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# The Impact of a Regional Crisis on Online Students and Faculty

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## Abstract

This study examines the experiences of online students and faculty when a regional crisis disrupted courses. Students could not access online courses for up to a month, threatening both retention and the financial health of the institution. Researchers share the details of the crisis including the institutional response, the challenges online students faced, and the additional demands placed on faculty during the crisis period. Findings suggest that online students experience significant problems with academic continuity, faculty serve as frontline responders in crises involving online students, and institutions need a crisis plan for online students.

## Introduction

While overall college enrollment is declining, distance education enrollments continue to increase with more than a quarter of students taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2017). The majority of online students are over the age of 25, more than half of them are employed full-time while they attend college, and almost half have children who are under the age of 18 (Magda & Aslanian, 2018). They choose online learning because it offers opportunities to access education while maintaining their day-to-day responsibilities (Ortagus, 2017).

Despite the growth of online enrollment and the differing needs of online students, campus leaders may not see them as an essential population to support beyond a few targeted services (Kara et al., 2019). For instance, institutions may have crisis management plans supporting the safety of face-to-face (FTF) students and their ability to access classes on the physical campus, but what happens when online students are the ones affected by a crisis?

One institution experienced this scenario in 2017 when Hurricane Harvey hit the Gulf Coast of Texas and caused severe flooding through the city of Houston and its surrounding areas. Approximately 80% of the institution's online student population resided in the impact zone and were at immediate risk of withdrawing from courses. With a significant threat to both student retention and the financial health of the institution, campus leaders had to find an immediate solution to support online students. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine how the 2017 crisis impacted online students, how campus leaders responded, and how both faculty and students in online courses experienced the crisis response.

## Literature review

Crisis planning on college campuses often involves preparation for events such as natural disasters where people need to be evacuated or system failures where important campus databases become inaccessible. Mitroff and Anagnos (2001) lamented that campus leaders can overlook situations where economic, human, and other resources are at risk. For instance, Hurricane Katrina in 2005 resulted in temporary closures for some institutions, and their student enrollment declined by more than half afterwards (L'Orange, 2010). Leaders had to find ways for students to continue their courses without being on a physical campus. One common strategy moved FTF students to the online environment until repairs concluded (SchWeber, 2008) but other problems arose such as a lack of online-trained faculty, online-ready students, and sufficient time to make the conversion (Camile et al., 2008).

While moving FTF students to an online environment is a documented strategy in a few crisis situations (Day, 2015; Regehr, Nelson, & Hildyard, 2016), no studies could be found regarding how campus leaders handle crisis response when students are already learning in an online environment. Campus technology failures may be addressed as part of crisis response (Dabner, 2012; Meyer & Wilson, 2011), but the potential impact to online students in crisis situations goes beyond a temporary inability to access technology. For instance, two-thirds of online students live within 50 miles of their physical campus (Magda & Aslanian, 2018) so they are likely to experience geographical crisis situations in the same way as FTF students. L'Orange (2010) emphasized that crisis events can be managed with good planning so it is imperative to examine possible scenarios that may prevent online students from continuing courses. There is a need to examine how crisis events impact online students and how academic continuity can be addressed in crisis planning.

