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Stephen Nelson

Bridgewater State College, s4nelson@bridgew.edu

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The Crucible of Crisis: Three Presidents Confront the Perfect Storm

Stephen J. Nelson, Bridgewater State College

Abstract

This article based on interviews with the presidents of Dillard and Xavier Universities and Tougaloo College examines their leadership in response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The ways they led their communities reveal both points of commonality and discrete leadership styles and approaches. Their experiences and those of their institutions can inform views of the college presidency, especially in times of crisis and challenge.

In late summer 2005, young adults around the country made their annual pilgrimage to college campuses as beginning or returning students. Included in this pilgrimage were students attending colleges and universities in New Orleans and in other parts of the South near the Gulf Coast while Hurricane Katrina was brewing nearby. Within days this “perfect storm” was to wreak havoc over much of this coastal area with heavy winds and rain, changing the face of New Orleans and the campuses of the city and casting its effects well inland. Three colleges and universities were among the institutions and areas of residence, culture, and life in the path of the storm, and the leadership of the presidents of these schools was tested by the resulting crisis that confronted these campus communities

The college presidency is a complex and challenging leadership position in the eyes of both higher education institutions and society. The *de rigueur* responsibilities and expectations of the office and of the individuals who hold these esteemed posts are decidedly demanding and difficult. When a major disaster or crisis comes on the scene and is added to the mix, the life of a president can and does change dramatically and in a heartbeat. The pressures to lead communities comprised of greatly diverse individuals, personalities, and groups—professors, students, staff, alumni, trustees, and other core supporters—to navigate through internal and external criticisms; to shape the profile of faculty members and the academic life; to raise money; and to manage public relations matters often force these leaders to exceed normally perceived human capacities. The tragedy at Virginia Tech, and the microscope of scrutiny placed on its president and members of his cabinet and key administrative personnel, is one of the more recent examples of public expectations about credibility and the small margin for error that these leaders cope with in handling crisis situations.

*Stephen J. Nelson is assistant professor, Educational Leadership, Bridgewater State College; senior scholar, Leadership Alliance, Brown University; and author of the recently published **Leaders in the Labyrinth: College Presidents and the Battleground of Creeds and Convictions**. Dillard and Xavier Universities are members of the Alliance.*

Three presidents of schools in New Orleans and the nearby Mississippi coast—Marvelene Hughes at Dillard and Norman Francis at Xavier Universities, and Beverly Hogan at Tougaloo College—found themselves literally in the eye of the storm and as focal points of their campus communities as they sought to cope with the damage and disaster that befell them. This article focuses on the presidents of these three historically black (HBCUs) colleges and universities¹ because even in normal times these black institutions often confront vastly greater economic challenges than their traditionally greater endowed white counterparts. In short, Xavier, Tougaloo, and Dillard are not institutions with a great deal of cushion against external pressures, especially those exerted outside their control, as was the case with the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina. It is also important to examine a snapshot of these leaders whose schools are normally not as much in the public view as others perceived as more prestigious.

These three presidents faced struggles and displayed élan in this time of crisis in ways that deserve attention. Their leadership, and the lessons drawn from it, can inform a broad audience. How do presidents, or other leaders for that matter, function at moments such as this? What might be learned about leadership from their experiences in the crucible of this disaster? What is suggested by the manner in which these presidents confronted the realities of crisis while their institutions faced a precarious future? Are the individual reserves on which they drew and the lessons they crafted ones applicable and informative for other leaders facing similar circumstances or are they applicable and informative merely for those who conduct normal day-to-day operations of the presidency?

An examination of the ways these three presidents led their communities reveals both points of commonality, and also unique and discrete leadership styles and approaches. Each had to find ways to deal with the economic, human, and physical plant impacts of the hurricane, and to navigate plans for the future in the face of questions about sheer survival. Their ensuing experiences and that of their institutions can inform views of the college and university presidency, especially in times of crisis and challenge. We turn then to these unique perspectives about leadership, and the ways Presidents Francis, Hughes, and Hogan weathered these challenges and created pathways to construct and shape their institutions as they rebounded for the future.

We will concentrate on three overarching elements. The first is the initial reactions to the disaster framed by instinctive responses and efforts to ensure the safety and security of people—with special concern directed toward students, the young people trusted to the care of these institutions, but also to the faculty and staff who make these colleges run. The second is the assessment of damage, its implications for their institutions' futures, the decisions that ensued for interim planning and a return to a semblance of "normal," and the steps essential for longer term rebuilding. The last and most important element we examine consists of the principles and values undergirding their leadership. Revelatory in this instance are postures rooted in the rudders and compasses that each president possessed and from which they exercised leadership. It is not a stretch to comprehend these qualities as being constituted as "faith," bordering on and including religious beliefs. It is clear that each relied on characteristics beyond normally revealed understandings about how leaders cope with crises and with the expectations and demands on them in such moments.

