

# THE LOGIC OF HEART: REMEMBERING HURRICANE KATRINA

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Synchronicity, when multiple events converge to create meaning, is amazing when it happens. As dean of the College of Education at LSU during the events that occurred leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina, I was wrapped in the maelstrom of the aftermath of Katrina in ways that would impact my life and leadership for the rest of my career.

But the synchronicity of events had nothing to do with Katrina, at least not directly. Almost 15 years after Katrina reshaped the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coast, I received a request for two of the articles I had written (Fleener, Jewett, Smolen, & Carson, 2011; Fleener, Willis, Brun, Hebert, & 2007) about our efforts to support afterschool activities for children and families living in a FEMA trailer park after Katrina through a three-year-long service-learning project. As I looked through my files and had our graduate assistants try to find copies of the articles to send to the person requesting them, I found a powerpoint presentation I did in January of 2007. The powerful images and presentation of activities we were involved in brought back a flood of memories and feelings that put in context the 10 years that followed in which I served as a dean at LSU and another southern university.

To add to this synchronicity, I was teaching a “reflective practice” class for doctoral students in an adult learning Ph.D. program and a class in organizational theory in an the EdD program that focused on preparing community college leaders. The Ph.D. class had as an assignment a *currere* project; the EdD class had an institutional logics assignment to evaluate complex organizational dynamics. I decided my video of the events and activities post-Katrina would make the perfect case study model for both classes.

I was amazed as I presented the cases in the classes, each with its specific twist, that the emotions I was feeling were still so strong and vivid. The emotions were not about the events of the aftermath of the hurricane, but my intense desire to help my current students understand the impact those events had on entire communities and the lessons that could be learned from them. The lessons learned were too important to be forgotten and pointed to a way of thinking that is important for creating more caring futures. This was my motivation for writing this *currere* exploration.

## REMEMBRANCE

*We lost electricity around 5:30 a.m. on August 29, 2005. It was a Monday morning. The wind was whipping the trees, making them dance, as we quietly read and waited. I had my Blackberry cell phone, the most advanced cell phone at the time, and called or texted a few of our new faculty to make sure they were okay. Without electricity, the landlines were useless and, at the time, not everyone had cell phones. I remember feeling very isolated and glad for the online company as we addressed our life challenges of extreme heat, melting ice reserves in our ice chests, lack of generator power, and the need to cook whatever might spoil in the refrigerator on the gas grill out back. While we were well provisioned, I was thankful that the neighbors had some ice blocks in their freezer that they shared with us after a few days.*

*I don't recall how I heard, but upper-level administrators were told to try to get to campus by Wednesday. By then, the roads were cleared enough to make it to*

*campus in Baton Rouge even though there was still no electricity for the stop lights. After two days in the heat with no electricity, I was looking forward to getting into the air conditioning. LSU had its own power plant, so I was anticipating a few hours of relief from the heat and some cool water. And I had that darn NCATE report to work on. It took a long time to get to campus on Wednesday—the usual 15-minute drive took over an hour that day and for many months to come. Baton Rouge had doubled in size over night.*

*As I got to campus, I began to understand the extent of damage to New Orleans. There had been no news out of New Orleans, so we did not know that the levees had failed nor about the human tragedy we were about to become a part of. Even though the university was officially closed, we were told to send students to the Pete Maravich (PMAC) basketball arena to volunteer and to enroll any students from the New Orleans universities who walked through our doors without worrying about traditional protocols and transcripts. Campus was closed for the next two weeks, but it became a hub of activity and center for communications for South Louisiana.*

*My Associate Dean, Patty, and I half-heartedly worked on our NCATE report, listening for students to come through the front door to the back-drop of helicopters landing down the hill at the track and ambulances taking off from the PMAC to downtown. We were told, “serve human needs first,” the chancellor, Sean O’Keefe, making it clear that we were to eliminate all red tape, break the rules if necessary, and think creatively to solve problems as they occurred. It was hard to concentrate on anything as the continuous sounds of helicopters overhead and ambulances taking off from the track were constant reminders of the activity and response occurring down the hill from us. The sirens heightened and foreshadowed all of our fears, uncertainties, and the unknown of what was yet to come.*

