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Chapter 18

Hurricane Katrina and the Nation's Obligation to Black Colleges

Marybeth Gasman and Noah D. Drezner

"The shock and hurt on campus were deafening. It was as though everyone had lost a close member of the family."

—Norman Francis, President, Xavier University

In spite of all its furious destruction, Hurricane Katrina may be remembered more for tearing down the myth of American racial equality than for tearing down homes and businesses. For too long, Americans, mostly of the racial majority, believed that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream had been realized. Yet, Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the fact that there is a long road ahead of us to achieve the civil rights leader's dream that "one day this Nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal'" (King Jr., 1963). And, while there has already been debate over how to rebuild the physical structures lost to the storm, there has been little mainstream discussion about how to bridge that racial rift. One of the most effective and least costly ways to rectify racial injustices is to support our nation's black colleges financially. Giving to black colleges now will help repair not only the physical damage done by the hurricane but also the historical damage inflicted over the past century.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the black colleges ravaged by Hurricane Katrina, exploring their contributions to both black higher education and American society. In addition, we discuss the past discrimination that led to the current situation for New Orleans' black colleges. Lastly, we examine the giving to black colleges that has come from the black community, the Foundation community and the giving that could potentially come from American citizens overall.

Background on New Orleans' Black Colleges

There are three black colleges in New Orleans: Xavier University of Louisiana, Dillard University, and Southern University of New Orleans. Xavier University, established in 1915, is the nation's only historically black and Catholic institution. Using money from her inheritance, Katherine Drexel (along with the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament) founded the institution, as a teachers college. Specifically, Sister Katherine wanted to educate black and Native American students. The college is also set apart from other institutions by its leadership. Xavier's president Norman C. Francis has been at the helm for over three decades, far longer than the average college presidency, lending stability to the small university. In addition to tripling the endowment to \$54 million (still meager in comparison to its predominantly white counterparts, but larger than that of most black colleges), Francis has shaped the institution into a place that nurtures students in the sciences. According to the American Medical Association, Xavier University is responsible for placing more blacks in medical school than any other institution in America. And, even more importantly, 92 percent of these students complete medical school and pass board exams. With an enrollment of only 4,000, the university awards more undergraduate degrees in biology and the life sciences to blacks than any other college or university. Moreover, since 1927, Xavier has graduated over 25 percent of the 6,500 black pharmacists in the United States, many of whom are committed to working in low-income neighborhoods. Xavier's work is even more impressive when considering that other institutions might not consider its incoming students desirable. The institution's 1991 incoming cohort had a meager average score of 464 on the quantitative portion of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) (Mitchell, 1993). However, Xavier empowers and educates its students far beyond what their original standardized test scores suggest. In the words of Xavier's president, the institution is "a model for destroying the myth that young people and minorities can't succeed in science" (Mangan, 2006b, p. A48).

Dillard University was formed by the merger of Straight College and New Orleans College in 1930. Straight and New Orleans Colleges were founded in 1869 by the American Missionary Association and the Freedmen's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church to provide teacher training in elementary education. Eventually, Dillard University grew to include an emphasis on instruction in secondary and collegiate education as well. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the Dillard campus was lush, with two rows of ancient trees lining the "Avenue of the Oaks" and leading to the heart of the campus. Students took immense pride in the appearance of their university. According to Dillard graduate and Brown University president Ruth Simmons, the university "has for so long been the route many of us have taken to middle class that for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the beauty of the site is a way of orienting them toward making a life for themselves that would include the

beauty” (Hoover, 2005, p. 21). Currently, the institution provides a large percentage of New Orleans’ nurses, focusing on both the professions and the liberal arts. Moreover, Dillard, ranked among the top 25 Southern comprehensive colleges by *U.S. News and World Report*. Compared to its historically black contemporaries, Dillard too has a strong endowment of \$47.6 million.

Southern University, a publicly funded institution, originally established as an extension of Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in 1956, is now an open admission institution, serving low-income students determined to move themselves out of poverty. The first graduating class received bachelor’s degrees in 1963 under the university’s new name, Southern University of New Orleans. If not for the university, many of these students would not be able to afford to attend college. Prior to the hurricane, the institution enrolled 3,600 students, most of them over 25. Southern has a profound commitment to community service and places its graduates in social service positions throughout the U.S. and abroad. The institution is ranked 45th in its production of all black baccalaureate degrees overall, 11th in its production of science baccalaureates, and 15th in its production of math baccalaureates out of all four-year institutions in the United States (2,466).