An initial theme these presidents note and that arises in their accounts of the circumstances they faced is the necessity in crisis situations to operate on a leadership version of autopilot.² The evidence they present is striking in the similarities among them. They instantly realized that they were confronting circumstances for which there was no real preparation. Their reaction, critical as it was human, required tapping into inner resources as days turned into months of fallout from the disaster and turning attention to what would need to be done in response and recovery.

But this fact alone, unsurprising as it is, tells only part of the story. The other and more important questions raised are: how do leaders function when on autopilot, when they are forced to react to events viscerally and instinctively? What do leaders draw upon in situations such as this? What are sources of guidance and of inspiration? How do they act sufficiently wisely to address the challenges of the circumstances they are forced to encounter? If the argument is that specific leaders may have the “right stuff,” we still need to inquire further about what are those elements of character that serve to produce good outcomes. What elements would constitute the content underlying any conclusions that a leader led well?

For example, President Hogan portrays the nature of her initial responses to the damage at Tougaloo College as a situation in which you have “No script. You do things by instinct.”³ As she surveyed the state of her campus, she was already thinking about the broader context of her work and the stake in it presumably shared by colleagues. This reaction about the importance of functioning closely with colleagues and of being willing to get one’s own hands dirty is one of Hogan’s recurrent messages, one shared by these two other presidents. It could be argued that this task of working side-by-side with colleagues is something a good leader should do all the time. While true, it is even more critical that this lesson not be forgotten or neglected in times of crisis. It is clear that this navigating principle was fundamental to the ways these three presidents shaped the pathways that needed to be constructed as they dealt with the hurricane and its aftermath.

Despite the chaos of the early stages of the hurricane’s fallout, as well as in the days and weeks that followed, these presidents exerted a clear focus on the human aspects of the unfolding drama. It was people, especially students but also staff and faculty and their well-being and morale, not the buildings, bricks and mortar and the other physical, structural, and facilities concerns that quickly formed the core of each president’s attention and decisions. The presidents independently indicate that the immediate safety and security of students were the pressing major concerns. Decisions needed to be made about whether students would remain on campus or that evacuations would be in the offing or forced by circumstances.

In addition, given the less than fully publicly coordinated and often individualized exodus of personnel and citizens from New Orleans, it was critical for the presidents there to know the status of faculty and staff, where they were being forced to go, and the degree to which they would be available in person or at a distance to assist with decision-making and planning. Reliance on human resources became paramount, despite the professional and personal travails experienced by college and university employees, especially those who were citizens of New Orleans. The presidents shared with key staff and faculty the ominous reports about the gathering threat to their homes while at the same time dealing with immediate personal concerns. Particularly for President Francis

the issues that he personally faced as he provided leadership to the university led to a number of stunningly poignant situations that provide a further behind-the-scenes view.

Francis confirms that in the opening hours of the storm, everything looked fine.⁴ He notes that Xavier University had experienced major hurricane threats in previous years. As part of their preparation for hurricane events, Xavier had to set up a “war room” to enable campus leaders to remain on campus at least as storms developed and to have access to secure communications and other management tools essential for coping with an approaching disaster. Earlier when a storm appeared to be developing, Francis had gone to the war room and utilized its accommodations as a meeting space for about ten of the university’s key leaders. While waiting for the advance of the storm, he remarked that he would remain on campus. As it turned out, nothing happened.

Later, when Katrina began to strike the coast, Francis initially went through the same drill, gathering his core staff in the designated crisis center and preparing to use this arrangement to make decisions, implement protocols, and develop necessary plans to deal with the situation. The Mayor of New Orleans and the Governor of Louisiana began to urge, though not yet order, evacuation. Despite the fact that the actual order to evacuate came later than might have been ideal, Xavier got almost everyone out. However, at this point about 200 students who were not evacuated remained on campus, and about forty faculty members and staff people were either on campus or in their homes nearby. Given the public orders, Francis decided to move to temporary headquarters in a downtown hotel rather than remain on campus as he had in the case of the previous threatened storm. When Katrina came and went without major damage, many in New Orleans, Francis and his staff included, thought they might have dodged a bullet.

But then the levees broke during the night, and water was now in the streets. Francis reports that the “city began to lose communications,” and as a result of his being at the hotel location, he was becoming “out of touch with the university” still staffed as it was by those who had remained on campus. Francis was forced to leave with other guests and more city residents as the hotel was cleared out while the water rose. He first “had to walk in three to four feet of water to drive to another hotel,” only then to depart the city by bus for Baton Rouge.