## **Context**

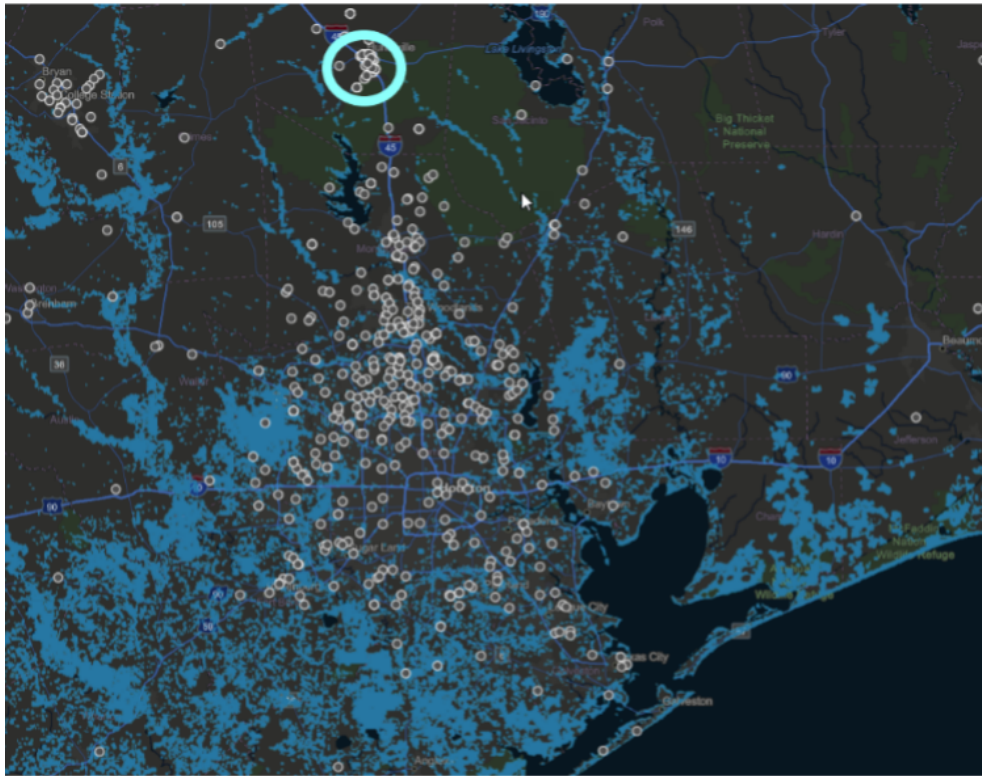
The study institution is situated approximately 70 miles north of downtown Houston, Texas. Many members of the campus community (commuter students, online students, staff, faculty) reside south of the college, in Houston and its surrounding suburbs. In the fall of 2017, almost 21,000 students were enrolled at the institution with 15% enrolled in fully online programs and 80% enrolled in at least one online course (SHSU Institutional Effectiveness, 2018; SHSU Online, 2018).

On Wednesday, August 23, 2017, students began their online courses for the fall term. Hurricane Harvey was already forming in the Gulf of Mexico and approaching the Texas coast. Campus leaders did not expect the hurricane to impact the main campus, which is more than 100 miles from the coast.

On August 25, 2017, the hurricane made landfall on the southwestern Texas coast, then headed northeast to the Houston region where it stalled. The stationary hurricane set the record for the highest total rainfall in the United States from a single storm. More than 50 inches of rain saturated the Houston area (Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, 2018) and the governor declared 54 Texas counties disaster zones (Harrington, Ramsey, & Varinsky, 2017).

Five days after the fall term began, the institution's president suspended all classes for more than a week. Administrators soon realized that a significant number of online students resided in the impact zone (Miller, 2018). Figure 1 depicts a close-up view of the Houston region during this time. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provided a map of the flooded areas, indicated in blue and located throughout the Houston region. The white dots represent the geographic locations of the institution's online students. The large-circled area at the top of image is the location of the main campus. As the figure illustrates, online students residing near the main campus were not heavily impacted by the storm but those in the Houston region were affected by the widespread flooding and damaged infrastructure.

Figure 1: FEMA damage areas in relation to online student enrollment (Miller, 2018). Reprinted with permission



In an effort to keep online students enrolled, administrators created a compressed 7.5-week course structure (“7B”) as an alternative to the 15-week courses that had already begun. The plan called for 7B courses to begin in mid-October, or the second half of the 15-week term, so online students could restart their courses after a six-week break. Compressed courses had been previously used at the institution so enrollment systems and learning management structures already existed.

Administrators invited faculty teaching online courses to offer a 7B course in addition to their already functioning 15-week course. Monetary incentives were provided, and more than 300 online faculty (43% of online instructors) volunteered. At the conclusion of the 7B enrollment period, 181 compressed sections were created with more than 850 online students enrolled in these new sections (Miller, 2018). Students who did not enroll in the 7B sections could remain in 15-week courses and work with their instructors for individual accommodations. Three quarters (76%) of online students completed fall courses on time and 86% returned for the spring term, which matched completion rates in previous fall terms.

## **Method**

Separate web-based surveys, containing mostly open-ended questions, were sent to a random sample of online students and all online faculty in the middle of the spring 2018 term so experiences across the entire fall term could be shared. Out of 1,068 students selected for the study, 114 participated for an 11% response rate. Out of 413 faculty, 177 participated resulting in a 43% response rate.

