

Challenging recovery for New Orleans universities after hurricane devastation

More than a year after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans campuses are faced with smaller enrollments, reduced faculty sizes, pinched budgets—and disgruntlement about how they're handling the recovery.

Heike Geisler received tenure in August 2005. Two weeks later, Hurricane Katrina hit, and she has been back to her office only once—to pack her things. The chemistry professor was sacked, along with most of the faculty of Xavier University in New Orleans, in the wake of Katrina.

"Each university has its own set of challenges," says Kathleen McCloud, who was chair of Xavier's physics department and is now on leave at NSF (see *PHYSICS TODAY*, November 2005, page 22). Tulane University's main campus and Loyola University suffered comparatively little damage from the storm. Xavier, the University of New Orleans (UNO), and Southern University at New Orleans were hit hard. Dillard University held classes in a hotel last semester, and SUNO is still working out of trailers. Private and public universities have access to different sources of funding, and the institutions that draw their students from around the country are generally doing better than those that serve the decimated local population. But, says McCloud, "everybody has the negative publicity problem—is it safe for my kid to go to New Orleans?"

In getting back on their feet, some New Orleans colleges and universities closed selected departments, while others fired professors across many disciplines. But all have reduced their faculty sizes—and several are now under scrutiny by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

Financial exigency

At Xavier, the layoffs of both tenured and nontenured professors were done after the university declared financial exigency. About three-quarters of the faculty have since been rehired. "It is very shocking for someone who has tenure to suddenly figure out it doesn't mean anything," says McCloud. "Nobody is sure why some people were kept or not. We don't know the criteria."

Xavier's physics department is down from seven faculty members before Katrina to five, after two tenure-track physics professors were laid off, three faculty members left, and three new ones were hired. Classes resumed in January, with enrollment down by

about 25%. "There had been four to six feet of water in all the buildings. Faculty members were living in FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailers on campus," says McCloud. "I am still amazed that we were able to get back to work. Xavier was able to hold two semesters, and our seniors were able to graduate in August."

Geisler, for her part, was not rehired. She is now unemployed in San Marcos, Texas, where her physicist husband, Carl Ventrice, landed a job at Texas State University.

Ventrice was not among those targeted for dismissal by UNO, which also declared financial exigency. He left because he was fed up with how the university was managing its recovery. "The cut list was leaked. It had salaries and departments—enough information to figure out who was on it," says Ventrice, who last April started an AAUP chapter at UNO. "Most of the people on the cut list were older faculty. [The administration] fired tenured people before untenured people. They took advantage of the storm to restructure the university." He predicts lawsuits and "another wave of faculty flight. Morale is terrible. When I talk to people who are still at UNO, they are almost all looking to leave."

Squeezed between a budget cut from the state and lost tuition money—enrollments this fall are about 11 700, compared with more than 17 000 before Katrina—UNO has a budget shortfall of \$22 million, or about 18%, says provost Fredrick Barton. "In human terms, we

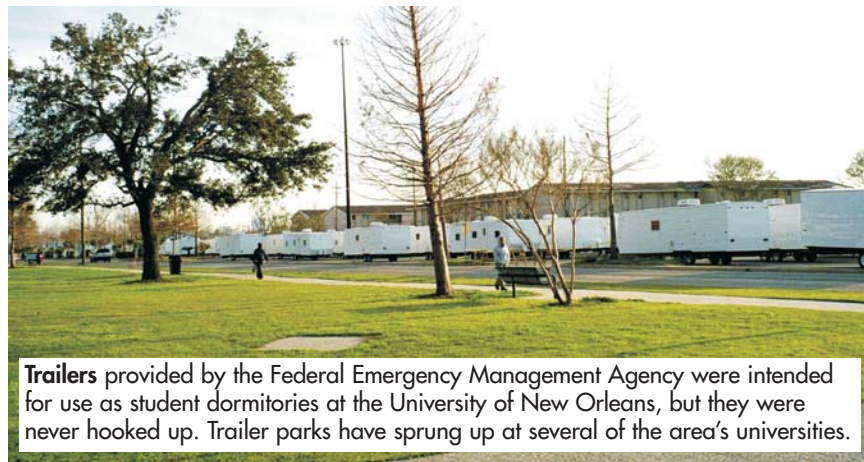
probably cut as much [of the faculty] as we could stand. But in purely budgetary terms, we didn't cut enough."

Of the 83 faculty jobs that were cut, Barton says, "57 were either vacant or the people took other jobs." Of the other 26, "16 were furloughed against their will." Fourteen of those, he adds, were tenured faculty members. "It was an elaborate procedure. In the area of science, the dean applied an operative paragraph inside the exigency authority. He identified the least productive faculty members—those faculty that were judged to be least successful in teaching and research."