He decided to set up preliminary headquarters in a small town outside Baton Rouge where some of his extended family lived. At this point he was “able to get contact with staff and students on campus for their evacuation,” negotiating arrangements to get them out of the city. Despite the grave conditions of rising water, one of the campus dining services was located along with the student and other residents on sufficiently high ground and had been able as a result of an emergency power source to continue functioning and producing meals. But now those remaining on campus had to flee the city environs in the not-so-well organized citywide evacuation that was underway. From his now off-site location, Francis and his staff were able to procure buses that would transport this final group of two hundred Xavier students first to Grambling and Southern Universities, and then from there they would subsequently travel to their homes.

Addressing the needs of members of their campus communities was an initial pattern of response for all three institutions and their leaders. The first goal was to keep students safe and, even if they were to remain on campus temporarily, in as good shape as possible. Coupled with this response was the need to support, maintain, and use as

effectively as possible the personnel, the human resources of the college. At each of the three schools, students had to leave the campus—Xavier and Dillard because water inundated the property. They were then forced to be away for slightly longer than the remainder of the semester, due to the extent of damage these two campuses suffered. At Tougaloo because power to the campus along with the surrounding city of Jackson was cutoff, students were forced to leave their residence halls, though were able to return in about a week when power was restored. Hogan was able to remain in the President's House, which became a headquarters from which to supervise and coordinate staff regarding the initial clean up and more long range needs that the storm created for the campus.

At Xavier and Dillard the full awareness and confrontation about the degree of damage seeped in over time. Because Presidents Francis and Hughes immediately had to leave their campuses and in short order move out of the city and region, both collected most of their knowledge about the state of their campuses from news reports and video footage of the disaster. They shared helplessness with fellow New Orleans's citizens, and gathered a picture of the disaster with the rest of the country from the rapid and suddenly incessant national coverage. In Francis's case, aware that his home was undoubtedly inundated, his first view of the damage was from an Internet satellite view of the neighborhood. On the screen he and his wife were able to identify their property by what they could see of a surrounding seven-foot high brick wall, now with only the top of the wall showing and only in certain places. Realizing that this meant their home was flooded by seven feet or more of water, Francis remarked that there was nothing they could do about it, that they would get to that problem in time (it was weeks later before they were even able to visit the property to survey the damage), and that there were more pressing concerns for the university and the city.

This evidence of personal and professional *élan* is at the heart of this story. Francis reports his experience almost matter-of-factly, possibly a result of the passage of time.⁵ But it appears that his approach is widely shared by fellow presidents, including Scott Cowen, President of Tulane University. There is a remarkable degree to which they all at the time felt detachment from immediate personal concerns and were able to exert professional focus on the tasks at hand as the manner through which they coped with the overwhelming realities they faced.⁶ Francis seconds Hogan's notion about the reliance on instinct. He characterizes this as being "driven by adrenaline that said we [Xavier] had come too far and done too much to let Katrina take us down," adding and quoting President Hughes, "We were on our knees but we were not on our backs."⁷

"Courage" may be an overused word to characterize leadership. But courage is apt in the instance of these presidents. Their voices are permeated with such affirmations, words that capture a personal response. For each of these presidents, the interplay of personal belief that a way forward through the crisis would be found coupled with firm yet flexible leadership style was a strong determinant of their core assertions about both the short run decisions and management of the crisis they and their institutions faced, as well as the longer-term issues that had to be addressed. In many ways this latter aspect of what has come to be required is even more difficult because of the energy needed to sustain leadership momentum and commitment for the longer haul. The challenge to maintain a personal conviction and hope that disaster can be overcome while providing

realistic leadership about the prospects for their communities continues two years after the storm and likely will continue into the foreseeable future. The manner in which these presidents have successfully faced this challenge and maintained the faith of their constituents confirms the courage of their leadership.

Like Francis, President Hughes quickly moved to confront the situation at Dillard wrought by the development of the hurricane. Hughes began her presidency at the university less than two months before Katrina struck. Prior to this appointment she had had an extensive career in academic administration, including serving as the President of California State University since 1994.

She could easily have “retired” from the presidency when she left that position. But she found herself drawn to Dillard and its presidential post, and unabashedly describes the attraction as a “calling” that led her to the university.⁸ Hughes had spent her first weeks on campus becoming acquainted with the university, the community in and outside the gates, and the students. Because the first year students had arrived about a week before the hurricane struck, followed by their upper class counterparts, Hughes had had at least some opportunity to greet and meet them. They were taking the first steps in becoming a new community.

Hughes was on a retreat with Dillard’s senior administrative cabinet when the storm began. It was from there that she began the process that would lead, as at Xavier, to the evacuation of the campus and to a crisis that she describes in language almost identical to President Hogan as having “never experienced anything so surreal.”⁹ She quickly returned to campus to make plans to shut down the university. Evacuating herself after overseeing the immediate emergency plans to fashion the departure of the students, Hughes, like Francis, went first to a secure place off campus and shortly thereafter moved to Atlanta to establish the university’s “new” headquarters with senior staff.

