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Today's News

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Presidents of Liberal-Arts Colleges Discuss Dealing With Disasters and Other Topics at Annual Meeting

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Marco Island, Fla.

Sal D. Rinella knows a thing or two about planning for campus disasters. As a consultant for Stratus, a strategic-planning firm, he helps colleges handle pressing issuesâ€”and disasters have been among the heaviest these days. But his experience is personal, too. He was president of Austin Peay State University in 1999, when the Tennessee college was struck by a tornado that closed four buildings and damaged many more.

A disaster "is a marker in the life of an institution," Mr. Rinella said during a session here at a Council of Independent Colleges conference for campus leaders. "Presidents talk about a campus before the flood, and after the flood."

The council, which represents more than 500 liberal-arts colleges and universities, holds the conference each year to help presidents and their partners keep up to date with issues of campus management. This year's conference, which concludes today, has dealt with a number of topics, including sustainability, athletics, competition with public colleges, and financial pressures faced by independent colleges.

In his session, Mr. Rinella said that presidents faced with responding to disasters should learn from one another. After the tornado hit Austin Peay, Mr. Rinella said, he called Blenda Wilson of California State University at Northridge, which had endured an earthquake in 1994. He passed on her advice, along with the counsel of many other campus leaders, in "eight overarching lessons."

Lesson 1
covered most of the practical aspects, starting with planning. Plan, and focus on the disasters that are most likely to hit your college, Mr. Rinella told his audience. Concentrate on what should happen in the first 24 hours. Disaster planning runs counter to most of the activities of the academic lifeâ€”you are not going to win points with the faculty. You have to do it as if your career and life depended on it, because it very well could.

A big part of Lesson 1 focused on communication. Go with a disaster-communication system that is low-tech and reliable, he said, like a siren with a public-announcement system attached to it. Get satellite phones. Create a parallel e-mail system for disaster personnel on a Web-based site, like Gmail or Yahoo. Make local police forces part of the planning process. Demand a back-up planâ€”know what you will do if all plans fail.

Lesson 2:
Once something hits, get the leadership team togetherâ€”then lead. "You have to make decisions and move on," Mr. Rinella said. "There is no collegial process in situations like this. Follow your instincts."

Lesson 3:
Get out there in the news media, talk to the public, and inspire when you communicate. "You have to show that

the college is going to get through this, no matter what," Mr. Rinella said. Set ambitious goals and give your rebuilding project grand namesâ€”Tulane University called its plan after Hurricane Katrina "Survival to Renewal," and Southern University at New Orleans called its plan "SUNO Rising." And remember that parents, professors, and the public want to hear from the president, not his or her handlers.

Lesson 4:
Immediately take steps to minimize loss of enrollment. Arrange, even ahead of a disaster, places where the college can continue to operate and hold classes, like nearby schools, churches, and other colleges.

Lesson 5:
Keep in mind that disasters create opportunities. Harness public sympathy for fund raising, with a pitch that speaks to the long-term vision and recovery of the college. Use the reconstruction plan as a restoration plan. Don't plan to go back to the way things wereâ€”go further.

Lesson 6:
Understand the phases of recovery. The disaster can create a window of cooperation and good will before attitudes return to what they were previously. Mr. Rinella described a time following the tornado when his staunchest faculty antagonist gave him a big bear hug. Take advantage of such windows, he advised the college leaders.

Lesson 7:
A disaster, particularly a regional one, will elevate a college's public-service role. The residents of a town or neighborhood will expect the college to support them while it is trying to support its own campus. For example, one New Orleans college was asked to start a charter school, Mr. Rinella said. Comments to the news media have to be empathetic toward the community, he said, but college presidents also have to assert the timeline and recovery of their campus.

Lesson 8:
Matters of the heart carry more weight than almost anything else. How you handle those matters will be what people remember most. Pay attention to things that people will valueâ€”like their research or their scholarly materials. Hold events to celebrate recovery and to thank peopleâ€”whenever a new building opens, mark it. Also, mark the recovery with a memorial.

