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To: CSU Community

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Topic: Prepared for Devastation: Crisis Management versus Disaster Reactions in Higher Education

Many campuses were caught unaware when COVID-19 required them to pivot to online instruction and student support in March of 2020. Everyone in the California State University (CSU) transformed their offerings to serve students through online instruction and support. More than two years later, ripple effects from the pandemic continue and solutions to unanticipated problems are still being invented on the fly. However, this heavy lift may have been mitigated had the CSU learned from our colleagues at other institutions across the United States who have experienced disasters such as hurricanes and terror attacks, and who not only prepared for the immediate challenges, but also the long-term effects to the campus and campus community.

An immediate emergency response is something that the CSU knows how to execute, for example, during the excessive heat of 2022 or the Tubbs Fire of 2017 that impacted Sonoma State. Where the CSU has room to develop is with regard to crisis management, which is being prepared for the long-term effects of a physical, health, or reputational disaster and recovery after it has passed. This memo focuses on physical and health disasters, but reputational disaster has also recently struck the CSU and the work the system is doing to review our crisis management protocols there are also important.

This Knowledge Center memo is one in a series created by the CSU Student Success Network (Network). The Knowledge Center is an online resource created by the Network that provides curated, synthesized, and succinct information and links to support faculty, staff, and administrators in adopting equity-minded and student-centered approaches on their campus. The Network was created by and for CSU faculty, staff, administrators, and students to advance equitable student learning, engagement, progression, and success. It is facilitated by the Education Insights Center at Sacramento State, an independent research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education.

Recovery from large disasters is long-term, difficult work — and is distinct from planning for an immediate crisis. Dr. Laurie Johnson, Chief Catastrophe Response and Resiliency Officer with the California Earthquake Authority, and Dr. Robert Olshansky, Professor Emeritus of Urban Planning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, state:

> "***Management of recovery matters because disasters extend over time. They disrupt lives and business as people await assistance, infrastructure repair, and the return of their neighbors. Physical recovery from disasters takes many years, and psychological scars can last for decades. Many people survive the initial disaster but then suffer from the recovery as the economy stagnates, social networks weaken, and healthcare and support services decline.[1]***"

The authors detail the history of approaches to recovery after disaster, and provide examples of how communities rebounded over time.[2] They note that communities are systems of systems that often remake themselves after disaster, and often emerge different than they were before. While Johnson and Olshansky focus on countries, there are lessons to be learned about the long-term impact of disasters on university campuses, which, due to their size, often operate as quasi municipalities. No disaster is fully avoidable, but mitigating the risk and reducing the level of work needed to recover is worth examining on our campuses.[3]

This memo challenges the CSU to continue to develop systemwide guidance to support academic and business continuity post-disaster. In 2021, the CSU Office of the Chancellor released a guide for academic and business continuity that provides some counsel on how to respond to the many crises we face in the CSU, and some of the suggestions are reiterated here. The CSU also hired a Director of Systemwide Emergency Management & Continuity in 2020. As the guide articulates, CSU campuses are required to have both emergency operations plans and business continuity plans. However, this memo challenges the CSU to continue to develop detailed plans to support campuses in not only emergency management, but also long-term crisis management and disaster recovery, and to involve, inform, and support middle leadership and frontline staff so that everyone on campus is well equipped to weather a crisis through to recovery. Middle leaders can, and should, also use guides such as the 2021 systemwide continuity guide to develop a unit level plan for business continuity even if their campus does not have one.

Key Findings From the Literature

Emergency management is not crisis management.

Emergency management focuses on the immediate impact of a disaster. **Crisis management** requires thinking about a variety of prospective challenges that may occur, and how the university can plan to mitigate them. Scholars have identified a number of crises that are likely to occur on a college campus:[4,5]

Serious outbreak of illness	Major food tampering	Employee sabotage	Fires, explosions, and chemical spills	Environmental disasters
Significant drops in revenues	Natural disasters	Loss of confidential/ sensitive information or records	Major lawsuits	Terrorist attacks
Damage to institutional reputation	Ethical breaches by faculty, administrators, and trustees	Major crimes	Athletic scandals	Loss of life (in instances such as a campus shooting)

Most of these crises must be addressed at the senior leadership level. However, this does not mean that middle leaders in the CSU should not think about, and have conversations with their staff about, what to do should any of these arise in their area. Treadwell reported that their review of the literature and a survey of 117 provosts indicated that many campuses have plans for an emergency, but not a long-term, systemic solution for planning for a crisis.[6] Scholars stress the importance of campuses developing a crisis management plan and creating a team to prepare for the inevitable.[7,8] A strong plan accounts for a campus' constituencies not only amid the challenge, but also recognizes that moving forward may take time as employees are supporting students, themselves, and their families through the crisis.

Disaster management plans should account for the unique needs of different student populations.