Like her colleagues she comments that it was “so unfathomable, left watching and seeing it unfold, though [at the time] not knowing the impact to the campus.” The media’s “attention was so focused on the Convention Center and the Dome,” where thousands of residents were stranded, that other features of the city such as the Dillard campus were simply being overlooked. Hughes was able by helicopter to get an “aerial view of the campus from which she was able to see only a lake of water 8-10 feet.”¹⁰ It was at this point that the full awareness of the “massive reality [she had] to deal with” now confronted her and her administrative group, and the Dillard community.

During the period of these opening days of the crisis for Dillard, Hughes recalls that her major task, and great challenge given the disruption to normal power, electronic devices, and computer and internet capacity, was “to communicate with the campus community, the faculty and staff,” and that at that time her personal and human “reserves were focused on the people rather than the place.” The immediate decision being forced by the total flood of the campus and its facilities was that she and her staff would have to relocate. By the second week she had made the move “to Atlanta as a command site with a team.” The good news and a tribute to the advanced planning that Dillard, like Xavier, had exercised was that the “emergency procedures had worked and that everyone was safe.”¹¹

Exerting her leadership and organizational capacity, Hughes reports that the “emergency planning team” that she had relied on while on campus “was [now] no longer

an evacuation team, but a planning team” to which she added “insurance companies, and Board members.”¹² She also had the good fortune to have a former FEMA member as part of group. It was at this point that any hope that might have been evidenced previously about any early return of students and others to the campus and resumption of the academic year was simply not going to happen in anything like the short run.

As Hughes and Dillard communicated with students, one bridge they had to cross, as Francis likewise had to with the Xavier community, was the “reality that they could not return in the fall.” But Hughes also was clear in telling students that she “wanted them to remain on course” despite the inability for Dillard to offer classes and residence on a normal basis. Many of the students had already begun to register elsewhere for the fall term. Thus the coordination of these temporary transfers, the necessary collaboration with colleague institutions, and the development of fair requirements for maintaining status with the “home” college became technical matters that Francis and Hughes (along with Cowen and other New Orleans campus leaders) had to address. Decisions regarding their status also had to be communicated clearly to students and to the other colleges and universities that came to be involved as they temporarily accepted students from Dillard, Xavier, Tulane, as well as other New Orleans students. Guiding these transitions became one more leadership demand on Hughes and her team, and one that they had to handle with the utmost care and foresight.¹³

In the early days of the disaster, Hughes and Francis dealt with the realities that the very technology upon which all of society had come to depend for communication and organizational life was temporarily out of commission. As the waters rose, causing electricity outages, institutional and other computer servers became compromised, disrupting e-mail and Internet use, including reliance upon institutional websites. Telephone service, including cell phones in cases where local transmitters or infrastructure were damaged, also became unreliable. However, from off-site locations these leaders and their staffs began to reestablish connections with their constituents, now widely spread out in different geographical locales. When use of these technologies and devices—telephones, computer services and instruments, web and Internet connections—was restored, they became, even more important than in normal times, the glue that held things together. This ability to regain a reliance on basic infra-structural needs in turn enabled these presidents and their staffs to engage in re-building and re-establishing community through critical communications and directions to students, staff, and faculty.

Almost as quickly as Katrina wreaked its havoc, these presidents virtually seamlessly turned their attention to the monumental tasks ahead. As the significantly disrupted life of these institutions began the slow progress of returning from the impact of the storm’s surge while the waters began to recede, Francis and Hughes embarked on turning their attention to rebuilding. Hogan likewise, though not facing problems to the degree of her counterparts in New Orleans, had to begin the process of addressing significant damage and partial destruction of many of Tougaloo’s buildings.

The confluence of issues that the storm’s effects brought to the fore created further unprecedented leadership demands on these presidents as they began steps in recovery. For example, because Hughes was so new to her position, there were members of her Board who thought she might want to vacate the presidency, thus leaving Dillard’s planning and rebounding to Board members, placing them in a most difficult position

from which to recruit and attract a successor.¹⁴ Sensing this rumor, Hughes reacted quickly to assure the Board that she had felt literally called to the position of their president in the first place. Now the storm and its aftermath served further to underscore and confirm her premonition that the choice to come to Dillard was indeed a “calling.” But this was only a precursor to the necessity to address the matter of the future of the university itself.

In these early days, one of the possibilities facing Dillard was the prospect that the institution would either move elsewhere in the city or leave New Orleans altogether rather than trying to rebuild on site. Damage estimates, not completely known at this time, ended up being in the vicinity of 500-650 million dollars, many buildings totally destroyed and others so badly damaged that they likely would be eventually torn down.