Qualitative data analysis occurred using a constant comparison technique (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers used descriptive and *in vivo* terms to identify first cycle codes, then conducted a second cycle of analysis to generate broader themes (Saldaña, 2016). A final cycle of analysis resulted in meta-themes across all questions. To assist with trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018), the researchers utilized peer debriefers to discuss initial themes and ensure accurate interpretation, and a reflexive journal and audit trail were maintained throughout the process.

## **Findings**

### **Faculty Experiences**

Faculty participants provided 2,791 unique comments which resulted in five meta-themes: Challenges Observed for Students, Support for Students, Mixed Reaction Towards the 7B Strategy, Impact on Instruction, and Perspectives for the Institutional Crisis Response.

### **Challenges Observed for Students**

Faculty described the challenges they observed for students including an inability to communicate due to technology problems (internet, telephone, electricity), losing supplies (laptops, textbooks), being distracted or emotionally drained, supporting family and friends who were impacted by the storm, and being unable to manage time well due to disaster-related demands. Unexpected challenges emerged due to students' jobs and internships. A participant described a course where many of the enrolled students were "firefighters, EMS workers, emergency managers, etc. Many of them were either impacted by Harvey personally, suddenly working much more than 40 hours per week professionally, or both." Another challenge emerged for students who were performing required student-teaching activities in elementary and secondary schools. Some of the internship schools were severely damaged and had to close for the remainder of the term, complicating the students' ability to complete their education degrees. Other student-teachers lost personal supplies they brought to their internship classrooms such as book collections and decorations that were not covered by insurance plans.

### **Support for Students**

One of the frequent comments from faculty was that supporting students while they were recovering from the storm was the "right thing to do." As one participant explained, "Many of my online students were affected by the hurricane. I felt that as their professor I should assist them by giving them an opportunity to reestablish their personal lives in order to be a successful student." Support was demonstrated in several ways including faculty choosing to convert their courses to the shorter 7B format, removing assignment deadlines in the 15-week courses so students could turn in work at their own pace, and contacting publishers to replace students' lost textbooks. Faculty also provided non-academic support such as identifying ways students could access computers and internet in their geographic area, demonstrating compassion by asking students about their families, and hosting online discussions so students could share experiences with others in the class.

Faculty encountered two challenges that impacted their ability to effectively respond to student needs. Some participants discussed the same storm issues encountered by students such as being unable to access internet or electricity, dealing with a damaged residence or vehicle, or being unable to leave their neighborhoods due to flooding. Faculty struggled with managing their personal situations alongside assisting students and expressed feelings of being overwhelmed. A second challenge was an increase in workload. This was primarily mentioned by faculty who converted to the 7B course because it often involved adapting instructional practices and managing the fast pace of the updated course. However, even faculty teaching traditional 15-week courses discussed increases in their workload as they adapted to individual student needs and provided emotional support for students who were experiencing anxiety and stress. The combination of instructional adaptations and the emotional impact of the storm increased participants' stress levels throughout the term.

### **Mixed Reaction Towards the 7B Strategy**

The option of converting to the 7B course appealed to some faculty who saw it as a way to serve students. Other faculty felt pressure to convert their courses and had a sense that they were obligated to make the change because campus leaders requested participation. Some faculty believed that planned course activities such as simulations, labs, and group projects did not readily fit into a shorter schedule or they did not want to increase their workload. As one participant explained:

I was also personally impacted by Hurricane Harvey and its aftermath. Converting my course to a 7.5-week class and then running both versions of the class [15-week and 7B] would have added a significant amount of work to my already significant workload. I did not have time to do that as a favor to my students or the university.

Another group of faculty asked students what they wanted and found little desire for the compressed course option.

Some faculty who may have been reluctant to convert their courses at first were motivated by the offered financial incentives. One participant explained, “I probably would not have agreed to alter it [the course format] without the \$1,000 stipend because it was fairly inconvenient to convert the course.” Other faculty were not motivated by the monetary incentive and felt they could offer adequate accommodations in the traditional 15-week format such as extending or removing deadlines, adjusting assignments, and addressing individual student needs as they arose.

