

Rice University Aces Crisis Management: What Companies Can Learn.

August 26-29, 2017, Hurricane Harvey punished southeast Texas, including the nation's 4th most populated city, Houston. As a parent of a junior at Rice University, I was a tertiary audience, after #1 students, and #2 faculty/staff. As a seasoned corporate social responsibility expert, I give Rice an A+ for how it handled the crisis. Every institution can learn from their example:

In sum: responsible caring.

- 1. Planning and Priorities**
- 2. Communication to All Stakeholders**
- 3. Community Spirit**
- 4. Perspective**

Planning and Priorities

Emergency preparedness began years before Harvey hit Houston, with installation of private generators and a water filtration system. Advanced planning with the city and experts, enabled faculty and staff to mobilize quickly. They shored up buildings, stored extra supplies, informed students and parents what they should expect, and what was expected of them, and published emergency.rice.edu. Off-campus students were provided food and housing at Rice, regardless of their meal plan status. The school released all faculty and staff, except those essential to student care and maintenance. Those who remained were housed and fed. Services were cut back or consolidated, and everyone did the best they could. Undergrads were reminded of the Dean's decades-old mantra, "Reasonable, Responsible, Respectful," and they embodied all three.

Communication to All Stakeholders

Two days before the hurricane was expected to reach Houston, Rice faculty and staff began communicating to students, parents, and even alumni. "Safety is everyone's responsibility, individually and collectively," wrote John Hutchinson, Undergraduate Dean. Via multiple media channels, students were updated several times a day, and parents at least once a day. Despite the stress of the storm, Saturday's letter was signed "Go Owls!" The Rice football team was playing against Stanford in Australia; residential colleges hosted "watch parties" in their dining halls.

Community Spirit

Community spirit pervaded campus and extended well beyond its hedges. Students and their guests, were appropriately creative – CPR classes, a 'weather' playlist, faculty lectures, and hallway Olympics. The update to parents after the storm arrived *first* expressed "heartfelt worries for the people of this wonderful city." Then let us know that campus was safe so far. The University worked with city and county officials, first responders, local businesses, and nearby residents, to maximize everyone's efforts. For example, Rice cleared a parking lot so emergency

helicopters could land, and then school EMS, police, and volunteers transported patients from there to the 24 hospitals in the city.

While the students were eager to help the community, the University wisely checked their enthusiasm until a needs assessment was completed, a system was developed, and it was safe to serve. When the storm ended, the new program, the *Rice Harvey Action Team* (R-HAT) was activated with a portal for school volunteers to tackle a host of projects requested by the community. Unsurprisingly, the program is oversubscribed, even since classes resumed. Additionally, in a show of partnership, Rice and University of Houston played a soccer match on September 4th that raised money for Greater Houston's United Way Flood Relief Fund.

Perspective

The University appreciated the *glimmers of a silver lining* in the storm. Campus wasn't hit too hard. Students were judicious with their use of food and supplies ("shared sacrifice"), they remembered to use hand sanitizer, and they followed the many instructions from the President, Provost, and Deans. Every communication, expressed heartfelt appreciation for the Housing & Dining, Facilities Engineering & Planning, and Rice Police departments for giving so much of themselves and for working together in true collaboration.

Taking care of the impacted members of the university community is now at the top of Rice's list. Alumni, parents, and students donated to a relief fund for just this purpose. "The upside to this whole situation has been a shared experience resulting in a [campus-wide and city-wide] bonding opportunity," wrote "Dean Hutch." Rice University and its students are prepared to do more than basic civic responsibility would require; they will be involved with the region's recovery long after this year's freshman class is graduated.