After cutting the 83 jobs, UNO is down to 517 full-time faculty members, according to Barton. Ventrice, for one, disputes the "official" numbers. "In reality," he maintains, "the university lost approximately 200 full-time faculty members in total." Besides the jobs stricken from the payroll, he says, others are vacant due to retirements and people taking positions at other universities. "This is a drop of over 30%. It depends how you count faculty." As Ventrice sees it, "Enough people left on their own, so there was no financial need to fire anybody."

The physics department is down from 14 faculty members to 10. "I worry about that," says UNO physics professor Jinke Tang, "because if you have a policy that doesn't honor tenure, it will be harder to attract good faculty."

"We were more optimistic right after Katrina than we are now," Tang says.



Trailers provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency were intended for use as student dormitories at the University of New Orleans, but they were never hooked up. Trailer parks have sprung up at several of the area's universities.

HEIKE GEISLER

"Our labs were not flooded, but instruments were destroyed from leaks in the roof and mold. We are still fixing things." For the most part, researchers were able to get their experiments started this past summer. But New Orleans's infrastructure is far from recovered, particularly in the lakeside part of the city where UNO is located. For a while, power outages were frequent and the water pressure was too low to flush toilets on the second floor of the science building. The water pressure is better now, Tang says, "but my colleagues on the second floor still have cooling problems and have to be prepared when operating their equipment."

Suspension and growth

Across town, Loyola University came away relatively unscathed. And, buoyed by a largely out-of-state student body, enrollments are at 88% of pre-Katrina numbers, although the incoming class is much smaller than usual. The university closed the computer science, education, and broadcast communications programs. Other departments, including physics, have been suspended.

"We are not admitting new physics majors this year, and we very reluctantly advised our freshmen and sophomores to transfer," says Loyola physicist Carl Brans. "We were told to jazz up the department and then drum up more students." One physics faculty position was eliminated, but no courses in the department were cut. "We are getting contradictory signals. And it's a mystery to us how our suspension saves the university any money," says Brans. Many faculty members, he adds, "did offer other alternatives—we offered to take a 5% pay cut."

Brans says he expects "Loyola physics will resume accepting students next fall." The suspension and cuts were made "without due process," he says. In August he prepared "a document for the AAUP. They are investigating governance failures." And on 26 September, Loyola's College of Arts and Sciences gave the university's president and provost a vote of no confidence.

Alone among New Orleans physics departments, Tulane University's expects to grow as a consequence of restructuring implemented in the wake of Katrina. In the restructuring, the medical school was slashed by 15%, the athletics department took some cuts, and four engineering departments were closed. In total, 166 faculty members were laid off, 61 of whom had tenure. To pick up some of the slack, says physics chair Jim McGuire, "it looks like physics and other

departments will be built up to be more interdisciplinary. We [in physics] are being told to think of 20 to 30 faculty members in 10 years. We have 11 now. The immediate growth area for us will be in materials science."

Fair treatment?

"We were hearing from so many faculty members—those laid off and those continuing—expressing concern about their campuses overturning existing rules and giving very little consideration for faculty members' long service," says Jonathan Knight, director of the AAUP's program on academic freedom and tenure. "The number of layoffs suggested that it was one of the largest layoffs of faculty in American history."

By the universities' counts, a total of more than 500 people were laid off from the five New Orleans institutions that the AAUP is investigating—Tulane, Loyola, Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, SUNO, and UNO. "We have difficulty pinning down the numbers," says Knight. "We don't know if we have complete numbers, and it's difficult, perhaps impossible, to separate layoffs from resignations and retirements."

"Certainly the devastation New Orleans experienced presented extraordinary challenges for the universities," continues Knight, "but one question is whether the universities could have done anything better to respect the longstanding values of consulting with faculty. We want to see what guidelines are being used and whether faculty are being treated fairly."

Censure by the AAUP would carry weight. "Universities that are sanctioned won't be able to hire good faculty," says Mary Blue, who had been a communications professor for 25 years at Loyola when she was laid off after Katrina. "If you were a new faculty member and found out that a university had taken away tenure from people, would you want to work there?"

For his part, UNO's Barton says, "I hope the AAUP finds what I know to be true at UNO: We very carefully followed our exigency authority, which was granted by the Louisiana State University board of supervisors. I hope they say, 'God bless you people. You have really had it tough, and you as faculty and administrators have had to do things we wish you hadn't had to do.'"

The AAUP expects to release its report next spring on how New Orleans universities are handling both the immediate and long-term aftermath of Katrina.

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