A small group of faculty expressed opposition to the idea of a course conversion. For instance, one participant shared dissatisfaction that the 7B course option was only offered to online students: “Students who were enrolled in actual physical classes were not given any venue to take their classes. Both online and in-class students were affected by Harvey.” Another comment voiced distrust of the campus leadership based on previous attempts to convert courses to a shortened format:

Prior to Harvey there was already talk at the university level of moving more online courses to 7.5 weeks. The rationale being peddled for this is “students demand it.” Well, there is just no evidence that moving courses to 7.5 weeks works. My students can barely keep up in a 15-week course. My sneaking suspicion was the university was using this disaster to push the 7.5-week model, in the hopes that at some point they could come back to the faculty who might dissent this model and say, “well, you did it after Harvey, why can’t you do it all the time?”

Other participants did not want to compromise the quality of student learning and felt that moving to a shortened course format would become a hindrance to learning.

### **Impact on Instruction**

Faculty teaching 7B courses addressed the impact of the storm on their courses. While some participants found it easy to adapt course materials to the 7B format and reported a successful experience, other participants described issues such as a lack of engagement from students or a decrease in student mastery of material, which is supported in the literature (Chen, 2007; Rodrigue et al., 2016). Many of the 7B courses had only a few students enrolled so regular classroom activities such as peer discussions were more difficult to perform. Faculty shared that students did not know what to expect from a shortened course format and were not prepared for the fast pace. While they felt students were generally successful in completing the 7B courses, they also expressed doubts about how much students really learned.

Faculty teaching 7B courses felt overwhelmed with converting their courses to a shorter format and keeping up with the fast pace of grading once the courses began, which is supported by other researchers (Grady, 2013; Rodrigue et al., 2016). The word used most frequently to describe the experience was “intense.” When asked if they would make the same decision to compress their courses under similar circumstances in the future, 85% of participants teaching 7B courses said they would. One participant explained, “I truly believe that this assisted students in getting back on track with their courses, and just as important, their personal lives.”

A few participants expressed frustration that some students took advantage of the shortened course option. As one participant explained, “Students were allowed to choose the 7.5 course even if not

affected by Harvey. This extra work on my part was not even for those who needed it.” Other participants were inclined to aid any students who asked for it, regardless of the storm’s impact. One participant remarked, “Lighten up and realize that you may have to relax your standards a bit. Don’t worry about some kid taking advantage of your good graces.”

Faculty offered several tips for adjusting online courses in a crisis situation including being flexible with due dates, adapting the course schedule to provide recovery time, offering opportunities to connect class topics to the current events, removing significant assignments, not hosting synchronous meetings, and recording video messages so students could see and hear the support. They also recommended finding different ways to communicate with students because email did not work for students who lost technology. Finally, participants suggested assuming that students have the best intentions for coursework when they ask for accommodations, and to put students first in all decisions. One participant summarized this sentiment by saying, “There are no blanket answers.”

### **Perspectives for the Institutional Crisis Response**

A majority of faculty participants held positive views of the institutional crisis response and described it as timely, supportive, and informative. The primary criticism was that there was no formal plan for managing a crisis of this magnitude for online students. They also felt that the institutional response was confusing at times. For instance, although initial messages to faculty described a financial incentive to convert their courses to a compressed format, the dollar amount and applicable criteria varied depending on when the communication occurred. In addition, there was a lack of follow-through on the incentives, with at least a few participants reporting they never received the promised compensation. Other participants expressed confusion over how course loads would be impacted, what would happen if there was low enrollment in a new section, and how students would be enrolled in the new sections.

Faculty participants criticized campus leaders for not considering the impact on faculty responsibilities before implementing the crisis response. Some faculty wanted work adjustments such as having a decrease in service obligations or having more understanding for lower teaching evaluations during the crisis term. Others wanted more staff members available to adapt courses, guide them in best practices, and assist with grading and other teaching tasks in the 7B courses. A few participants wanted leaders to ask how faculty were responding to the crisis before creating a campus response. As one participant explained, “No one asked if we had reached out to students or how we were already attempting to meet their needs.” Another participant offered a sharp criticism of the decision-making: “Administrators need a reality check on how much work it is to teach online. Simply saying we can shift to a 7.5-week model shows ineptitude of how much work goes into pedagogy, planning, and teaching.”

Faculty were divided regarding how the institutional crisis response for online students could be improved. Some participants wanted instructors to determine how to address academic continuity plans individually while others wanted a more uniform response from the institution. As one participant noted, “One decision for the entire campus may be necessary. Students should not be split between some 15-week classes and some 7.5-week classes.” Other suggestions included allowing students to drop courses later in the term and offering courses between the traditional academic terms instead of trying to adjust the current term.

