



## Responding to Hurricane Katrina

Last fall was no time for business as usual. Like the rest of the world, we at Williams were encouraged by the initial reports of Hurricane Katrina's indirect hit of New Orleans. Little did we realize how far-reaching its effects would be.

As the scale of the disaster became clearer, our thoughts turned first to alumni and student families who might have been in harm's way. As with 9/11, we established a Web site on which Williams people could report their situations for their classmates and friends to read.

Some of our students from the Gulf Coast were already on campus; some still had to make their way. We were able to arrange and pay for the travel of two students who'd been cut off from their family resources. The mother of one of them came to Williamstown, staying for a time in the home of history professor Charles Dew '58 before moving to a vacant home in town and eventually joining family in the Midwest. We made sure that both students had all they needed to begin the school year as prepared as possible.

Offers of support poured in from all parts of the College community. So did a uniquely compelling idea. Bill Spriggs '77, a senior fellow at the Economic Policy Institute, wrote us eloquently about the benefits to both institutions if Williams could help keep on track the legendary pre-medical program at Xavier University of Louisiana. This historically black campus each year produces twice as many African-American medical school students as any other college or university. Bill rightly worried about the cost to these students and to the country of a disruption in this valuable pipeline and pointed out how much we at Williams might have to learn from such a successful program.

It wasn't time to count the many hurdles involved. We quickly set out to see how many Xavier pre-med students and faculty we could incorporate until the university could reopen. Once again, all segments of the College community rallied, including computer science professor Bill Lenhart, who gave up a significant part of his leave to oversee the operation.

When it seemed like the numbers might be too large for us to handle on our own, we contacted Amherst, which quickly became a full partner with Williams—another sign, if we needed it, that this wasn't business as usual.

Communication with Xavier officials was logistically difficult. Their faculty and students had scattered and had already begun accepting placements elsewhere. In the end, we managed to accommodate eight Xavier pre-meds and one faculty member. The students took Williams courses and dove into campus life. The faculty member helped support them while pursuing her research.

Amherst had a similar number of students. We also arranged to accommodate for the fall semester one local student who'd just begun at Tulane.

We have been in the very fortunate position of being able to do this at no cost to the students or their institutions.

Meanwhile, the campus quickly coalesced around relief efforts. In its first week alone, an organizing group raised \$16,000 toward its \$50,000 goal.

Katrina Relief expanded to Hurricane Relief after the devastation of Rita, and then to Disaster Relief after the shocking earthquake in Pakistan.

Some two-dozen students are devoting their Winter Study to hands-on relief work in the Gulf. This being Williams, the students read theoretical works ahead of time and will write about it afterward. Yet again, alumni have played an important role. Jim Samenfeld-Specht '74 put us in touch with Pete Kirkwood '93, a board member at Hands On USA, one of the disaster-response groups with which our students will work.

I've written often in this space about the College's strategic plan. Planning is important, and I'm proud of what Williams has accomplished along this line. But the health of an institution also depends on how it reacts to the unexpected, and in this regard I can say that I've never been prouder than I was this fall of our far-flung College community.

—Morty Schapiro