There were preliminary signals from the Board and elsewhere that it would be in the best interests of Dillard to re-establish itself elsewhere. Hughes wanted the university to take off the table any thought about giving up on New Orleans as their home.¹⁵ Thus she proposed that the Board pass, which they did, a motion that they would rebuild in New Orleans, even if they did not know where, meaning remaining in the city even if it became impossible to return to the original site of the university for its 137 years as an institution. Hughes believed an official stand confirming that Dillard would not leave New Orleans was critical for the community as well as other surrounding and interested parties. At the same time, her stand was a way for Hughes to maintain the focus of her Board and staff, as well as other Dillard stakeholders, on what the pathway was; considerations other than the goal of returning to New Orleans would be distractions from this mission. (It is clear from conversation with Hughes that she views this recovery and rebuilding as nothing less than a mission.) Francis also reports that early discussions about Xavier’s future included the prospect that it would merge with Tulane, a step that would have significantly altered its tradition and position (especially as an HBCU).¹⁶

The rebuilding process for Xavier and Dillard continues two years after Katrina. The immediate crises generated by the hurricane presented unprecedented challenges to these presidents. But the longer-term problems, difficulties, and decisions have likewise tested their leadership, albeit in different ways. No longer are instantaneous and instinctive decisions and leadership wisdom the primary requirement. Rather, to face the necessities of longer duration, reconstruction, and securing the future, these leaders must exert the ability to persist and to expend personal and institutional resources crucial to the tasks at hand and over what already is and will continue to be for the foreseeable future a very long-term process.

From the outset of this phase, Hughes decided on a bold assertion and strategy. It appears she hatched the idea personally and then navigated with her Board to garner support. Her strategic view and stance are simple, yet profound: Dillard would not only come back, but that she and her colleagues would rebuild the campus and return the university to a standing even better as an institution than it had ever been.¹⁷ In a sense she took advantage of the opportunity of the disaster that had befallen Dillard to argue that buildings and facilities not only needed to be renovated or newly constructed, but that what replaced the old would result in more than a mere status quo.

Dillard was fortunate to receive enormous assistance and aid from Brown University, whose president, Ruth Simmons, is a Dillard alumna. Brown was one of

many colleges and universities to offer support and to assist the higher education institutions of New Orleans in temporarily placing students, many of whom transferred immediately for the fall semester, losing little if any time and course credit. But Brown, leveraging and collaborating with Princeton, provided further ongoing assistance to Dillard regarding facilities, long range planning, and other strategic support and technical capacity.

Each of the three presidents featured here placed themselves at the nexus of their respective leadership teams. As noted, there are great similarities in the leadership styles they utilized as they asserted command in the situations that were affecting their campuses. They relied either on existing and functioning presidential cabinets, capable of operating for emergency planning purposes, or they expanded these groups as needed to include other players who would be crucial in response and recovery efforts. However, all three also delegated significant authority to staff colleagues in order that the full capacity of their institutions would be marshaled to cope with the crisis. Thus, while clearly in charge and exerting the authority of the presidency, these leaders are also sufficiently wise to know that the most effective and efficient way to lead, especially in the face of a crisis situation, is to use the expertise and ability of the other “leaders” of their campuses to the fullest extent possible.

In addition to the reasonable set of skills and abilities that are viewed as essential to college presidents, the Katrina crisis has required both that these capabilities be applied to an extraordinary degree and that complementary training and experience also be brought to the fore. For example, President Francis notes that his legal background served him well “mostly because of training to be hard-nosed: what are the problems, what are the solutions? How do you survive?”¹⁸ He adds, emphasizing the above-noted importance of delegation that “we thrived because we hired people smarter than us. You give these people authority to make decisions in their areas.”

But the theory that it may be good to delegate, particularly in crisis and urgent situations, is only good as far as it goes. Francis points out that much of the leadership capacity of these colleagues and staff was grounded in “the preparation of people who had the commitment to the institution.” Here were his staff and crucial Xavier personnel living “in temporary quarters, but they worked passionately for the campus to get back.”¹⁹ To Francis, this passion is what made things work and enabled Xavier to respond and recover. He points out the irony that the “school had the largest enrollment in its history in August 2005.” Thus they had an enormous influx of students all of whom were “wondering when we would get back?” Due to the yeoman efforts of Francis and his staff and faculty, seventy-six percent were eventually able to return to campus by the following January. The university developed plans so that these students (especially valuable to those who had not taken courses in the fall term after the hurricane) could complete an entire academic year of study compressed between January and August 2006, the one year anniversary of the storm. Thus they would be on course for the 2006-2007 academic year.

