

The Sloan Semester Brought An Academic Lifeline to Hurricane-Affected Students, But Not Without Its Set of Challenges and Lessons Learned for the Future of Higher Ed Disaster Preparedness

Hurricane Katrina has become a lesson for our nation’s disaster preparedness capabilities, as well as for the higher education distance learning community. One question being discussed among educators with more intensity today than in past years revolves around whether the higher education distance learning community can organize emergency education plans that would enable students to continue their education if another disaster (natural or otherwise) ultimately closed down their institutions, over the short-term or long-term, as did Hurricane Katrina.

The Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) initiative that came to the aid of the 2005 hurricane-affected higher education students — called the “Sloan Semester” — is an excellent case in point to understand how higher education can possibly react to disaster in the future. By taking a close look at what actually happened during the Sloan Semester, and at the lessons learned, the higher education distance learning community can gain insight into the necessary steps to take in order to keep students actively engaged in their educational pursuits when and if the next disaster hits.

How the Sloan Semester Started

From an historical perspective concerning higher education disaster preparedness plans, in general, Ray Schroeder, director of the Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning at the University of Illinois at Springfield, and an active member of Sloan-C, had created a disaster preparedness plan for the University of Illinois system in 2004. In that plan, Schroeder noted that a disaster-related business-continuation plan with distance education components was not without precedent. In 2003, for instance, the University of Hong Kong shifted to distance learning solutions to keep its university community active when the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

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epidemic temporarily closed it down.

Much sooner than anyone had expected, Schroeder’s ideas became part of the framework for the beginning of the Sloan Semester, which jump started on the morning of August 31, when the world became aware of the devastation caused by the category 4 to 5 hurricane that had made landfall in New Orleans only a few days earlier and ultimately resulted in levee failures. The flooding temporarily shut down Delgado Community College, the University of New Orleans, Xavier University, Tulane University, Southern University at New Orleans, Loyola University, parts of the Louisiana Technical College System, and a number of other colleges and universities located primarily in the southeastern part of Louisiana.

Immediately upon hearing this news, Sloan-C Board of Directors member and University of Illinois Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs Burks Oakley contacted Sloan-C. Soon afterwards, Sloan-C president and Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Program Director Frank Mayadas formed the Sloan Semester Steering Committee, comprised of eight administrative members representing Sloan-C and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). Mayadas also contacted Ralph Gomory, president of the Sloan Foundation, who took the necessary steps to secure funding for the Sloan Semester.

As early as noon on August 31, Oakley, with the help of steering committee members Bruce Chaloux, director of the SREB’s Electronic Campus; John

Bourne, Sloan-C executive director; and Mayadas, drafted an emergency Asynchronous Learning Network (ALN) proposal to aid hurricane-affected students. The proposal was immediately submitted to the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation’s Executive Committee and, within 48 hours, the Foundation allocated \$1.1 million dollars for the Sloan Semester.

Bridge Concept

The Sloan Semester was created to meet the needs and concerns of those students who were suddenly thrust into a situation in which they could not take the Fall courses they had already paid for at their home institutions, which had closed down for an undetermined period of time.

Hurricane-affected students were given the opportunity to enroll in Sloan Semester courses at no tuition cost to them. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation subsidized the cost by providing grants to the providing institutions in the form of \$2,500 for 11 or more student enrollments per section, \$1,500 for six to 10 enrollments per section, \$1,000 for three to five enrollments per section, and \$500 for one or two enrollments per section. The grant process was managed by Sloan-C.

The Sloan Semester courses began on October 10, 2005 and ended on January 6, 2006. In the end, the Sloan Semester offered 1,345 no-cost, fully online, regionally accredited, accelerated courses from 153 Sloan-C institutions. It enrolled more than 1,700 hurricane-affected students, filling more than 3,000 seats in undergraduate- and graduate-level courses.

The emphasis and focus was on helping students continue to earn some credits during the Fall 2005 term and then return back to their home institutions during the following 2006 term. This was considered a “bridge” concept, whereby students were given guest access to the Sloan Semester courses they desired to take. These Sloan Semester students were not considered fully matriculated at the institutions that provided the courses.

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Building A Make-Shift Semester

To set the Sloan Semester in full motion took a formidable effort by a group of dedicated people, who were dispersed, working out of Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Illinois, Tennessee, New York, and elsewhere across the country. This group managed to team up effectively and produce positive results, conducting business in an organized fashion from start to finish, primarily by electronic means, via e-mail, instant messaging, and through listservs, teleconferences and web conferences. They also posted information to share with each other on web pages they created in short order. The group built the Sloan Semester “on the fly” in record time.

The Sloan Semester was achieved by integrating the SREB Electronic Campus model and services with the Sloan-C ALN infrastructure. The Electronic Campus is a marketplace and web portal to online courses and programs offered by colleges and universities located mostly in the southern United States. The SREB infrastructure became the online backbone for Sloan Semester students to find and register for a wide variety of Sloan Semester courses that interested them. Sloan-C is a large consortium of institutions and organizations committed to

online education. It provided experienced leadership, connections with first-class online education providers, and communication vehicles and support services for getting the Sloan Semester off the ground and running.