Over the following 10 days, LSU operated an 800-bed field hospital for those who were most critical and triaged over 15,000 evacuees. We converted several facilities across campus to support the largest acute-care field hospital ever in U.S. history. LSU became the site of the largest deployment of public health officials while coordinating with and supporting DHH, FEMA, U.S. Public Health Service, CDC, LSU Health Sciences, State emergency response teams, the U.S. Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, National Guard, Navy, Marines, and volunteers (LSU, 2006). Over 3,000 faculty, students, and staff volunteered, requiring another level of response. In addition to our dorms housing students and their families and friends, over 800 mattresses and 100 computers were donated to convert office buildings and any spaces that had shower facilities into temporary housing for the many emergency response personnel requiring food and shelter. The LSU Vet school housed and eventually found homes for 1,300 pets (LSU, 2006).

Everyone in Baton Rouge also took in volunteers and displaced families. Over the next two months, my house became a second home to my friends from New Orleans, my housekeeper and her family, who were without electricity for over a month, and six International Rescue Committee volunteers arriving from Pakistan to support recovery efforts.

*What I remember most was the heat. It was so hot and humid in the days and weeks after the hurricane. I was glad I had done laundry before the hurricane because it was hard to stay in clean and dry clothing. Body odor became a new social norm.*

*Power was out in most places, and there was very little reliable information about what was going on both in New Orleans and in our own downtown River Center where many of the evacuees and their families were being taken. We kept hearing rumors of violence and desperation, especially at the Superdome in New Orleans and the River Center in Baton Rouge. What we didn't hear was that 80% of New Orleans had flooded or that all but one building in Chalmette had taken on water while the St. Bernard Parish school superintendent ran her own command post from the second floor of the flooded high school. I don't remember getting any information from TV or the radio. That seems so strange now, with cell phones and social media, where even when the electricity is out you can share on social media real-time experiences. It seems so long ago that, without electricity, there really were no communications with the outside world.*

In the immediacy of response, the foundations were laid that would define our efforts for the next three years. I received a call requesting that we send some of our kinesiology students and faculty to the River Center to work with the kids who had been traumatized by their experiences of death, flooding, and evacuation. Could we send our students to get the kids up and moving, involved in physical and mental activities? My faculty stepped up.

The next request was to help with setting up a school and using donated computers on the cruise ships in New Orleans that were housing the families of the first responders. Partners from UC Berkley were working to set up internet access so their students in California could tutor and counsel students who might spend the next year without a school to go to. Apparently New Orleans did not get the same memo we did about cutting red tape as efforts to set up the internet met obstacles at every turn. This would not be the last time we had challenges with red tape.

As waters receded, we were asked to go to schools in Lakeview and New Orleans East to see if we could help reopen them for students who might be returning to the area. The New Orleans schools had been taken over by the state before Katrina, so what had been public school systems were now independent agents, and administrators were very interested in having our College of Education take them over as charters.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) left one natural disaster in Pakistan to work with recovery efforts in Louisiana later in October. IRC members commented how this first experience in the U.S., as opposed to responding to natural disasters overseas, was their most difficult with obstacles and resistance to their help from bureaucratic red tape. For example, working with our students and community leaders to survey the needs of churches and other pop-up shelters for evacuees, they were met with resistance from the Red Cross and governmental agencies who wanted to close down these smaller places of refuge to consolidate evacuees into larger FEMA run and Red Cross supported shelters.

As smaller shelters were denied resources and support, the Renaissance Village (RV) opened (see picture below). With close to 600 trailers at its peak (Seabrook, 2008), the RV was the largest evacuation trailer park created by FEMA to shelter victims of Hurricane Katrina. By the end of October 2005, there were approximately 2,500 individuals living in small FEMA trailers in the middle of a field in Baker, LA, approximately 10 miles north of Baton Rouge. The trailer park became a central part of my activities from October 2005 through June 2008 when it closed.