Asked what kept him going during this time, Francis replies that it was the simple fact that “he knew he had a great staff, and if there were any doubts [about that staff] Katrina erased them.”²⁰ Such belief and confidence, confirmed by the crucible of an almost unimaginable crisis, are a platform on which most leaders would hope to be able

to stand. For Francis, this grounding sustained him not only in the opening days of responding to what Katrina wrought on Xavier, but even more so during the longer-term work that continues with the effort to return the university to its full stature and vigor. Francis sums up the hard work his Xavier colleagues had put in during the first months: "When the lights came on at the campus, it was like a lighthouse," adding, "This is a crisis, but we still have our lives so we will make this work."²¹

Underlying the concrete actions and steps these three presidents undertook to address the immediate and longer-term effects of Hurricane Katrina are the personal rudders and compasses that undergird them as leaders. These leadership characteristics do not readily lend themselves to be "taught" in any conventional sense. Revealed in the actions and words of these presidents is a combination of instinct, experience, beliefs and values, and, to some extent, the throwback word, "faith." However, despite the uniqueness of the individual stories these presidents relate about what kept them going in the face of such disaster, the perspectives each constructed and the visions essential to enable their institutions and communities to rebound are a strikingly important feature of what we are able to learn from them.

Though Tougaloo College was not as significantly affected as its colleague institutions to the south in New Orleans, the damage and upheaval to its campus were still profound. Placing into a broader context what she and her community faced, President Hogan reflects that they were presented with "a teachable moment for what much of the rest of the world has to cope with daily."²² She also embraced and emphasized with her staff from the very first moments that Tougaloo's students would "learn from us," that is, the way the leadership of the college would be conducted would not be missed on the students.²³

Hogan claims that her most immediate response was a "feeling of helplessness." The campus suffered significant damage, had no electricity, and "there was no way to just call to get power up and running."²⁴ This sense that there was much to do and that the restoration of basic services was not in Hogan's immediate control became even more apparent as recovery from the storm progressed and the reality was that "there were places locally [such as a hospital] that needed things" much more than the campus. As events and time unfolded, Hogan reports that she did receive "pressure from administrators" to try to use her and Tougaloo's local influence in order to get campus power restored ahead of other institutions and areas of the city. Her argument is that morally and ethically "she simply could not do" this and at the same time maintain in any kind of good conscience. Hogan views "these judgments," that she had to make during the response and recovery as "testing her values and conscience."

Reflecting on the demands of dealing with such a cataclysmic event for her and her college community, Hogan reveals an internal journey of leadership guided by basic core principles. It is impossible, and outside the bounds of this inquiry, to know and to judge the extent to which the same core assumptions were at the basis of her presidency during "normal" times. Further, it must be pointed out that she and her fellow presidents faced with this disaster did not construct a set of new values overnight. However, Hogan connects them to her understanding of what took place in the face of this crisis time. She reports finding herself continually thinking about the situation and what it meant. One

thing that was clear was the knowledge of “the things we did not have for this kind of disaster,” and that much of the world copes with such a paucity of resources all the time.

In an effort to be highly visible and to support and work closely with her staff, Hogan was on campus during the bulk of each day, much of her time spent walking around the campus to survey damage and to consult directly with staff supervising clean up. Early in the aftermath, while out on campus, Tougaloo’s safety and security and grounds directors told her that it was too dangerous to be personally on site. Shortly after, a tree fell near where she was standing, but with a hard hat, she continued to be side-by-side with her staff engaged in the clean up.

Each day began with an early morning meeting of the administrative group she convened to handle recovery and planning. One of the perplexing aspects of what she faced as a leader was the “awesome responsibility to have to have answers when you don’t.” Staff were asking questions about what to do next, and Hogan had to grapple with a balance between the need “to exude calmness, motivation, assurance,” with the reality that she and her group would have to navigate the unknowns together. She simply did not have all the answers, or lacked sufficient information from which to develop them. Thus Hogan was required to operate on instinct and the best sense of how to proceed without the normally desirable level of knowledge and ability needed reasonably to predict the course that events would take.

Hogan underscores the experience of her fellow presidents that in confronting a crisis such as this there is “no script. You do lead and act by instinct.” Nothing was more revelatory than the basic principle of leadership highlighted by the hurricane: “There is no job that my colleagues might have to do that is beneath me.” Thus, even when college safety and security and other buildings and grounds personnel urged her not to perform particular actions, she persisted by physically being on campus.

Hogan concludes her reflections about the meanings inherent in the entire episode by shifting to an even deeper core underlying her leadership. First, she sets the recovery in the context noted above that in a sense this was learning and a teaching opportunity for everyone. Students would see how the adults around them reacted and functioned. But also Hogan and her staff had to be prepared to learn a great deal themselves. Second, even in the crisis she was able to connect what was ahead to continuing aspirations for Tougaloo. She captures this connection between the present crisis and the path through it by saying, “We are about the creation of future and we do this every day.” Thus what should be different about the tasks ahead in recovering from this natural disaster or any similar unanticipated calamity? The future that now had to be created was urgent and possibly more tangible, but it remained nonetheless connected to the normal mission of the college: the “creation of the future.”

