Meeting the Challenge: Columbia Welcomes Students Displaced by Hurricane Katrina

By Robert Hornsby

One of the less reported aspects of Hurricane Katrina is that it damaged up to 30 colleges and universities in the Gulf Coast region, displacing as many as 100,000 college students, according to the American Council on Education. Tulane University alone had 13,000 displaced students from eleven different colleges and schools, many of whom had just arrived to begin their fall terms when the storm hit. As news and images of the devastation wrought by Katrina emerged, Columbia University acted quickly. A group of key administrators and faculty worked together to create a seamless system for admitting over 200 of the displaced students as visiting students—waiving tuition, extending registration deadlines, offering academic and psychological counseling, and providing a full range of student services, including temporary housing assistance and health benefits. The planning team also posted information and coordinated responses with other universities in the New York area and with the American Council on Education. Provost Alan Brinkley summed up the sentiment driving these efforts in a letter to the Columbia community: “All of us, in New York were the recipients of the enormous generosity of people across the nation and the world after September 11, 2001. I know that we will all do our best to reciprocate by helping those affected by the disaster along the Gulf.”

Fast-track Admissions

Within hours of the hurricane’s landfall, the admissions offices at many of Columbia’s schools began receiving calls from distraught college students and anxious parents seeking help. Most of the callers were Tulane students with home residences in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut; a few were also from faraway states, such as California, Florida and Texas. With home institutions unable to produce transcripts and other written records, admissions officers conducted sessions with individual students to determine their academic level and assigned them to classes accordingly.

At Last Count, 139 Undergrads and 66 Grads

Over 200 displaced students are now taking classes at Columbia. They come from a variety of institutions—not only Tulane but also Loyola University and the University of New Orleans. The majority are undergraduates and have entered the University through the School of Continuing Education, where like everyone else in the school they are mixed in with regularly enrolled students in Columbia College, Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science (SEAS) and the School of General Studies. At least 66 students are enrolled in graduate schools, including Arts and Sciences (10), Law (6), Business (5), Architecture, Planning and Preservation (4), Teachers College (4) and SEAS (1). The Mailman School of Public Health has admitted 23 graduate students; and by special arrangement, the College of Physicians & Surgeons has accepted four third- and fourth-year medical students from Tulane for their ten-week clinical rotation.

Getting Oriented

On Wed., Sept. 7, over 100 visiting students and parents filled the President’s Room of Faculty House for a special orientation session. It means a tremendous amount to all of us that you are here, and we would invite you in every way to participate in the life of Columbia,” said President Lee C. Bollinger in his welcoming remarks. “I think you’ll love this place,” he added. Loyola University New Orleans freshman Jackson Nardelli, 17, said he was looking forward to starting physics classes at Columbia despite missing New Orleans. “I was away from home in a cool city, but the flip side is that Columbia’s a great university too,” he said. “I’m really blown away by it.”

Rapid Mobilization Effort

Crisis response presents a particularly daunting challenge for large, complex and decentralized institutions like Columbia. Yet in the wake of Katrina, the University acted quickly to respond with one voice and to craft and implement a university-wide process for accommodating students displaced by the disaster. A group of faculty and administrators spent long hours hammering out policy and overcoming hurdles to ensure that Columbia could do its part in assisting the students whose lives had been disrupted by one of the worst natural catastrophes in U.S. history.

The list of those who helped ensure a smooth, equitable response is long. In addition to faculty at the schools involved, it includes directors and staff from Student Affairs, Health Services, Housing & Dining, Academic & Residential Facilities, Student Financial Services, Student Information Services and Public Affairs, plus the University Registrar and the University Chaplain.

For the latest on the University’s ongoing Katrina relief efforts, go to www.columbia.edu/cu/new/05/05/katrina_final.html

Katrina Special Report

The Record talks to a few of those who worked behind the scenes on behalf of Katrina-affected students:

• Frank Wolf, dean of the School of Continuing Education
• Joe Iemolo, vice president for Academic and Residential Facilities
• Margo Angott, assistant vice president for Health Services
• Maria Mosca, director of Student Information Services plus Reports on CU’s ongoing fundraising efforts...