Institutional Continuity and Distance Learning: A Symbiotic Relationship

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Abstract

Universities and colleges have been developing institutional continuity plans to protect their ability to function within an environment of increasing uncertainties caused by natural and man-made disasters and events. Within the academic context, distance learning strategies have emerged as critical components for program continuity. This research reviews the strategies and tactics of online learning in institutional continuity planning and preparation. In addition, the necessities of institutional continuity create an important and symbiotic opportunity for faculty training and the integration of distance learning within the fabric of the academic mission of an institution.

Introduction

Institutional continuity has long been a concern of organizations and communities in crisis. History is replete with examples of instances of success and failures of communities and institutions to effectively respond to disaster situations. For example, most of the residents of Pompeii escaped the ravages of an erupting Vesuvius because the city's leaders organized a mass evacuation. The annual floods of the Nile in ancient Egypt were controlled by a flood control system implemented by Amennemhet III. In more modern times, the development of community fire departments reflected the concerns for disaster planning and response. The Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950 sparked community-wide preparations for community survival and continuity in the case of natural or man-made disasters (Coppola, 2011).

The analysis of the demand-adjustment process between an institution and a crisis event is a frequent topic of sociological concern. Boom towns, resort communities and communities facing annual disaster events dominated much of sociological literature in the 1950s and 1960s (Bates, 1976). In response to crisis situations, individuals, organizations and societies make attempts to minimize the consequences of crisis events, including disasters. Specifically, they develop a variety of measures which address the initial impact, as well as effective post-disaster response and recovery strategies. In time, successful crisis management strategies and practices merged into the tactics and techniques of disaster management (Quarantelli, 1999).

The motivating concepts that guide disaster management are: (1) the prediction and prevention of disasters; (2) the reduction of harm to life, property and the environment; (3) the minimization of the economic costs of disasters; and (4) the identification of the causes of disasters. Thus, modern disaster management is based upon a four-phase approach. These phases include disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. Mitigation involves the reduction or elimination of a disaster threat (FEMA, 2012). Disaster preparedness involves providing victims who may be impacted by a disaster with the resources necessary to improve their chances of survival and to minimize their financial or other losses. Disaster response involves those actions taken to minimize the impact of a disaster and recovery involves returning the lives of the victims, organizations or communities back to a normal, pre-disaster condition (Coppola, 2011).

Though most major institutions have developed crisis management strategies, it was the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that provided the impetus for institutional continuity planning in higher education. Tulane University, the University of New Orleans, Xavier, Dillard, Southern and LSU-New Orleans experienced severe damage and dislocation of students and services for many months. Approximately 30 institutions of higher education and over 100,000 post-secondary students experienced extensive losses and disruption of their educational programs as a consequence of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (Mercer, 2005). For example, three of the major Black institutions experienced more than $850 million in damages (JBHE, 2013). With such extensive and wide-spread losses, higher education became an active participant in institutional continuity planning and preparation.

Institutional Continuity

In higher education, institutional continuity is a complex combination of strategies and activities. Business continuity plans detail the organizational patterns of adjustment and accommodations necessary to sustain all areas of a college or university in a disaster and post-disaster environment. Student life, facilities, financial activities, security and infrastructure are addressed along with the academic mission of an institution.

Institutional continuity, as a component of a comprehensive disaster management, involves reducing or eliminating the likelihood or consequence of a hazard. Therefore, institutions of higher education must identify both short-and long term hazards in preparing for institutional continuity. Natural hazards or threats, for example, can range in potential impact from a serious snow storm to a major hurricane or even an earthquake. Thus hazard profiling is an important component in mitigation planning.

However, institutions of higher education cannot plan for all possible hazard situations, but they can develop strategies of response for each of a college or university's major components for either a short or long-term disruptive event, be the H1N1 virus, a hazardous waste spill or super-storm Sandy.