Although higher education has long disabused itself of the notion of being "in loco parentis," we are still responsible for the students we support, and they remain some of the most vulnerable people in a disaster and through the disaster recovery process. A study on disaster education found that students who live on campus have different expectations of their university than those who live off campus.[9] Students who lived on campus were more likely to be interested in a disaster education course than those who lived off campus. Those who lived on campus also often reported feeling unfamiliar with university protocols for disaster, and would have liked to have these disaster protocols clarified by their university. Interestingly, the researchers also noted that international students, who often have no way home even before a forecasted disaster, are most vulnerable to disaster and that campus policies need to take them into account. The researchers did not list out-of-state students as vulnerable, but it would be logical to include them in this group.

As an example, students who were displaced during Hurricane Katrina did not receive information about next steps after the disaster, nor did they receive the care they needed over time – including housing, financial, and mental health support.[10] The lack of support students felt in the wake of Katrina may have also contributed to approximately 20-25% of students who were displaced enrolling at other universities, and wanting to remain where they were rather than return to New Orleans. While this was necessary for the students, an institution suddenly losing 20% of its student body is significant and reflects one of the crisis factors noted above: significant drops in revenues.[11] Taking the time to carefully plan for mass evacuation, and return to campus, could mitigate this type of loss.

Other researchers highlighted the unique challenges for students completing their degree programs online.[12] With many of our campuses continuing, post-COVID, to maintain a hybrid model—with some courses online and some face-to-face—their work is especially salient. Holzweiss, Walker, Chisum and Sosebee state:

> ***"Researchers have concluded that while the majority of college campuses have emergency response plans established for specific crisis situations, the plans do not include details for academic continuity … And even when online courses are seen as an option for delivering instruction in a crisis, the FTF [face-to-face] student population is the only consideration.[13]"***

For instance, in studying the aftermath of 2017's Hurricane Harvey on the Texas coastline for one institution, they found that information was limited, but when it was available it only addressed the campus' face-to-face students. Online students were unsure if they were still supposed to show up for class in the middle of a disaster. The study's authors recommend that campuses with online programs first recognize that the online campus entity does need support; they also recommend that leaders

know the students well enough to plan for how disaster will impact them, and create a crisis team for online students.

Further, an institution with an online campus must be vigilant in keeping abreast of crises that occur in other parts of the state or world where online students reside. As such, there should be policies in place for students impacted by a disaster in their area that does not impact the main campus. While the institution that Holzweiss, Walker, Chisum, and Sosebee studied altered the format of the online session because the entire campus was impacted by Hurricane Harvey, individuals might experience disaster where they live, and clear policies will need to be in place to support them and their studies while they cope. Without these policies, the university opens itself to disaffected students who do not feel supported by campus leadership, potentially leading to withdrawal, which means some students may not progress in their degrees. A large number of withdrawals also means financial hardship for the campus.

Planning for disaster could benefit from inclusion of middle leaders.

The Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) was forced to begin thinking about disaster preparedness after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. BMCC is the only higher education campus in the United States to lose a building to a terrorist threat. BMCC subsequently also faced flooding from Hurricane Sandy in 2012. BMCC's journey after September 11, 2001, provided insightful perspectives about what can happen if a population has to be away from their campus for an extended period of time, and the consequences for returning too quickly to campus. The college community was not only disrupted on the day of the terror strike, but for months and years afterwards.[14] Debris needed to be removed from the site; students had ongoing trauma when hearing sirens; Muslim students and Arab students became targets of abuse. BMCC vice president of student affairs, Marva Craig, stated that college leaders learned from 9/11 to "overhaul in-building communications and enhance counseling and mental health services. The college also learned to avoid keeping documents all in one central location, instead storing them off-site or in digital form."[15] The campus has returned triumphantly after more than two decades, but there are those who continue to suffer with poor health outcomes that are likely linked to the disaster.[16]

Four years after 9/11, the campus challenges presented by Hurricane Katrina are instructive for middle leaders at all institutions. A qualitative study that documented the experiences of student affairs and student support staff found that, during the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, these staff members did not feel respected or supported by their senior leadership.[17] The study found that campus leadership did not seem to value the work of student support, nor did they understand it. Some senior leaders told staff that if they could not report to work in the immediate aftermath, then they needed a new job, despite the ongoing challenges the hurricane

wrought. At public institutions in particular, decision making was left to senior levels of leadership without the consideration of middle leaders or frontline staff who often did not hear from them until weeks into September. Another key challenge was communication. Many of the employees did not hear an official word from their institutions for days after the devastation. Without official protocols, the staff nevertheless scrambled in the aftermath to communicate with students — for example, by creating new web pages students could find to receive any updates that were available. What was most important to the staff members was finding their students and ensuring they were safe. However, they received little to no validation for this. What the stories of these middle leaders tells us is that the planning for disaster did not include middle leaders, and in both the immediate aftermath and the long-term recovery, their work was not respected, even though it directly affected students.

With regard to faculty concerns, technology was essential to the recovery of teaching and learning post-Hurricane Katrina.[18] Technology leadership is necessary to ensure that faculty are well prepared to shift their course modalities to accommodate a long recovery period, and to provide means of communication until a campus populace is able to return to its physical location. When putting together a crisis management team, information technology staff should be represented.