*Figure 1: Picture of Renaissance FEMA Trailer Park, Baker, LA*  
Photo by: Patrick Salisbury (2008)

We began coordinating and training student volunteers through a service-learning class designed to prepare our students to work with “children in crisis.” Run as a funded program through a variety of sources including private donations and small grants, Delta Express, as we became known, worked with numerous partners to provide after-school services for students and families. Initially, we had planned to open a school at the RV, but there was a law that said there could be no schools in Louisiana that had a disproportionate number of homeless children, and all of our children were considered homeless. Then there was the challenge of having facilities donated and paid for by the Rosie O’Donnell foundation that FEMA would not let us use for almost six months until legal liabilities could be figured out. As described by NBC reporters Cynthia McFadden and Sarah Rosenberg, “The ‘Rosie’ trailers came to be seen as a perfect little picture of the big FEMA problem: an overwhelmed bureaucracy unable to untangle itself enough to make even simple things work” (McFadden & Rosenberg, 2006). Using tents and trailers, we collaborated with other RV partners to provide social, psychological, and educational services such as art-therapy, kids-with-cameras, mentoring, eco-art, oral history projects, journaling, after school tutoring, educational games, computer tutoring, and physical activity. Until the family services area sponsored by the O’Donnell foundation was opened, all of our activities took place in the tents and on concrete streets. The only thing that even began to approach an exercise facility was a single basketball hoop put up next to the activities tent.

### THE PROGRESSIVE

As I reflect, I can’t help but think about how my experiences and understandings as a dean were shaped by who I became in August 2005. As Chancellor O’Keefe emphasized, people first. As I have transitioned after 17 years as a dean to being a faculty member, and as I look to the last years of my professional academic life, I continue to believe this mantra and am driven by it.

Putting people first is not the best way to operate as a dean, however. I remember the times when HR (Human Resources) or our legal team advised me to work against this instinct in support of the institution. It is very hard to be so legalistic that you can’t

tell someone you're sorry or that you don't have their best interests at heart because you must put the institution over the person.

Now, as a faculty member, I have regained my humanity and work toward the fulfillment of this important lesson-learned—that you have to sometimes break rules and overlook difference to meet people where they are in order to help them. That working for the concomitant good releases positive energy that creates better futures for everyone. And that you can't treat people's brains without feeding their bodies and souls.

So I now get to work with students and faculty colleagues again. But even more importantly, I get to work toward creating communities of the future (Smyre & Richardson, 2016) with a heart. I have to wonder what has happened to higher education that, in order to work for the system, you become so trapped by the needs to maintain it that you must lose your own humanity. This question will continue to frame this inquiry into the case of LSU in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The lessons learned with Katrina have import beyond crisis management or long-term crisis support but speak to the very purpose and soul of higher education. The hope for the future is that higher education, especially public universities and colleges, can reconnect with our mission of serving our publics with honor, integrity, hope, and care for the concomitant good.

#### THE ANALYTICAL

In analyzing the LSU response to Hurricane Katrina, both in the immediate aftermath and over the longer-term commitment to the Renaissance Village partnerships, institutional logics (Thornton Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012) and neo-institutional theory (Friedland & Alford, 1991) provide a framework for understanding the complexity of responses and needs from mind, heart, and gut perspectives (Fleener, 2002; Fleener & Irvine, 2019). Using institutional logics framing, the case of LSU and how we responded to the aftermath of social, emotional, and physical devastation also provides insights for higher education futures.

*I remember the first day the school buses came to the RV trailer park. We weren't even sure how many students there were in the village. With 600 trailers at capacity, we anticipated several hundred students were now residing in this encampment surrounded by wire fences, so when the buses first pulled up, we expected at least 100 students would be boarding to go to their new schools in Baton Rouge. We were surprised when only 35 students showed up. Working with our partners, we tried to find out why students were not going to school and found out the parents had been told they could not get on the buses with their children to go to the schools to help enroll them. Since for many of them their last ride on a bus was to be plucked off of levees or from the Superdome in New Orleans without knowing where they were being taken and because many of the children were still experiencing separation anxiety and trauma from the events of Katrina, we could understand why parents didn't want their children getting on a bus and being taken to places unknown. Why, we asked, couldn't the schools suspend their "no parents on buses" policy in this case?*

Analyzing this and the many other situations we faced from an institutional logics perspective shows the multiple levels and dimensions of the complex challenges faced in the aftermath. The institutional logics framework delineates many of the contextual, social, cultural, organizational and ethical challenges we faced at the Macro, Meso and Micro levels.