An effective disaster recovery planning process supports necessary preparations to identify and document procedures to recover critical operations in the event of a major institutional disruption. For example, the University System of Georgia institutions and the USG System Office have been tasked to consider the results of their risk analysis process and their business impact analysis when developing their Continuity of Operations Plans (C.O.O.P.). Specifically, each institution's planning process will culminate in a viable, fully documented, and tested COOP. In addition, to provide for recoverability, all institutions and the USG System Office will include disaster recovery considerations and costs in project documents and budget proposals. Thus, mitigation planning within the University System of Georgia is designed to improve the likelihood for the full recovery of key business processes as part of a complete business continuity program, which includes emergency response, and business resumption plans (USG, 2009). Specifically, the guidelines stated that:

> Each USG institution and the USG System Office must establish a Continuity of Operations Program that provides processes supported by executive management and resources to ensure the appropriate steps are taken to identify the impact of potential losses, maintain viable recovery strategies and plans, and ensure the USG institution and the USG System Office have the ability to continue its essential functions during a business disruption or a major catastrophic event (USG, 2009).

The directive of the System Office focused primarily on business continuity and the protection and preservation of the technological resources of the system, leaving each individual institution to develop their specific Continuity of Operations Programs.

Disaster Recovery Plans and Business Continuity Plans might appear to be interchangeable, but they address two different concerns. The Business Continuity Plan (BCP) addresses an organization's ability to continue functioning when normal operations are disrupted. In essence, it addresses the continuity of the critical business functions. The BCP includes other plans including: disaster recovery, end-user recovery, contingency, emergency response, and crisis management plans. A Business Continuity Plan, by definition, is an all-encompassing, "umbrella" term covering both disaster recovery planning and business resumption planning.

A Disaster Recovery Plan (DRP) defines the resources, actions, tasks and data required to manage the business recovery process in the event of a business interruption. The plan is designed to assist in restoring the business process within the stated disaster recovery goals. Specifically, a DRP is used for the advanced preparation and planning necessary to minimize the impact of damage caused by a disaster, and ensures that an institution's critical systems remain available during the disaster and the recovery period (USG,2009).

The business continuity/disaster recovery plans are living documents that change along with changes in hazard risks and business requirements. They serve as a component in an overall emergency response plan and are tightly coupled with institutional incident/disaster planning.Ultimately, institutional resilience is a two-way street: post-secondary institutions depend on emergency services to maintain academic and other continuities and at the same time they are becoming more tightly linked into regional and state-wide emergency management plans.

Academic Continuity

Academic continuity is the process of maintaining continuity of learning in a situation caused by events that make it difficult or impossible for students and/or faculty to attend classes. In recent years, there have been several natural and man-made related events that have resulted in entire institutions having to close for a period of time, however, it is much more common to find the learning processes being disrupted due to local events (bus strike), or the arrival of the flu season.

Academic continuity is a core component most closely linked with an institution's ability to maintain or restore its business and academic services when circumstances threaten or disrupt normal operations (Senner, 2008). Obviously, some elements of business continuity are related to academic continuity. For example student services, such as registration, academic advising, and financial aid must be maintained, even in modified forms, during a disaster and its aftermath. Many services are indirectly related but critical to academic continuity. In particular, information technology (IT) services such as learning management systems maintenance or faculty payroll processing must be addressed during the response and recovery phases of a disaster or crisis event.

Academic continuity also is a key part of the larger picture of institutional resilience, which is the capacity of an educational institution to prepare for, withstand, and recover from major disasters or other circumstances which threaten or disrupt normal operations. Institutional resiliency can be conceived as having two parts, planning and preparation and continuity, or the capacity to maintain or restore operations once an event has occurred.

Academic continuity addresses the capability of a higher education institution to maintain teaching despite a disruptive event or the capability to promptly resume teaching given such an event. The Sloan Consortium defines academic continuity as:

> the process of maintaining continuity of learning in a crisis situation caused by a natural disaster, human induced (man-made) disaster, or other precipitating factors. It is the extent to which operations can be sustained which enables affected faculty, staff and students to continue academic activities during the response and recovery phase despite the disruption caused by the crisis (2013).

The Sloan Consortium's leadership and support in the development and implementation of academic continuity planning provides the motivation and awareness of the role of distance learning as a fundamental strategy for colleges and universities in being able to effectively address the academic component of institutional continuity. The Sloan Semester which temporarily provided educational continuity in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina illustrates these efforts (SchWeber, 2008). Though it was a temporary response, the Sloan Semester project was a unique electronic partnership between 153 institutions of higher education, the Southern Regional Education Board and the Sloan Foundation. Emphasis on the role of distance learning, as well as mutual aid strategies with other institutions, provide the basic components of institutional and academic continuity planning in higher education.