Last, she indicates the obvious but often overlooked, notion that “as a leader you have to be prepared to take charge.” Hogan would argue that she did this primarily based on instinct. But then delving a bit more into the basis of her instinct, Hogan suggests: “At your center you have to have faith,” which she defines as “something that helps assure that you are not piloting the ship.” She assumes a philosophical posture that on one hand may appear naïve, but on the other may be at the core of how a leader leads: “You know that it will be okay. That you will work to do the right thing. And it will come out okay.” These comments allude in Hogan’s case to her faith and belief in some

“higher power” (though not describing this as God, she implies this to be the case). Drawing these elements together, she concludes, noting, “Leadership traits and spirituality are [the two qualities] that inform your style.”

As Tougaloo students returned to campus, only weeks after first being evacuated, Hogan strongly urged them to volunteer in the local community to assist in the continuing recovery and rebuilding efforts. Exerting leadership to encourage students to be of service to the neighborhoods and city of Jackson is further evidence of Hogan’s notion that the entire crisis presented learning opportunities and a teachable moment for all concerned. Hughes initiated a similar program at Dillard when students were able to return to campus. She wanted the university to be part of the recovery, so students became involved in service endeavors, service learning, and research projects. The capacity of these schools to affirm relationships to their communities, truly to emphasize “town-gown” relationships, has been one of the salutary and broadly educational stories connected to the Katrina recovery: students from local colleges and universities, complemented by contingents of fellow undergraduates from around the nation, along with other volunteers reaching out to the community. Those who especially benefitted from these students serving those in need were individuals, mainly the most poor New Orleans citizens, struggling against great financial and other constraints in efforts to return to their residences and livelihoods.

Like Hogan, Hughes also reflects about what she learned about herself through the initial days and months, extending to two years, of coping with the presidential leadership challenges of a campus completely inundated by water and having its future threatened by the ravages of the storm. Hughes comments that she “had had a lot of career experience, but it was moving through hoops,” the traditional career trek through upward positions of increasing responsibility, first in academic administration and then to two presidencies. However, she underscores that confronting the Katrina damage “was different because of the purpose” and it was these stakes, resurrecting Dillard from a very possible demise, that Hughes came to see as a situation in which she “is working from a different base of strength and that is the thing that makes her move forward.”²⁵

As a coda to these presidential reflections, Francis reiterates the larger picture that was revealed in the face of this crisis. His reflection is an important reminder to those who oversee and protect the gates of the academy on a day in and day out basis, but can be easily forgotten in normal times in which the challenges are more *de rigueur*. Francis says that as he and his staff assessed what they were facing, he came to the conclusion that “the goal was sacred, and that goal was to get back, and to get back for the students.”²⁶ When the Xavier students were able to return to campus, Francis spoke to them at a reopening convocation. His message was simple: “The university and the students had overcome a major crisis,” and in response fellow “students from all over the country are coming to help.”²⁷

There are many lessons about leadership to be drawn from the experience of these three presidents and their colleges and universities as they faced the realities, fallout, and long road of recovery Hurricane Katrina caused. First, leaders are expected to move immediately to the fore, to direct the actions of their staff and community members. They may be forced by the circumstances and the rapid unfolding of events to perform much of this leadership and management in an instinctual manner. In doing so they

should, as they appear to in this case, follow the advice that has guided organizations, such as NASA in the midst of crises such Apollo 13: If you do not know what to do, do not do anything. But Hogan, Francis, and Hughes moved forward systematically, though at times probably lurching in directions out of necessity, in order to utter the decisions that had to be made; they had to provide direction while permitting sufficient autonomy through broad delegation to their direct cabinet and emergency team administrators. Also, as Hogan points out, there are times, maybe especially in crises, that leaders may not have all the answers and they need both to acknowledge that (at least to themselves) and yet still continue to plot courses of actions.

Second, these presidents responded to ensure that people were the priority and that these community members had to be enabled to be as safe and secure as possible. A combination of instinctive responses, especially directed toward the students in their care, coupled with foresight and some degree of pre-planning (e.g., Xavier's emergency procedures and information sources for such occasions), and probably a bit of good fortune resulted in this task being carried out in as timely, safe (no lives lost), and orderly a fashion as could be humanly imagined under the circumstances.

Next, in very rapid order these leaders turned attention to the recovery and rebuilding stage facing their campuses. Their adjusted time lines and goals for when their institutions would re-open (much less a problem for Tougaloo given the relatively less extensive damage suffered than Xavier and Dillard) had to be pushed into much more distant futures. In the meantime all efforts were expended to ensure that students would be able to continue their educations at other institutions and to compress their work upon their return.

Another challenge that had to be faced was the degree to which communication is crucial in keeping communities of people—students, faculty, administrators, staff, and other stakeholders such as alumni and key funding sources—together. In normal times these constituents would have regular contact with each other, often in person, as a bond uniting them. The fact that these colleges and universities were able to hold together, that the presidents were able to apply the glue essential in bonding their constituents was a critical step in the human recovery and in the capacity for everyone to take the first steps on the road back and to envision the day of their return.