At the Macro level, there were policies, politics, legalities, and bureaucracies with their red tape that created challenges and worked against putting people first. There were expectations about what universities were supposed to be and do that were disrupted as we became a communications hub and critical care emergency hospital. The no-parents-on-buses policy was one example, but there were so many. As another example, FEMA policies on proof of property ownership were problematic not only because much of the proof was swept away by the floods, but also because chain of ownership in neighborhoods like the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward was not clear. Families often lived in grandmother's house or an aunt or uncle's house, so it was not easy to prove family ownership. This is one reason that, even now, much of the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward has not been rebuilt.

Another example of Macro level politics occurred with setting up the RV education and family services center, as described earlier. Rosie O'Donnell donated double-wide trailers and built a state-of-the-art playground to create a place where children and their parents could go for tutoring, counseling, educational services, and support navigating the bureaucracies of applying for social services, permanent housing, and schooling. Although the facilities were built and ready for use by December 2005, we could only look through the wire fence at them as it would be almost another six months before they could be used. FEMA had leased the land for the RV park and didn't feel the family services facilities was appropriate under their mission to provide temporary housing for displaced families. It took months to untangle the legal challenges of unleasing a portion of the land from FEMA and leasing it to the family services facilities. These were similar challenges that we faced in New Orleans as our partners at UC Berkeley attempted to create internet access for the children of first responders living on the cruise ships in New Orleans.

What is noteworthy about the analytical framing of institutional logics is the impact of the heart and gut responses to the crises. While most of the "mind-centered" approaches were obstacles driven by policies and bureaucracies that prevented thinking outside of the box, it was in the heart and gut responses where innovation and care emerged. The heart and gut responses maintained and supported the human and ethical responses important to an ethic of care that puts people first.

Neuroscience supports the idea that beyond our traditional ways of thinking about learning and knowing, complex, functional neural networks (brains) exist in our heart and our gut as well as the organ we call the mind (Cooper, 2001; Soosalu, Henwood, & Deo, 2019). Analyzing across the Macro, Meso and Micro levels of organizational complexity using the three-brains perspective of learning provides a useful dimension for understanding the context of the LSU response during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Research studies have used three-brain ideas to explore leadership (Dotlich, Cairo, & Rhinesmith, 2010), individual growth (Cooper, 2001), and leadership development (Soosalu & Oka, 2012).

While mind-structures are rules, policies, hierarchies, legislative mandates, and legal constraints, heart responses are driven by individual needs and collective care. When one responds through the heart, the response is driven by a desire to "do the right thing" or to demonstrate care and concern for people. Heart-knowing is emotive and connected and driven by values and ethics. Even at the macro levels, a heart response meets the needs of the individual or institution that are unique and often unexpected. Heart responses are more contextually driven and support decision making in unique situations.

The gut responses, like the neurophysiology of our own guts, is associated with movement, action, and a different kind of structure than the mind structure. While the

gut has a clear structural relationship with keeping the body healthy through digestive and elimination processes, the action of digestion and elimination for the health of the system are the foci. From an organizational perspective, the gut dimension includes the structures that make things happen, that keep things moving, and that respond to consumption by extracting nutrients and eliminating waste. The gut response, like the heart response, is situational and contextual, and while structures support the response, they do not dictate the response. As described by Heifetz and Linsky (2004),

solutions to technical problems lie in the head and solving them requires intellect and logic. *Solutions to adaptive problems lie in the stomach and the heart and rely on changing peoples' beliefs, habits, ways of working or ways of life.* (p. 35, emphasis added)

Addressing the challenges of setting up the Family Education and Services Center required legal and political action. Suspending the no-parents-on-buses policy would be a heart practice, driven by meeting the needs of individuals and doing the “right thing” rather than following the rules. Registering displaced students without the need for transcripts or developing partnerships with UC Berkeley, Big Brother, The Community Initiative Foundation of Baton Rouge, Americorps, among others, was a gut response, providing for adaptive response and creation of structures to meet the needs of the families and children in the RV village.