Amazingly, the Sloan Semester project was created quickly in response to the learning gap faced by students who had registered for courses in the fall of 2005 and were displaced and/or disconnected from their home institutions as a consequence of Katrina. Within 72 hours of the hurricane's impact, a team comprised of Sloan-C Consortium, the Sloan Foundation and area educational institutions had obtained funding to support online course work in the affected areas. During this time, 1700 students registered for 1345 course offered free by 153 institutions (SchWeber,2008).

The Texas A&M System states that institutions should develop plans to be able to "reinstate academic classes within two weeks of a disruption whether through traditional or alternative methods/locations. Also they should be able to maintain these operations for thirty days" (Texas A&M, 2013)

Regardless of the nature of a crisis situation, students temporarily absent from class risk falling behind and possibly being unsuccessful or abandoning their courses all together in a crisis event. Proactive strategies and tools, however, exist to accommodate students absent for a block of successive classes. These activities are designed to keep students active and successful in courses during either short or long-term institutional disruptions.

Georgetown University, in response to major snowstorms in 2010, noted that though it is impossible to predict particular circumstances that might affect normal class schedules — whether related to illness, weather, or other factors — there are a number of steps, ranging from extremely simple to more complex that faculty can take to prepare themselves and their students for possible interruptions. A detailed checklist of crisis-relevant responses is available to faculty and staff which document a variety of potential responses (Georgetown, 2010).

Preparation Checklist

Issues to Address	Possible Solutions
Establish a mode of communication to use in case of an emergency. ▪ Ensure students all have access to and are aware of this communication method.	Email Blackboard Course Blog
Make your syllabus available digitally.	Email Blackboard Course Blog Wiki
Decide how you will distribute documents and readings during a disruption. ▪ Become familiar with the process of making PDFs from hard copies. ▪ Familiarize yourself with how to use Lauinger e-reserves.	Email Blackboard Course Blog Library e-reserves Google Books
Designate a centralized place to collect student submissions.	Email Blackboard Course Blog
Think about how you would continue class discussion in the event of a disruption.	Email Blackboard Discussion Course Blog Wiki
Organize a way to communicate lecture material to students during a university closure.	Lecture Capture
Research options for holding class virtually. You can fall back on your chosen option if it is expected that several class periods will be missed.	Skype

Decide how you would hold office hours virtually during an extended disruption.	Skype Google Chat Blackboard Collaborate
Think about how your methods for evaluating student learning could be moved to a digital space.	Blackboard Quizzes Google Forms
Settle on an option for providing students with grades and feedback on their work in the event of an emergency.	Email Blackboard

This detailed preparation list clearly reflects a dependence on online resources such as the institutions learning management system and other electronic resources. It also assumes that students and faculty not only will have access to this technology, but that they will be trained and prepared to use it.

Dr. Dennie Templeton, Executive Director of Emergency Preparedness at Radford University notes that as a result of an increase in the number of natural and man-made delivery crisis events on campuses in recent years, institutions of higher education have had to consider alternative curriculum delivery options to minimize instructional disruptions. Specifically, Templeton (2010) notes that web-based learning management strategies, templates, and web-portals can meet the challenges posed by extended campus-wide crisis events.

Algonquin College's (2009) developed a plan to promote academic continuity for students temporarily absent from class in response to the H1N1 virus epidemic in 2009. However, the institution realized that it was a viable response to similar events ranging from weather, disaster, team-travel or family issues for both students and faculty.

In the case of a short-term emergency, Algonquin College noted that students with the flu would most likely be given medical advice to stay home for a period of time following their illness, even if they felt well enough to return. The institution felt that it was important that these students be able to access learning materials and make contact with their professors and classmates as required even if they had to miss a period of class work. Thus, the institution posted a number of suggestions for supporting students who, although they were unable to attend their classes/labs/field experiences, would be able to stay connected with peers and accomplish some, or most of the course work/assessments off-campus. These suggestions included both the face to face and online learning environments and were organized around maintaining four categories of support which included: (1) proactive orientation activities; (2) strategies for supporting absent students; (3) using technology to support learning and assessment, and; (4) return to college support activities. Underlying these activities was an increasing reliance on online instructional access and technology.