Meanwhile, Hughes, Francis, and Hogan exerted leadership dedicated to the tedious process of dealing with contractors, lawyers, insurance providers, and local authorities. This phase continues to the present time and likely will for the foreseeable future. In this case the matter of extent of how Dillard and Xavier will return to the previous or an even improved state has yet to be realized. However, it is clear that Presidents Hughes and Francis are of a mind to settle for nothing less than seeing their institutions once again whole and positioned even more strongly than in the pre-Katrina days.

Lastly, and most importantly in terms of its contribution to what we know and believe about leaders and leadership, are the stories of the internal journey that Katrina created for these presidents. These presidents are individuals, maybe unique but maybe less so than might first be thought, who appear deeply religious in the broad sense and who view their faith and beliefs having been put to the test by the crises they were forced to navigate. Their words convey notions about the sacredness of their task; a firm belief

about the transcendent importance of creating and shaping the education of students; and an intent to both draw meaning from present travails and to envision that meaning as a sustaining force in the unknowns of rebuilding and recovery. They add to these values the humbling understanding that while you are taking charge as a leader, the situation you face is not completely in your control and that you are therefore functioning in light of more transcendent forces and powers. This grounding supports the aspirations each has developed that there could be an even strengthened and brighter future.

To substantiate this contention about the role of faith and belief in the compass and rudder of any leader requires a more thorough exploration of these or other leaders facing similar crisis circumstances. But a provisional conclusion can be drawn that belief in larger power(s) and in a view that plights be understood in a broad, possibly transcendent context, not unlike that of prophets and those of faith, was in the minds of these presidents and appears to have sustained them.

Hurricane Katrina created for these presidents a nearly unprecedented confrontation with threats and challenges to the very foundations of their institutions, of the education offered to their students, and of the employment and professional prospects of faculty, administrators, staff, and other employees. As were described in these interviews their journeys shed light on how leaders cope with such demands and how they sort through the choices facing them. Much of what they share cannot be “taught” in any conventional sense. However, as with all college and university presidents, these three had to bring to bear their own combinations of experience, instinct, and sound judgment in order to size up and address the tasks they faced.

We cannot always be certain that leaders in positions who encounter such circumstances will lead in sound fashion. The hope and expectations about their appointments are always that they will be able to provide well-grounded leadership especially in such crucibles. In this instance, Hughes, Francis, and Hogan met the challenges of their day and respectively to Dillard, Xavier, and Tougaloo in ways that guided their campus communities well and that hold lessons for those interested in the college presidency and in leadership.

¹ These three schools are also members of the Leadership Alliance, headquartered at Brown University. The Alliance was founded over fifteen years ago in the early 1990s with a purpose and mission to increase the numbers of minorities entering academic fields for the Ph.D. and other advanced degrees and the aspiration to increase those then electing to join the academic professorate by dedicating careers to scholarship and teaching at universities and colleges.

² Telephone interviews were conducted with these three presidents on the dates indicated for each.

³ Beverly Hogan, President, Tougaloo College, interview with author, July 20, 2006.

⁴ Norman Francis, President, Xavier University, interview with the author, March 25, 2007. The account that follows is taken from this interview.

⁵ I interviewed Francis nearly a year and a half after the onset of the Katrina crisis.

⁶ At its 2007 Commencement, Brown University awarded honorary degrees to the three New Orleans college and university presidents, Hughes, Francis, and Cowen.

⁷ Francis interview.

⁸ Marvelene Hughes, President, Dillard University, interview with the author, November 15, 2006. The account that follows is taken from this interview.

⁹ Hughes interview.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. One of the unfortunate realities that Dillard and likely other institutions continue to deal with now almost two years after the hurricane is debate and litigation with their insurers about fair compensation for losses suffered. The dilemma is that of reimbursement at the value of the property versus the cost to replace the facilities.

¹³ One of the positive stories to evolve from the diaspora of students from New Orleans' campuses in the wake of Katrina is the cooperative relationship that instantly developed between institutions there and their counterparts who temporarily took in students so they could continue their educations, but with provisos such that students would be obligated to return to their home colleges and universities, not to become permanent members of other student bodies.

¹⁴ Personal conversation with President Hughes, May 26, 2007.

¹⁵ Hughes interview.

¹⁶ Francis interview. HBCU's are Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

¹⁷ Hughes interview.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Hogan interview. The commentary that follows is based on Hogan's reflections.

²³ This is a notion strikingly similar to that made by TheodoreSizer in *The Students Are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), in which he notes that students in schools are always watching their teachers and that the messages they convey in handling themselves and the students are equally as powerful as any conveying of the curricular content they teach.

²⁴ Hogan interview.

²⁵ Hughes interview.

²⁶ Francis interview.

²⁷ Ibid.
