

Chapter 64

Hard-Learned Lessons: Online Course Development in the Years Following Hurricane Katrina

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ABSTRACT

After Hurricane Katrina, numerous studies and policy reports addressed the plight of higher education in New Orleans (AAUP (2007) and McClue, Esmail, and Shepard (2009) serve as examples). Of importance to this chapter are those works that focus on the well-being and renewal strategies of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the city (Cook-Dormoh, 2007) and, in particular, the role that technology plays in addressing the needs of displaced students and strengthening online degree generating programs. This chapter investigates the work of one particular HBCU—North-South—that, post Katrina, had great hopes of building online classes and programs of study. The goal, as articulated by school officials just after Katrina, was twofold: to attract the former student population and to develop a permanent, disaster-ready alternative to traditional on-the-ground classes. Data demonstrate that work to build and maintain online classes has been fragmented, declining significantly by 2008 and benefiting students in a select few programs.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

As the only public Historically Black College or University in New Orleans, the case site, North-South University, was established in 1959—five years after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* legislation (Francis, 2004). Brown called for integration in all public facilities, including colleges and universities. Like Mississippi and Alabama, Louisiana—specifically, New Orleans—was not ready to implement the federal mandate in the 1950s and as demonstrated by Gill (1997), held a cadre of citizens who were unwilling to accommodate diversity well into the 1990s.

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Even with state support, upon creation, North-South, was known as “the Jim Crow school” to area civil rights activists (Francis 2004). They argued that the school was only created to attract Black college-bound students who, otherwise, would have drawn attention to racial discrimination when attempting to attend Louisiana State University New Orleans, now called the University of New Orleans. LSUNO, now UNO, is a majority white school that was built around the same time as North-South and in very close proximity (DeBerry, 2011; Francis, 2004).

Where LSUNO (UNO) has a number of facilities including lecture halls, a library, and several dormitories, North-South has always been small and positioned in just the right way to disappear from the public eye. Tucked into the residential neighborhood of Ponchartrain Park, an all-Black middle class region of the city (for a history of the neighborhood, see Gafford, 2013), North-South was strategically located to enforce the local custom of segregation. Combined with segregation is the problem of access and resources. Even though North-South had an “open admissions” policy until 2010, less than 4,000 students have ever been enrolled at one time. Of those enrolled, even fewer were counted as graduates from the university (DeBerry, 2010 and 2011). Although 4,000 is a small student population, the school has never had more than eleven functional buildings and these facilities have been fought for by students (Francis, 2004). After Katrina, the school operated classes in just a few buildings and even in 2012 many of these buildings could only do so on the upper levels, as the bottom floors were still not restored. There is a brand new building for the Business department which offers several online courses and a number of FEMA trailers which at one point, numbered over 345 according to unpublished research by Esmail and McClue, 2011.¹

At no point in history have the leaders of North-South been able to avoid struggle and controversy. At this point, however, when compared to other area universities, including HBCUs, the state of North-South is dire. Part of this can be attributed to the leadership at the university. The first chancellor of the school was hand-picked and had a long tenure of nearly three decades (Francis, 2004). Upon stepping down in 1987, North-South has had six additional leaders, three serving for two years or less. Although the current chancellor arrived in January 2006 after the storm, his leadership has been called into question by members of North-South’s Faculty Senate (Pope, 2012). The faculty senate overwhelmingly voted that they held “no confidence” in the chancellor, arguing that he had failed to bring the campus back to pre-Katrina working order. Furthermore, some questioned whether restoration was even an interest of North-South’s formal leader while other faculty members came to his defense in terms of how much progress has been made. In addition to constant changes in leadership, faculty and student losses have uniquely shaped the school environment and morale for the worst (AAUP, 2007; AAUP, 2013). It is for these reasons a study of North-South’s rebuilding efforts are needed. Though various aspects are in need of analysis, resources for students such as online learning are of primary concern, for what is a university if not for the students?

SETTING THE STAGE

Through a review of university documents from 2005 to 2013, we found that although workers at the institute had high hopes of rebuilding a campus based on the lessons learned from Katrina, i.e., a strong online presence should be in place in the event of displacement, a combination of structural and internal factors have stymied this growth. These adherents suffered through technological lag, often a problem for HBCUs nationwide (Baskerville, 2008:4; Evans, Evans and Evans, 2002: 12-13; Snipes, Ellis and

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