Faculty recommended the creation of a response team to coordinate crisis activities such as developing temporary policies and procedures as well as becoming the primary communication channel for the campus community. Messaging could then become more frequent and accurate. Other suggestions included increasing the number of staff available to assist in a crisis response, developing clear guidelines for which students qualify for the response, offering a chat room to obtain real-time responses, and identifying resources regarding common challenges such as where students can access technology, counseling resources, emergency funding, and replacement textbooks.

## **Student Themes**

Student participants provided 849 unique comments which resulted in four meta-themes: Varied Impact of the Storm, Support and Connection with Campus Community, Experience with the 7B Strategy, and Perspectives for the Institutional Crisis Response.

### **Varied Impact of the Storm**

Students reported a wide range of challenges due to the storm. One frequently mentioned issue was limited access to their online courses due to lack of electricity or internet. One participant explained, "I lost power, had to move immediately the weekend following the hurricane and was without access to internet for about a month." Other students experienced problems obtaining their textbooks. Since the storm hit at the beginning of the term, textbooks either never arrived or were significantly delayed. A few students reported family or friends moving in with them due to damaged residences. Students also mentioned the toll the storm took on them emotionally, explaining that their focus was divided between school and everything else happening in their lives. One participant shared, "I work in the communication industry so my work schedule went into overdrive trying to get communication between all the first responders and FEMA center up and running."

### **Support and connection with campus community**

One consistent theme from students focused on the support received from the faculty. Students needed emotional support as well as adjustments to their courses, and they discussed how faculty overwhelmingly provided that support. One participant stated,

I was overwhelmed by everything that I was experiencing and finally reached out to my professors for some guidance. Initially, I was uncertain if they were going to understand my predicament, but I stood corrected because their response was very supportive and geared toward me succeeding in the program despite my current situation. I can never thank them enough because without their understanding and commitment to their students, I would have failed out of the program.

The words "empathy," "understanding," "flexible," and "caring" were used repeatedly to describe the support provided by faculty.

While the majority of student participants shared comments about faculty support, there were a few students who had a different experience. One participant took a face-to-face course and an online course and shared this example:

I felt very discouraged from my online course. Class seemed to go on without any care towards those of us who were hit by the hurricane. I have never been more disappointed in a professor in my entire college experience. We were displaced, living in a home with multiple families, and did not have power. I received emails from my professor without any concern to our situation. Students faced with the devastation from a hurricane should not have been expected to worry about class assignments within days of a disaster. My in-class professors were so understanding of the situation but [the] online class was a completely different situation.

Another participant echoed the sentiment saying, "There was no support from faculty. They still expected you to get your assignments in regardless if you were affected."

Students desired empathy and support from everyone working on campus, but their comments indicated it may not have been consistent across the campus community. When asked what support they received from administrators, the response was mixed. There were positive comments such as the participant who explained, “I was contacted by an administrative assistant to check on me as well as let me know that the university would work with me during this time to be sure that I had time to recover and secure needed housing and other necessities.” Other participants did not feel they received the same kind of support: “I personally [*sic*] got no help from the school. They even gave me late fees to my payments. I had to take out an additional lone [*sic*] because Harvey set me back financially.” One participant recognized that the 7B strategy was made possible by administrators: “I suppose the ability to switch to the 7.5-week class is something that was done by administration. I found this to be helpful in getting my life back on track after the hurricane.”

### **Experience with the 7B Strategy**

Students who chose the 7B course option did so based on their personal needs after the storm such as finding temporary housing, repairing damage to homes, and restoring residential services such as electricity and internet. As one participant shared,

Since I had to move due to damage to my home, I was without internet connection for about a month. I understand that is nothing compared to what some people have been and are still suffering from Harvey. I would have been unable to complete the class work that was required without the shortened classes.

Other participants described reasons for enrolling in a 7B course such as not being emotionally ready to address classwork and falling behind academically in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

Students shared mostly positive comments regarding instruction in the 7B courses. One participant noted:

The instruction was very similar to any course that I have taken in the past. My professors provided specific guidelines and always answered any questions I had in regard to the course material. As expected, the workload is at a much faster pace. Assignments were to be turned in much sooner than taking a 15-week course.