Clayton State University, in response to the continuity concerns of the University System of Georgia, is developing institutional and academic continuity plans. Each college or school of the university developed a Continuity of Operations (COOP) Department Plan. Since Clayton State University has been a lap-top university for over ten years, the technology and resources were available to continue academic activities in spite of either a short or long-term disaster events.

Since each class offered by the university is provided with a Desire2Learn (Georgia View) shell account, all faculty are required to post syllabi, course assignments, and class notes for all courses, whether seated, hybrid or fully online. In the event of a disaster or campus closure, Desire2Learn allows students to participate in discussions with their faculty and other students, as well as group discussions in either synchronous or asynchronous environments. This option is only available, however, if Desire2Learn or another online instructional portals are available following a disaster event. Fortunately, the campus computing center is the most secure structure on campus and the university has a backup system for online instruction through the University System of Georgia (CSU, 2012). However, having an institutional backup plan in the event of a major catastrophe in the form of off-site systems or cloud storage capabilities is fundamental to a disaster management strategy.

Faculty, having been provided with lap-top computers, also are encouraged regularly to back up course-related materials, advising information, and research materials on external drives provided by each department. Alternative and flexible testing and assessment strategies also are encouraged in cases of short or long-term disruption of campus or course access (CSU, 2012).

If institutions frontload their learning management systems with basic course formats, and syllabi for all courses; transitioning from traditional to online delivery modes in disaster situations is relatively simple and efficient. Encouraging a significant portion of an institution's faculty to have online versions of their courses available facilitates disaster response and provides

access to supplemental learning options in non-disaster situations.

Regardless of the unique accommodations specific institutions make to crisis or disaster events, the goal is to be effective so that operations and academic learning can continue in the disaster recovery stage. Empire State College in New York, in dealing with their program in Lebanon during the 2006 war and Xavier University of Louisiana during the Katrina aftermath identified a number of characteristics associated with resilient organizations. The principles they identified were to be able to adapt to the situation and problem solve; expand upon existing resources; quickly make and implement decisions; and manage effectively in uncertain and unexpected situations (SchWeber, 2008).

Distance learning resources are a major component in providing academic continuity in the case of a disaster or crisis event. Colleges and universities, both within the United States and abroad have established distance learning as a necessary component for academic and institutional continuity. The increasing dependence and legitimacy of distance learning as a vital and necessary component of the higher education equation creates a unique opportunity for distance learning to shape the role and responsibilities of faculty in the future.

Institutional and academic continuity are heavily dependent upon distance learning as a vital resource in disaster response. However, it is not the only avenue of adjustment. In disasters which result in long-term disruption of an area infrastructure, electricity and internet access may not be available to institutions and their clientele. For example, super-storm Sandy left many in the northeast without power or internet access for two or more weeks. In instances of such wide disruption to infrastructure, institutions of higher education need be able to adapt to a disaster response mode in which students and community partners may not be able to access technology-based options. Therefore, institutions of higher educations also need to establish policies and procedures, such as flexible semester and course scheduling, to augment their technology based responses (McCullar, 2011).

A Symbiotic Relationship

The growing demand and expectation that distance learning will be an on-going component of institutional and academic continuity creates a unique opportunity to enhance distance learning and its associated pedagogy. At many institutions, distance learning is a supplemental activity and faculty participation and preparation are optional components in the role and responsibility of faculty. However, with the increased institutional requirements for distance learning to be a permanent part of the role of faculty, a symbiotic relationship is emerging.

The emerging requirement for distance learning competency may change how faculties are evaluated, recruited and even tenured. In development of Clayton State University's recent Institutional Technology Strategic Plan, it was suggested that distance learning competence be a part of the recruitment process for all new faculty. Likewise, distance learning competency has been suggested as a part of pre-tenure, tenure and post-tenure review.

As institutions move forward in requiring continuity capabilities as part of their mission and purpose, the role requirements of faculty will likewise include competence in the pedagogy and delivery of online instruction. The symbiotic relationship between institutional and academic continuity and distance learning will insure that competence in this emerging field of pedagogy will join teaching service and scholarship as a fundamental component of the faculty role in the 21st Century.

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