"We are in the dream-making business," Mr. Rinella said. "If you follow those instincts, you will be fine."

Striving for Greener Campuses

Sustainability and carbon neutrality were also major themes at the conference, and became off-the-record topics of discussion among presidents at dinner and over drinks. Most college presidents said that they believed sustainability and carbon neutrality would be expensive, and that they struggled with how to deal with those issues with limited resources.

In one of a couple of sessions dealing with the topic, Anthony Cortese, president of the nonprofit group Second Nature, and Ray C. Anderson, chief executive of Interface, a billion-dollar carpet company committed to sustainability, tried to convey that the concept was not just ethical but also potentially profitable.

Mr. Anderson, who has outlined his environmental epiphany in his book, *Mid-Course Correction,* talked about the ways that Interface's sustainability drive has led to energy and financial savings. (For example, use of landfill methane in one production facility is both cheaper than natural gas and better for the environment.) He noted that the company's sustainability drive has also led to new customers, who are committed to buying green.

Mr. Cortese talked about a number of colleges that have signed the American College & University Presidents Climate Commitment, and noted that more than 100 of them are members of the Council of Independent Colleges. "Some have argued that reducing carbon is too hard or impossible," he said. He tried to persuade the audience that that was not true.

But he faced some difficult questions from audience members who said they were reluctant to sign the climate commitment. To become climate neutral, a goal of the commitment, most colleges would have to buy offsets, some of the presidents said. But offsets, in which organizations are paid to set up or maintain projects that mitigate carbon emissions, are controversial.

"I have trustees who say that the whole offset thing is a con," one president in the audience said to Mr. Cortese. "We face a lot of skepticism."

Mr. Cortese responded that people should not focus on offsets and should instead focus on reducing carbon emissions through efficiency and changing behaviors. And institutions that want to set up offset programs don't have to pay an organization to maintain some far-off forest, he said, mentioning one method for sequestering carbon. Colleges could get involved in helping nearby communities reduce carbon emissions and count that as an offset. For example, he said, the Johns Hopkins University is helping the City of Baltimore convert its bus fleet to biodiesel fuel. Or a college might install a superefficient boiler in a neighboring school.

Suggestions like those were privately met with skepticism by presidents at some small colleges. At dinner, one president said he did not have enough money to replace boilers in his own buildings, much less those at the local high school. "But if Harvard University wants to replace the boilers in my buildings and count that toward their offsets, I'd be totally fine with that," he said, only half joking.

In another session, some college presidents tried to show that reducing carbon emissions might not be as expensive as some people think. Douglas M. North, president of Alaska Pacific University, held up a graph that showed that cutting the first third of carbon emissions, mainly through conservation programs, costs nothing and may even have an immediate payback. Costs for cutting the second third are nominal, he said. But costs rise sharply after that. "Cutting the last third is a bear," he said.

In that session, David E. Shi, president of Furman University, and Mitchell Thomashow, president of Unity College, discussed ways that their campuses were pursuing sustainability. Their institutions are very different: Unity College, in Maine, was established as an environmental college, and attracts students with interests in the outdoors. Furman, in South Carolina, attracts primarily suburban students, Mr. Shi said, and sustainability there has been pushed mainly by the administration and faculty members.

Mr. Shi said that Furman has tried to integrate sustainability with every part of the university, taking it beyond campus operations and into the curriculum with hands-on learning opportunities. The sustainability drive has included some unusual partnerships. The university has found a philanthropist who owns 10,000 acres of land in Chile, and has persuaded him to keep that land undeveloped. The land will be used for biological research and for carbon sequestration, which the university will count as an offset.

Furman has also formed a partnership with *Southern Living* magazine, which is building a green show house on the campus, which will eventually become home to Furman's sustainability center.

Mr. Thomashow said he is making Unity College a "living lab for sustainability." Sustainability efforts on the campus have to be done frugally, using local materials and manpower. He is trying to broaden the campus movement to include nonwhite students and conservatives.