Other students were not as satisfied with their experience and highlighted feeling isolated with only a few other students in the course, having instructors who did not provide timely support, and finding it difficult to keep up with the fast pace of the schedule. One participant shared regrets over making the switch to the 7B course because of the challenges experienced.

Students who did not register for a 7B course were asked to explain why. A majority explained that they were not affected by the storm and did not need any accommodations. Another group of participants said the compressed format was not appealing to them and they wanted to remain in the traditional 15-week format. A few participants explained that the compressed course option was not offered to them.

### **Perspectives for the Institutional Crisis Response**

Participants were overwhelmingly positive about the 7B strategy and appreciated the concern, even when they individually did not need accommodations:

I was not a student that was effected [*sic*] in a horrible way by the Hurricane but the unity I felt from my online professors’ response to the situation was the coolest thing I have ever seen. I felt a deeper connection with my online class, people I have not even met, more than with my in-person classes.



Another participant noted, “I was able to make it through successfully and come out of my situation stronger and more prepared for the potential challenges that I would face in the future.”

There were a few students who highlighted negative experiences. These experiences focused on both the classroom environment and institutional response. One participant shared a challenging situation with an instructor not complying with an institutional directive:

I did have one professor that did not comply with the delay of classes and started on the normal schedule. When I told her about the delay in classes, she merely stated that she could give us one week extra to catch up.

Another participant was unhappy that only online students were offered the compressed courses stating, “Take into consideration that you guys have commuters that lost everything they had. And to bounce back from that a week later and to go to school is harsh.”

For strategies to improve crisis response for online students, participants wanted more empathy from faculty and administrators, mandatory adjustments for all courses, and proactive communication to find out what students need. Some participants desired more flexibility with policies and processes such as temporarily extending academic and financial deadlines. Other participants wanted ways to request emergency assistance such as replacing textbooks and supplies. One final suggestion sought opportunities to participate in the broader community response such as donating funds or volunteering in clean-up efforts.

## **Discussion**

This study attempts to fill a research gap by highlighting a significant crisis situation at one institution and focusing specific attention towards online students, who have been neglected in crisis management research. Several lessons from the crisis situation can assist campus leaders in understanding how crises can impact academic continuity and how plans could be updated to better serve online students.

### **Understand Online Student Needs**

With a majority of online students enrolling in institutions in their geographic region (Magda & Aslanian, 2018), campus leaders can no longer assume that a crisis will only impact students at the physical campus. In this study, online students experienced outcomes similar to FTF students in other reported crises such as a loss of personal property, increased emotional distress, and a disruption in academic progress (Camille et al., 2008; SchWeber, 2008). What makes the online student experience unique is that they do not have an alternative access point for their courses. While FTF students can access their courses by moving to an online environment, online students cannot readily move to the FTF environment for courses. When both the physical and online learning environments are not accessible, academic continuity for online students ends abruptly.

Campus leaders should examine institutional crisis plans and explore ways to address online student needs. First, get to know the demographics of online students at the institution. Understanding where they reside geographically can assist with identifying students impacted by a regional crisis. In addition, knowing what academic programs they are enrolled in could prove beneficial. For example, student teachers may take face-to-face courses for most of their curriculum but their student teaching term may occur online as they move to different locations for their required internship. When a crisis occurs in the region, checking with the administrators providing oversight for student teaching could help identify students who may be affected by the crisis and in need of additional support.

A second strategy is to develop a specific crisis response for online students, especially concerning

incidents that may impact academic continuity. For instance, when widespread electricity and internet blackouts occur, online students do not have the ability to attend class, turn in homework, or even communicate with their instructors. Creating strategies that explain what instructors and students should do in this situation could provide a rapid response that is consistent and can be adequately supported by campus resources. In addition, any crisis planning for online students should include administrators from student affairs as they are the campus professionals who assist students with resources such as counseling services, emergency funding, and off-campus organization referrals.

The dominant sentiment from online students in this study was that any crisis response considering their needs was appreciated. They expressed gratitude for the opportunity to delay coursework by six weeks in the 7B option yet were just as thankful when responsive faculty allowed students to turn in late assignments without penalty in full length courses. The recognition by campus leaders that online students needed support impressed many student participants in this study and helped them feel connected to the campus community.