Before the Sloan Semester could be fully put in place, a good number of policies, ground rules, and responsibilities for provider institutions, students, SREB and Sloan-C were created by the Sloan Semester Steering Committee. These policies, ground rules, and responsibilities took on a life of their own as the Sloan Semester progressed. What follows is a condensed snapshot version of how things panned out and what lessons were learned.

First Orders of Business

One of Sloan-C’s first orders of business was to build a robust website and information system that had the three-fold purpose of finding hurricane-impacted students, recruiting institutional providers, and facilitating a student academic and financial-aid advising service. First-draft procedures for the review, approval, and authorization of institutions and courses to be offered by the Sloan Semester were established in very quick order.

Getting Online

In about five days, a sloansemester.org website was published. This website enabled prospective students and pro-

spective providers to submit information to Sloan Semester administrators by filling out online forms. Providers were submitting information about their courses for eventual Sloan-C approval, and students were providing their contact information, along with the courses they were interested in taking.

Back-End Infrastructure and Support

In addition to building this public website, Sloan-C created several private websites and listservs for disseminating more specific information utilized for communicating with prospective providers, as well as for communicating with a vital group of academic and financial advisor volunteers that Sloan-C had recruited and put in place to assist prospective students.

Back-end web-based databases that were already in place inside the Sloan-C infrastructure collected all the provider and student information needed during the very early phase of the Sloan Semester development cycle. In addition, Sloan-C was analyzing all the results of this data, attempting to match the students’ needs with the network of Sloan-C institutions that could fill those needs with the appropriate online courses.

Promotional Challenge

Getting both institutional providers and prospective students aware of the Sloan Semester was another part of this effort that took some quick thinking and rapid implementation. The Sloan-C staff, with the help of a professional media relations strategist, quickly developed a strategic plan to reach displaced students and their parents. Promotional efforts included press releases, a radio tour, outreach efforts to higher education audiences, outreach to regionally-based news reporters, Internet-based public service announcements, e-mail-based marketing, posts to message boards and listservs, and print advertising.

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Integrating with Catalogue and Registration System

The next step was to integrate all this information with SREB's Electronic Campus infrastructure, which was modified to take on the Sloan Semester online catalogue and student registration processes.

About one week after the sloansemester.org website went live, the process model shifted. Provider institutions were given login access to an SREB online course data entry (CDE) system for submitting pre-approved course information. Upon review by SREB, courses that were accepted into the Semester offerings were listed in an online catalogue that was in a holding pattern. In effect, the system was building a searchable directory of fully online, regionally accredited courses that would be combined with a streamlined online registration and admissions process. The registration/admissions system was called the Visiting Electronic Student Authorization (VESA), and it was built through a business relationship SREB had with XAP Corporation - an electronic and Internet-based information management systems provider for college-bound students — which provided the VESA service at no charge for the Sloan Semester.

The entire online catalogue/registration system went live on September 15. On that date, when students visited sloansemester.org website they could link into the system, find the courses they wanted to enroll in, and pre-register for such courses by filling out the VESA form.

In addition to building an effective online catalogue/registration system, a mass e-mail communication process was created for ongoing announcements and updates to students, institutional providers, and Sloan-C advisors.

Securely Transferring and Reporting Data

Once a student properly filled out his or her VESA form and registered for a course, the provider institution was notified by e-mail. The provider institution registrar would go to a secure VESA.SREB website in order to access each student's VESA file and then

process that information into their own registration system. To manage the ebb and flow of all this data, SREB also built a data collection reporting system that would give the Steering Committee real-time information regarding what courses were being filled by whom, what kind of courses might still be needed by students, and which providers might be able to fulfill that need.

Advisors Play Key Role

Just prior to the catalogue/registration system going live, a volunteer student advisement team, comprised of 41 experienced student advisors from across the country, was put into place. In addition to communicating with prospective students via e-mail and telephone, this team created an effective online FAQ section for students that became an extremely important feature of the Sloan Semester website.

Snafus, Challenges and Problems Starting with VESA Processing

Inevitably there were snafus and challenges that occurred as the processing of VESAs took place. For one, some institutions did not react in a timely fashion after they received notification of prospective incoming students, leaving some students in limbo, wondering if, in fact, that had been officially enrolled. Additionally, some of the institutions batch processed their incoming VESAs, sending out mass e-mails to prospective enrollees that never made it to their intended destinations because they were stopped by spam filters.

In short, some provider institutions were well prepared for an influx of student VESAs while others were not. Consequently, SREB and Sloan-C personnel were getting inundated with phone calls and e-mails from students seeking their enrollment status.