Starting from Disadvantage

Although founded and funded on an unequal basis, black colleges have shown remarkable resilience, continuing to enroll a substantial share of blacks who receive a college education. In most cities across the country, black colleges were sited on undesirable land—a situation amply demonstrated in New Orleans, where Xavier, Dillard, and Southern universities were built on the lowest ground, thereby suffering the greatest damage when the levees broke. Dillard is under a mile from the London Avenue Canal that breached in four places, flooding the campus with 8 feet of water destroying the institution’s prided “Avenue of the Oaks” and causing \$400 million of damage. Southern University sits just south of Lake Pontchartrain and west of the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal that connects the lake to the Mississippi River. There were five breaches along the Canal, causing \$350 million of damage to the public institution. And, Xavier, although a fair distance from the lake, is in the downtown business district near the Washington Avenue Canal. Most of the time, the Canal contains barely any water but during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Canal became a lake, flooding the campus and causing \$100 million in damage. On the other hand, Tulane University and Loyola University of New Orleans are located in New Orleans’ well manicured Garden District on much higher ground.

According to Michael Eric Dyson (2006), the “concentrated poverty [in New Orleans] is the product of decades of public policies and political measures

that isolate black households in neighborhoods plagued by severe segregation and economic hardship” (p. 7). This type of systematic inequity has been in existence since the founding of the United States. The Constitution, in Article I, Section 2, from its ratification in 1789 to the adoption of the 13th Amendment adoption in 1865, counted blacks as $\frac{3}{5}$ (0.6) of a white person for purposes of representation and taxation. According to the National Urban League's 2006 Equality Index, blacks are still far from being on an equal playing field with whites in the United States. Using current data the Equality Index compares conditions between blacks and whites on health, education, economics, social justice, and civic engagement indices. The study found that in 2006 the black index value is 0.73, where white Americans are the control and therefore are valued at an index of 1.0 (Thompson & Parker, 2006).

Like black individuals and families, black colleges, over the course of their existence, have had fewer resources than their historically white counterparts. For example, many white philanthropists and state governments historically have given less to black education, believing black colleges cost less to maintain than their white counterparts. Due to discriminatory employment practices, black alumni had little access to wealth and therefore, less disposable income to contribute to their *alma mater*. As a result, black colleges have smaller endowments and less access to discretionary funds. In the words of Xavier president Norman C. Francis, “We don't have large endowments like our counterparts in the major institutions. The income that some of the other institutions get from their endowments is twice as much as our endowments themselves. And so we can't use endowment money to the extent that they can” (Gordon, 2005, p. 3). Despite these circumstances, black colleges, especially those in New Orleans, have educated a distinguished slate of elected leaders, doctors, lawyers, judges, teachers, and college professors.

Damage Done

Not only were the three historically black colleges hit the hardest in terms of physical damages, but fewer of their students returned when classes reopened, in January 2006, after a semester hiatus. Tulane, a predominantly white university announced that 88 percent of its students returned compared to 75 percent at Xavier. In fact, just recently, Tulane was cited as making the fastest recovery of any college hurt by Hurricane Katrina. Dillard and Southern were able to retain 50 percent and 44 percent of their students respectively. In addition, for Dillard the problem was exacerbated by the fact that the institution was unable to open its campus, instead the institution taught from a hotel.

In addition, none of the black colleges have endowments that come anywhere near Tulane's \$850 million. Moreover, Xavier University faces a public perception that because it is a Catholic college, it receives support from the

Church. Its president is crisscrossing the country, trying to dispel this myth (Goodman, 2005). In order to make ends meet, all three institutions had to terminate employees, even tenured faculty members, a fact that received far less press than the proposed termination of Tulane faculty.

