdependencies, and be prepared to shift our activities or involvement as required. For example, over the past five years, the recovery process has meaningfully changed New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region. Certain needs have been met while new ones have emerged. Tulane has monitored these developments carefully to ensure that our resources and programs continue to be aligned with the city's changing physical, demographic, and economic landscape. Second, we have sought opportunities to more effectively integrate and connect the communities on which Tulane depends. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, that meant coordinating efforts among fellow universities, alumni, and health care networks to marshal resources and address Tulane's most urgent needs. More recently, we established a community engagement information-exchange website for our alumni and other prospective volunteers, which directly connects them with community organizations in need of project assistance. This website has facilitated a number of projects, ranging from building homes to oil spill cleanup. Finally, we have learned that effectively managing our interdependencies requires having strong ties to other organizations in our communities. We have made it a priority to build relationships with other universities and local organizations as a way to share resources, collaborate, and maximize the impact of our social initiatives. Thus, Tulane's new focus on the role and importance of communities has not only speeded our own recovery, it has left us all better prepared for future challenges.

The elevation of our commitment to community engagement has not come at the expense of research and education. In fact, we constantly strive to synergistically and strategically integrate research, education, and public service, as illustrated by the four programs described above. It is our hope and our expectation that

other major universities and colleges will continue to escalate their commitment to community engagement as well. Now is the time for us to become even more externally focused and linked, rather than being inwardly driven.

CONCLUSION

It is simple to embrace an ideal in theory. We acknowledge the need to be citizens of the world, for example, and most of us recognize our obligation to help others in less fortunate circumstances. In the context of higher education, most colleges and universities say they strive to produce graduates whose minds and hearts reach far beyond the sphere of their immediate influence.

In practice, however, the details of our daily life and the comfort of routine often overshadow our ideals. We fit them into our existing lives, add them to our schedules, and take comfort in knowing we're doing what we can. However, when ideals meet catastrophe, one of two things can occur: either ideals are abandoned in the struggle for survival, or they take root and help drive and shape recovery. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina provided Tulane University with these two options. Five years later, we are a far different university, thanks to the trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, alumni, friends, and students who were able to look past the chaos of the moment and see an opportunity not only to help our city recover but to reshape our university into an institution that incorporates its ideals into every aspect of its mission.

Five years after Katrina, a storm of a different kind has hit Tulane's campus. Our programs are gaining momentum as socially conscious students seek a Tulane education, and as their spirit of civic engagement generates ever more new and innovative ideas. It is now our hope that Tulane's success can serve as a model for encouraging other institutions to provide human and intellectual capital to the communities in which they operate. These resources are essential ingredients in addressing our long-term social challenges, and in preparing students to become engaged citizens and leaders of the world.

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1. See Amanda P. Cowen and Scott S. Cowen, "Rediscovering Communities: Lessons from the Hurricane Katrina Crisis," *Journal of Management Inquiry* 19, no. 2 (2010): 117-125.