### **Treat Online Faculty as Frontline Responders**

Campus leaders should recognize that the primary connection online students have to the institution is through their academic courses. FTF students have a variety of campus resources to use when they need support but online students may not have the same services available (Kara et al., 2019). Faculty will be the first campus representatives students turn to when they are experiencing a crisis situation and should be considered frontline responders.

As this study demonstrates, online students needed faculty to support them academically and emotionally. Faculty did more than just adjust course schedules and assignments during the crisis. They also called publishers to replace students' lost textbooks, hosted online discussion forums so students could talk about their personal experiences, and even provided rides for students who lost vehicles in the storm. In these front-line responder roles, faculty participants expressed feelings of being overwhelmed with both their increased academic roles and unexpected support roles.

Many faculty are unlikely to have previous crisis training so it is imperative that leaders provide as much guidance and support as possible when a crisis occurs. Sharing a list of campus resources and where to refer students in need could help faculty understand what tasks can be handled by other personnel on campus. Temporarily providing more personnel to assist with academic responsibilities such as instructional support and grading would allow faculty to make the necessary adjustments for student success outcomes. And offering counseling services to both students and faculty could provide additional outlets for expressing and managing emotions.

Leaders should also consider the increased demands on faculty during a crisis. In this study, some faculty converted their 15-week courses to 7.5-week courses while others dropped assignment deadlines to support students trying to deal with the storm's aftermath, allowing students to turn in assignments whenever they were completed. These approaches increased the time spent with academic workload and resulted in negative outcomes such as a decrease in teaching evaluation scores and reduced work on research and service tasks. When faculty evaluation, promotion, and rehire processes are dependent on quality work throughout an entire academic year, consideration should be given for how these factors will be judged during a crisis period.

Faculty in this study were willing to support students through the crisis and believed it was the right thing to do given the circumstances. But they also worried about their workload and productivity and how their efforts would be judged when they spent so much time supporting students. Addressing these concerns as part of a crisis plan can help campus leaders develop a culture of trust with faculty.

## Develop a Crisis Plan for Online Students

This study emphasizes the need for a crisis plan that includes online students as a population of concern. Campus leaders can begin that process by bringing together administrators who serve online students in any capacity, faculty who teach online students, and students who can serve as representatives of the campus online population. This task force could brainstorm possible crisis scenarios involving online students and suggest ways that the campus can provide resources and ensure academic continuity in each situation. As effective strategies are identified, campus leaders can develop policies and processes to respond quickly when a future crisis occurs.

Crisis planning will vary between institutions but there are common topics that should be addressed within a crisis plan for online students. Some suggested topics and possible questions to ask include:

- Leadership – Who will lead a crisis response effort? Where will the leadership be geographically located during the response period? How will leadership access the campus president for rapid decision-making?
- Technological Resources – What technology is available for communication and instruction? How can each technology be leveraged in a crisis? What additional resources does the campus learning management system offer that could be utilized during a crisis? If course delivery needs to be adjusted, what will that look like and how will it be managed?
- Student Support – How will students access services for counseling, academic advising, and academic support? What emergency funding exists to support student needs and who will coordinate funding requests? How do students learn about available support?
- Faculty Support – What training do faculty need to be effective first-line responders during a crisis? What resources can be offered to faculty for the crisis response to assist with either academic or personal issues? How will the campus crisis response impact faculty workload, and what short-term and long-term adjustments are needed?
- Policies and Practices – What adjustments will be mandatory for all courses and faculty? What processes should exist for reporting crisis response activities and challenges? What existing policies and practices (e.g., deadlines, requirements) may need to be temporarily adjusted to accommodate the crisis response? What data would be useful before, during, and after a crisis event to better understand online student needs? Who will coordinate data needs?

Addressing all of these topics and questions as part of a crisis plan will assist institutions with an appropriate and timely response.

## Conclusion

By considering the needs of online students within crisis planning activities, campus leaders can demonstrate that these students are an essential part of the campus community and that there is concern for their well-being. This, in turn, can lead to increased efforts towards inclusion of online students in other aspects of campus life such as dedicated support services and resources, engagement opportunities, and policy and process updates. With the growth of online education, campus leaders should look for proactive ways to serve the online population, especially in times of crisis when threats to an institution's stability may increase.

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[Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents](#)