In the post-Katrina period, Southern has adopted an on-line format for most of its classes as most of its campus was destroyed. Traditional classes are being held in 400 trailers, located north of the main campus. Southern University's eleven academic buildings have yet to be gutted and decontaminated; these are on a list of over a 1000 public buildings in need of work. In all likelihood, these structures will not be repaired soon, making the institution the only college in New Orleans that will not be operating on its own campus in the fall of 2006. Faced with vast damage and a meager endowment of only \$2 million, the institution had no choice but to scale down its services. However, some members of Southern University's administration feel that the state board of overseers' decision to cut 19 academic fields after Katrina, including math, English, and physics, went too far. According to Joe Omojola, the former dean of the College of Science, "It is wrong to use the devastation of Hurricane Katrina as a cover to attack an institution at its most vulnerable state" (Mangan, 2006c, p. A31). Omojola is referring to the state's efforts, prior to Katrina, to close Southern in the past due to low graduation rates. The university's transient commuter student population translates into less than desirable graduation rates and these graduation rates lead to questions of accountability.¹ Regardless, Southern University is still offering low-income students a chance for education and producing informed citizens who strengthen the city of New Orleans and beyond.

Given the contributions of these three institutions, it is not sound to abandon them during this time of need. If these black colleges are to survive, they need deeper pockets. In January 2006, President Bush announced a \$200 million relief package for institutions of higher education affected by Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and Mississippi. After a \$10 million allocation to the Department of Education to support colleges throughout the country that accepted displaced students, the remaining \$190 million was split evenly between the two states, regardless of the fact that Louisiana sustained greater damage and had more institutions affected by the storm (Brainard, Burd, Field, & Selingo, 2006). The federal government allowed each state to distribute its share of the higher education allocation. Of the \$95 million distributed to Louisiana, \$75 million will be distributed to both public and private institutions based on full-time enrollment, lost tuition revenue, and the size of their

1. Many of the Southern University students stop in and stop out of the institution, taking classes for professional development or taking a leave until they have additional funds to pay for college.

financial aid budgets. Additionally, \$8.5 million is set aside for incentives to encourage students to return to Louisiana institutions (Mangan, 2006a). In the decision on how to allocate the funds, physical damage incurred by the institution was not considered (Mangan, 2006a).

This distribution, while important to New Orleans's black colleges, is not enough to meet the recovery costs. Black colleges, particularly Xavier and Dillard, are hard pressed to find the money needed to rebuild. In the year 2000, Congress, through the Disaster Mitigation Act, excluded private colleges from FEMA's flood aid program. That decision has left Xavier and Dillard (both private universities), who with tight operational budgets were not able to full insure their campuses, with little to no support for rebuilding infrastructure after Katrina. Other private colleges, such as Tulane, with larger operational budgets and endowments are not affected as much by the Disaster Mitigation Act since they had the resources available to properly insure their campuses.

Are Blacks Helping Their Own?

Some Americans may wonder whether blacks are themselves helping black colleges. The answer is a resounding yes! Although conventional wisdom says that blacks don't give, statistics show that they do and often more generously than whites to the church, education, and health-related programs (Gasman, 2006). According to a recent survey conducted by *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, blacks give 25 percent more of their discretionary income to charity than does the general population. In the case of Hurricane Katrina relief, according to a poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2006), blacks are twice as likely as their white counterparts to be related to or know someone directly affected by Hurricane Katrina. As a result, black giving of time and money has been taking place at an unprecedented rate. Blacks have been opening their homes, donating clothes and food, baby supplies, books to restock libraries, and adopting churches (Perry, 2005). Individual blacks are also giving to mainstream charities such as the American Red Cross.

Many prominent celebrities have been prompted to help as well. Through his foundation, Tom Joyner, gave \$1 million to scholarships for students attending the New Orleans' black colleges. Even rap celebrities such as Ludacris and P. Diddy, traditionally apolitical, have given time and money to Hurricane Katrina victims. Likewise, the Twenty-First Century Foundation, a leading black philanthropy, gave \$200,000 to higher education in New Orleans. Of most significance is the \$2.8 million dollars raised by the United Negro College Fund, specifically for Xavier and Dillard Universities. These funds were garnered through a combination of individual donations and corporate sponsorships.

Lastly, both Howard and Texas Southern Universities, each designated as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), provided a broad range of services to Katrina-displaced students. These institutions offered medical, legal, psychological, and religious support. Both institutions took in great numbers of students, providing a hospitable learning environment to those who had been displaced by the storm.

Who Else Is Giving to New Orleans' Black Colleges?