Performance reviews at Unity are connected to sustainability efforts, and Mr. Thomashow said that he has found enthusiasm in unlikely places. Recently, he met with a janitor at the college, who said that he wanted to use the greenest cleaning materials in the industry.

"It turns out that the faculty are the hardest to move forward on some of this stuff," he said. "But we'll get there."

Figuring Out Prospective Students

In a packed session, John Lawlor, of the Lawlor Group, a market-research firm focusing on colleges, outlined

some observations about student-recruitment trends for 2008. His advice was aimed at leaders of small colleges, which compose most of the council's membership.

First, he advised the presidents, consider your surroundings. "Geography is destiny," he said, and regional population shifts should push colleges to re-examine what they offer to prospective students. They should look for niches that fit the demographics around them.

"Older students represent a largely untapped market," he said. Only about 28 percent of Americans 25 and older have college degrees, yet older learners are more serious students, and they are able and willing to pay for their education, he said.

Mr. Lawlor said colleges need to work harder to show prospective students and the public the value of a small-college education. Prospective students and parents want students to be able to get a job out of their college experience. But parents and students are also concerned about the rising costs of college, and "the net cost of attendance ultimately influences selection," Mr. Lawlor said. "I still don't believe that colleges are talking about their value proposition."

A powerful "stealth marketplace" is at work in college selection, he said. Parents and students are talking to one another and doing research online before ever making contact with a college. Sometimes an application in the mail is the first contact. Colleges need to make sure that their new public facesâ€”their Web sitesâ€”are attractive, complete, and easy to use.

Despite the stealth market, the campus visit is still a powerful way to attract students. "If there is a silver bullet, I think this is it," Mr. Lawlor said. Some colleges are reluctant to hold campus visits in the summer, he said, but that's a mistake. Summer visits are vital because that's when prospective students have time.

Parents and students are closer than ever, and students are often looking for the familiar comforts of home on a campus, he said. Parents (usually the mothers, he said) are also scrutinizing the campusâ€”places like the dining and living areas. As a result, colleges might consider holding more events to attract the parents as well as the students.

Students usually identify spirituality, environmentalism, and social consciousness among the most important aspects of campus living and the college's mission. Having programs devoted to those issues can be an important part of attracting students, but Mr. Lawlor advised leaders to take care in marketing them. He warned, for instance, that some prospective students might not understand terms like sustainability.

Technology allows colleges to stay connected with parents of students and alumni, he said, and that provides a way to enhance word-of-mouth reputations of colleges. Admissions officers and alumni officers should have a natural affinity, he said, but they are not talking with each other enough on most campuses.

Adapting the Workplace to a Changing Faculty

Faculty lifestyles and values are changing, and the workplace should change to accommodate them, Ann E. Austin, a professor in higher, adult, and lifelong education at Michigan State University, said during a speech Sunday morning.

The demographics, attitudes, and work environments of faculty members have changed drastically in recent years, she said, noting that many more faculty members are female and nonwhite, compared with 20 years ago, and more faculty members are working in non-tenured jobs.

Faculty members in the latest generation to enter academe value a balance between work, family, and private lives, and are more inclined to move around in their careers, she said. Technology has also changed the nature of the workâ€”increasing the opportunities for connections with colleagues and students, and also ramping up the work's complexity and intensity.

Dealing with a handful of issues strategically would help colleges attract and retain faculty members, Ms. Austin said. She offered the following suggestions to college leaders.

Start with respect, she said. Celebrate the accomplishments of faculty members. Respect a balance between the faculty members' work lives and private lives. Be flexible in workday hours, tenure processes, and child-care needs.

Professional growth has always been important, but it is now more important than ever, she said, so leaders should support programs that encourage faculty members to develop expertise and skills in their disciplines and in technology.

Finally, nurture a collegial environment on the campus. "There should be regular communication about valuing faculty," Ms. Austin said.