In addition to the difficulties of pivoting teaching modalities during a disaster, the American Association of University Professors examined some of the challenges for faculty at five institutions in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.[19] What they found was that in some cases there were existing policies, related to financial exigency and termination of faculty member contracts, that would have mitigated some of the challenges post-hurricane. However, institutions did not follow these policies, and this inaction exacerbated harm. The authors of the study asserted that the financial challenges post-hurricane allowed institutions to make changes more rapidly than would normally have been possible, including terminations of faculty. These terminations may have been avoidable if the institutions had adhered to language adopted in less chaotic times.

Implications

Finally, there are some crises that lurk and, while we can prepare, we can never be fully ready. For example, researchers from the U.S. Geological Survey examined what would happen should an earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale occur along the Hayward Fault located in Hayward, CA.[20] The Hayward Fault is one of the most active and dangerous in the United States, and runs directly under CSU East Bay; Chabot College; University of California, Berkeley; and numerous other colleges and universities in Richmond, El Cerrito, Berkeley, Oakland, San Leandro, Castro Valley, Union City, Fremont, Hayward, and San José.[21] The last significant earthquake along this fault occurred in 1868, and scientists predict that the next time an earthquake occurs along it, it will be much bigger than the Loma Prieta quake of 1989.

The report outlines potential long-term problems, including building damage, casualties and trapped people, fire, and water supply challenges that would slow down fire response. Since 2014, communities in the East Bay region have come together to prepare a response to a major earthquake and implement risk-reduction actions to minimize hardship. Their actions demonstrate that with planning, recovery does not have to present campuses with a second disaster.

Crisis management on college campuses has shifted from the 1970s, when the main perceived threat was bombings, to now, when the effects of climate change are bringing weather disasters to our doors. There is enough information now to begin shifting our thinking from being prepared for an immediate emergency to preparing for a long-term crisis and recovery process. We urge CSU campuses to consider the recommendations of Mitroff, Diamond, and Alpasian and others noted in this memo to prepare in advance for the inevitable.

Finally, Treadwell encourages degree programs in higher education administration to shift from focusing so heavily on student development theory, and instead emphasize systems thinking, to look at challenges as a whole.[22] Treadwell found that senior student affairs leaders responsible for managing disaster and recovery were not well prepared for the task at hand, which included understanding building codes, insurance, and other aspects of campus life that are more aligned with running a city than with teaching and developing students. Crisis management is needed not only for campus planning, but for educating future leaders as well.

Recommendations

Based on the work of the scholars cited here, we recommend the following:

- ✓ Prepare for a broad range of crisis types. This may include plans that are localized and campuswide.
- ✓ Understand your collective bargaining agreement as it pertains to unionized employees and health and safety regulations.
- ✓ Review the language of the plan to ensure that its wording does not have unintended consequences. For example, the word “emergency” has a particular context with regard to the rights of employees in the CSU.
- ✓ Develop mechanisms for detecting early warnings of a crisis, and create crisis management teams that consist of crisis stakeholders at multiple levels, both internal and external to the institution.
- ✓ Consider which departments are most essential to institutional functioning and start disaster recovery planning there.
- ✓ Consider the needs of your different constituencies to include students residing on campus; students living off campus; students online; staff and faculty.
- ✓ Prepare campus technology to withstand long-term disasters and implement protocols for backing up essential data.

- ✓ Do not rush a return to "normalcy." Underlying campus health issues may emerge over time.
- ✓ Prepare for financial challenges based on enrollment deficits or the costs of recovery.
- ✓ Consult with crisis management experts within your campus and the larger system, and use their knowledge and experience to inform your planning.

Resource List

These resources serve as a starting point for developing your own campus or unit-level disaster management guides:

- Dr. Mary Comerio's scholarship on building disaster-resistant universities and her work with the University of California, Berkeley after the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989, led to a partnership with FEMA and the creation of Building a Disaster-Resistant University (2003), a FEMA guidebook. While this guidebook's unit of analysis is the entire university, it may also assist units within universities in considering what resources are available, what risks may exist in specific departments, and how to implement a unit-level plan along with a larger university plan.
- The Disaster Mitigation Act (2000) outlines how states will receive federal funds for disaster mitigation, and how to consider cost reduction. Considering that CSU campuses are de facto cities/municipalities of their own, and acknowledging that California is prone to both wildfire and flooding, this document is a good start for thinking in more depth about hazard mitigation.

Limitations

This memo provides an overview, but not a comprehensive review, of existing research on the topic. It does not provide extensive information about methodologies of the literature included. We spoke with experts in disaster management to inform our search of literature on campus disaster management and reviewed literature on relevant historical large-scale disasters that impacted campuses throughout the United States. We then searched the research literature for key terms in crisis management, as related to campuses. Despite the thoroughness of this search, there is limited research on effective disaster management strategies specific to university campuses. Due to these and other limitations, the CSU Network does not endorse the strategies presented in this memo as "best practices," and the strategies presented may need to be tailored to specific contexts within CSU campuses.

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