Tips and Strategies from the Network

Disaster Management

by Melinda Karp and Shonda Goward

Although we often hear today's COVID-19 pandemic referred to as "unprecedented," that is not necessarily the case. Wildfires, earthquakes, hurricanes, terrorist attacks—all of these crises have impacted higher education in the past, and are likely to do so again in the future. What can we learn from colleges' responses to previous crises and their aftermath in order to guide our planning for what might come next?

On March 4, 2022, 30 individuals from 14 CSU campuses came together virtually to learn from others about how to manage campuses and departments during a crisis—and after. They also spent time thinking about the ways that middle leaders have a direct role to play in planning for and recovering from disasters. A key learning is that it is as important to plan for recovery as it is to plan for the initial moments of crisis.

The group first heard from Dr. Mary Comerio, Professor of the Graduate School at UC Berkeley, who has spent nearly 30 years understanding the implications of natural disasters on higher education planning and risk management. Speaking on the "disaster resistant university," she cautioned the group that when planning, it is important to think about the most critical operational aspects of a university or department. What do you need to function effectively? Let those operational needs guide your planning.

> "It is important to think about the most critical operational aspects of a university or department."

Dr. Comerio reminded the group that there are two key considerations: business functions and people. Safeguarding these two things guide you to emergency and recovery plans that prioritize your core functions and staff wellness. She shared these guiding questions:

- What happens when you cannot get into buildings? How are those buildings used, and how will you preserve those functions without access?
- What will you do with your staff?
- How do you imagine scenarios you have never imagined before? What can you learn from other parts of the country to expand your thinking about what's possible?

Dr. Comerio provided these particular activities or actions to increase preparedness and resilience:
- Give grants to labs and other sensitive areas to upgrade their facilities for resilience. Keep in mind that:
  - bookshelves should be bolted to the walls;
  - refrigerators and compressors in labs can fail;
  - lab samples require electricity;
  - lab animals can fall out of their cages; and
  - wet sprinklers can ruin rare books and archives.

- Craft policies and procedures for resuming instruction that do not rely on online access, as not all students or scenarios are assured of internet functionality.
- Little crises can provide insight into future bigger crises; for example, Zika was a harbinger of the coronavirus.
- Your COVID group laid the groundwork for resilience. Reflect on what worked, codify it, and refine it. Do not just move on—maintain your emergency thinking for the next time.
- Take resiliency planning one step at a time.
- Spend time working with colleagues to overcome inertia and convincing them that crisis and resiliency planning is worthwhile.

The group also heard from a panel of middle leaders who navigated crises on their own campuses. Dr. Paolo Almeida, chair of the Chemistry Department at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, described his efforts to maintain departmental functions in the face of a devastating hurricane. Dr. Aaron Jones, Director of Educational Opportunity Programs at UC Santa Cruz, shared his experiences navigating student support during extreme wildfires. These two panelists shared the following insights and strategies:

- Keep in mind that crises can sever connection to people and places. Plan for this disconnection in your recovery.
- All of your stakeholders; students, staff and faculty, are impacted by lack of services, as well as by the fact that they are living through a volatile moment.
- Think about staff. Crises and recovery impact them, too. And it is emotional stuff. Be mindful of equity between faculty and staff, as faculty often have far more leeway than staff.
- Lead with a person-first mentality. Help students, faculty, and staff deal with personal needs before figuring out the return to campus.
- You have to move from normal operations (colleges, departments, programs) to cross-barrier operations. How will WE move forward TOGETHER?
- There are cycles of crisis and response. Typically, the first reactions are promising. It is only later that you start to see cracks.
- Some decisions are institutional. Others are at the unit level—those are the decisions middle leaders can plan for and control.
- Weekly team meetings throughout a crisis and recovery help keep processes moving forward and evolve as the situation evolves.
- Acknowledge what will not get done during disruptions.
- Communicate directly with students, and do so even when they are back on campus. Make sure students know where to find you as you return.
  - Update websites regularly.
  - Use email signature lines to communicate key information.
  - Send email and text blasts.
- Document what you did. You will forget if you do not write it down. Formalize it. Practice crisis-focused thinking so you are not caught flat-footed in the future.
- When building a plan, think about the nitty gritty:
  - Who will feed the lab mice?

- How will you pay your student workers?
- What will you do for staff who have desktops, rather than laptops?
- How will you reach each other, not to mention students, when the internet goes down?
- What about students who are in transition, such as between majors, and so do not have clear connections to campus departments?

Throughout the day, participants connected with their colleagues in breakout rooms to explore current campus emergency plans and strategies to build recovery and resilience. We know that it is hard to think about the next problem when we are still in the midst of the aftermath of a difficult situation. However, we hope the ideas above spur your thinking just as it did for the participants.

Student Success Network
in the California State University

Education Insights Center

California State University, Sacramento
6000 J Street-MS 6147
Sacramento, CA 95819-6081
studentsuccessnetwork@edinsightscenter.org
http://csustudentsuccess.net