An Overabundance of Drops and Adds

Another challenge came in the form of students changing their minds, dropping and adding courses as new ones continued to become available via the online searchable directory of courses. Other students completely dropped out as they came to the realization that taking a course would be too much of a challenge

as they tried to cope with the immediacy of their uprooted lives.

Unappreciative Institutions

Perhaps even more disheartening was that there were some hurricane-impacted institutions that did not appreciate the Sloan Semester as they discussed the possibility of mounting their own mini semester to recover lost tuition dollars (which they never accomplished). These institutions were not amenable to accepting Sloan Semester credit. When students got wind of this non-transferability issue, they dropped out of the Sloan Semester courses they had enrolled in.

Too Many Options

At full capacity the online catalogue had too many similar courses made available. This caused students to register for classes across multiple sections, resulting in low enrollments in certain courses, which, in turn, resulted in some courses being cancelled. This caused a good deal of additional, and unnecessary, work for Sloan Semester personnel who had to scramble to help students get into equivalent courses in a timely fashion.

Textbook Problems

Another challenge came to the forefront when it became evident that the cost of books was not being covered by the Sloan Semester, forcing some students, who were already in dire financial condition due to the hurricane, to not consider enrolling in, or eventually dropping out of, Sloan Semester courses. Additionally, some students enrolled in courses at the last minute and were not able to obtain textbooks in time for their first week of important assignments. These were unfortunate oversights that, in retrospect, would need to be corrected in any future disaster-preparedness planning initiatives.

PR problem

Finally, while more than 90 percent of the Sloan Semester public relations and advertising strategies worked extremely well at getting the word out, the decision to invest dollars in a relatively large print-advertising campaign, whereby ads were placed in more than 70 State of Louisiana community and weekly newspapers and

10 major city daily newspapers in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, turned out to be an ineffective strategy.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the Sloan Semester was an extraordinary success achieved under difficult circumstances in record time. The academic community stepped up to a challenge, with numerous volunteers working overtime under a clear focus and driving force of knowing that they were helping students in need.

Overall, any future emergency planning and business-continuation initiatives must consider that it takes both a sophisticated information technology and communications back-up system, along with a strong academic plan, comprised of highly organized faculty, administrative and student-services components, to face the possibility of any future disaster that could force an institution to close its doors.

Additional Resources:

For more information about the Sloan Semester, including results from a study of characteristics of Sloan Semester students and providers, news stories about the Sloan Semester, and more, please visit <http://www.sloan-c.org/sloansemester/index.asp>.

In addition, a detailed case study about the Sloan Semester, written by George Lorenzo, featuring interviews and quotations from the Sloan Semester staff, as well as from students and faculty from impacted institutions, is currently in press for the Fall 2006 issue of the Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, located online at <http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/jaln/index.asp>.

Sloan Semester Postscript

Sloan-C Steering Committee members Burks Oakley and Bruce Chaloux developed a presentation based on their experiences dealing with the Sloan Semester, called a “Sloan Semester Postscript: Lessons Learned. . . Now What?”

Here is a condensed version of that presentation that outlines some of the important strategies that the higher education community should consider in preparation for the next, and inevitable, disaster.

1. Develop an Academic Emergency Plan as You Develop Your Facility Plan.

In other words, yes, institutions must obviously have a technology-oriented systems insurance and recovery plan in place in the event of a disaster, but if an institution wants students to continue with coursework, an emergency academic plan, with distance education provisions readily made available to students, should also be solidly in place and ready to go live in short order. Online learning offerings can be a key component of such a plan.

2. Establish and Have Ready Online Repositories of Courses.

The SREB Electronic Campus as well as the Sloan-C catalogue of online degrees and courses are great places to start building agreements with outside institutions for ultimately constructing a repository of online courses that can be at-the-ready when necessary.

3. Develop a Plan for Re-establishing Institutional Websites Fast.

Their home institution website was the first place hurricane-affected students went to when seeking out more information, especially since phone lines were down or clogged for a good period of time. Unfortunately, most websites were completely down during the first few days of the disaster. Therefore, establishing an emergency back-up website, in particular for disseminating important information to students, faculty and staff, is vitally important.

4. Develop a Set of Guiding Policies and Obtain Policy Commitments.

Tuition and fees, financial aid, academic advisement, registration and admissions processes, and transfer of credit outcomes are all issues that need to have specific policies and procedures attached to them in order to facilitate an overall smooth operation.

5. Design an Academic Buddy System

Investigate ways in which your institution can partner with another institution to formulate a kind of academic “buddy system”, in which student services support systems, faculty, and IT infrastructure backup can be implemented by such partner in the event of a disaster. It is also good practice to always keep the communication lines open with online learning support organizations such as Sloan-C, NUTN and ADEC.

6. Don't Hide It

Once an institution has developed a disaster-recovery/business continuation plan, they need to make it known to their faculty, staff, administrators, students and local community and review and revise it on a regular basis.