Thinking about organizational complexity from an institutional logics perspective that captures the levels of organizational existence and the dimensions of three-brains knowing helps untangle the challenges of higher education and support the heart and gut responses that think of people first and break the rules to meet their needs.

Level	Org. Features	Mind/Structure	Heart/Practices	Gut/Acion
L6 Macro	Societal/ Community Level – Education as a Social Structure	Legal and social expectations and support for higher education	Desire to help educate kids and support families	Resources for response to needs such as the Rose Education Center; External partnerships such as Big Brothers, IRC, Americorps
L5	Institutional Level – Higher Education Sector	Existing HE facilities and capacities (e.g., technology, communications, human resources)	Fund raising across institutions (e.g., Virginia Tech. raising and presenting a check for \$20K at first LSU football game post-Katrina) to support LSU students displaced by hurricanes	Work across institutions, e.g., accommodating students by registering them without need for transcripts
L4 Meso	Organizational Level – Public Research Carnegie I Institution Context	LSU-specific infrastructure e.g. communications, technology, buildings	Focus on “People first”	Culture of “all- hands-on-deck”

L3	Institutional Level – LSU Baton Rouge Campus	Existing policies, rules, hierarchies, and bureaucracies; Service-learning classes developed	LSU student studies of children in crisis; students and faculty volunteering time to work with families and kids at the RV	Funding for RV activities; development of service learning classes and providing money to hire staff for coordinating RV efforts
L2 Micro	Individual Level – capabilities & motivations	Tutoring, Case Management	Students and faculty stepping up to work with RV after-school and programming; creative approaches to helping kids	Consistent and long-term presence (“Are you going to be here next week?”)
L1	Individual Level – cognitions, mental models, constructs & values	Educational Games, Activities in Playground	Art Therapy; Kids with Cameras	Service Learning Student-to-Student

Figure 2: Institutional Logics Analysis of Katrina Response & Three-Brains Approach

**THE SYNTHESIS**

As I enter the final years as an academic, I have the luxury of being able to think about what’s next. I also have the perspective to think about what has been and how we got to where we are. Where we are, in higher education, is a reflection of our society with its backlash of neoliberal emphasis on instrumentality, pragmatics, legal conservatism, and production. At many institutions, tenured faculty are becoming an endangered species, and administration celebrates the demise of the tenured-faculty-member-dinosaur. And maybe that is deserved as we have shifted away from our commitments to meeting the needs of our students and our communities. But at the same time, those of us who endeavor to work across institutional boundaries to support communities and work for the concomitant good are discouraged from this work unless it can produce external funding. We, as faculty, seem to exist to feed the institution rather than vice versa.

Why did it take a disaster like Hurricane Katrina for us to realize our true purpose? How do we hold on to the ideas that we should eliminate red tape, break the rules if necessary, and think creatively to solve problems as they occur?

As I consider institutional futures, the strict hierarchies that dominate higher education will eventually collapse under their own weight of sterility and uncaring objectivity in how we treat each other and how we interact in the world. Faculty incivility and discontent has reached extreme levels, making a career as an academic more and more unfavorable. Many of the most creative scholars no longer choose careers in higher education.

My *currere* experience of our institutional and collective responses to Hurricane Katrina can help us understand the importance of taking care of people first and bending the rules when necessary. This means reconsidering the rules and bureaucracies to embrace the heart and gut of ethical, caring, and coordinated action. I hope my students remember from my lessons on Katrina the importance of heart and gut knowings as drivers for doing the right thing to support each other in caring and loving ways.



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