Many mainstream foundations have given to those HBCUs destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. The Bush Foundation, endowed by 3M Corporation executive Archibald G. Bush, donated \$4 million to Dillard and Xavier and an additional \$1 million to Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi (Bush Foundation, 2006). The Andrew Mellon Foundation gave \$2.8 million through the Southern Education Foundation to Serve Historically Black Colleges and Universities to support private black colleges that absorbed students displaced by the storm. The money was distributed directly to the institutions to help defray the cost of enrolling the additional students (Foundation Center, 2006). In addition to the Mellon Foundation gift, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation donated \$1 million of its total \$1.6 million hurricane relief grants to the Southern Education Foundation to establish a Presidential Leadership Fund for Dillard and Xavier universities. The Fund supports salaries for central administrators, faculty, and staff as well as consulting costs related to the rebuilding each of the devastated campuses (Mott Foundation, 2006). Beyond private foundations, former Presidents George H. W. Bush and William J. Clinton established a joint fund with the United Negro College Fund, Black Entertainment Television (BET), and Jet magazine to support both Dillard and Xavier universities. Presidents Bush and Clinton also announced a grant of \$30 million to all higher education institutions affected by Hurricane Katrina. Xavier, Dillard, and Southern University are likely to receive some of the largest grants of the 30 institutions selected because of a distribution formula that takes into account the extent of damages on each campus.

Perhaps the most interesting and least expected donor to a historically black college is the nation of Qatar. The Muslim monarchy has given \$60 million to Katrina-affected organizations, including a \$17.5 million gift to Xavier. The majority of the gift (\$12.5 million) is to add 60,000 square feet to College of Pharmacy to increase enrollment, with the remaining \$5 million going to scholarships for students affected by Katrina. Qatar decided to give the money directly to organizations rather than through the United States State Department, as it is traditional for foreign governments to do, in order to ensure that the most affected people benefited (Strom, 2006).

The Individual Responsibility of Americans

While there are numerous structural changes that are required in order to fully support black colleges, we offer suggestions for immediate individual-level action. The simple fact is that the majority of the wealth in the United States is controlled by whites. As mentioned earlier, if black colleges typically have small endowments, it is because their alumni do not have the same access to wealth as the white middle class. According to the National Black United Fund, the median income in 2002 for black Americans was \$31,778 compared to \$51,244 for white Americans. Even more importantly, the median net worth (i.e., savings and capital assets) in 2002 for black households was \$5,988. For whites, that figure was \$88,651, almost 15 times higher (NBUF, n.d.). Quite simply, this means that black families alone lack the means to put these black colleges on stable financial footing. Black colleges need the assistance of whites in order to flourish, and all Americans have an obligation to support them.

The United States benefits from black colleges. These institutions have not only produced individuals who have excelled in the arts, sciences, law, medicine, music, and sports, but they continue to graduate educated citizens who contribute to our economy and to the fundamental values of our nation (see Appendix). For centuries, blacks have served the country, providing both paid and unpaid labor. It is time for the United States to pay back our debt to blacks and we can do so, in part, by supporting black colleges, those ravaged by Hurricane Katrina and those in our own state and local communities. How? We suggest several ways:

1. Give to the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). This organization was created by blacks to support black higher education. Since 1944, the UNCF has provided scholarships and operating funds for black colleges.
2. Give to the Thurgood Marshall Fund. This organization supports the nation's public black colleges—Southern University included. It acts in much the same way the UNCF does—providing scholarships and funding to member colleges.
3. Give to the individual colleges affected by Hurricane Katrina. All of these institutions are in great need and make it easy to give to their institutions via the Internet.
4. Give to your local private and public black colleges. There are 103 historically black colleges in the United States, most are located in Southern and border states. Giving to these institutions will help to stabilize them, helping them to be prepared when faced with disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.

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Appendix

Prominent Graduates of Xavier, Dillard and Southern

Xavier University of Louisiana

Bernard Randolph, four-star general, U.S. Air Force

Alexis Herman, U.S. Secretary of Labor

Regina Benjamin, first African-American woman named to the American Medical Association's Board of Trustees

Dillard University

Ruth Simmons, President of Brown University and first African-American president of an Ivy League institution

Ellis Marsalis, Jazz musician

Billy Ray Hobley, Harlem Globetrotter

Bishop Alfred Norris, United Methodist Church

Andrew Young, Jr., Civil rights activist and politician, former mayor of Atlanta, first African-American U.S. ambassador to the United Nations

Southern University at New Orleans

Michael Bruno, owner, largest black-owned CPA firm

Elton Lawson, obstetrician and gynecologist