

LOOKING AHEAD POST-DISASTER: WHAT LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN HIGHER EDUCATION CAN LEARN FROM HAITI

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Much can be learned from the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12, 2010. The impact to the Haitian higher education system was catastrophic. It was estimated that 6,000 students and 200 faculty lost their lives. Additionally, it was reported that 28 of the 32 university buildings in the capital were destroyed, with the remaining four severely damaged. A further setback to the system was the number of professors and students who, understandably, left Haiti after the quake struck the country. The Haitian higher education system has been in a state of rebuilding since that time.

Mexico experienced an estimated 8.2 magnitude earthquake on September 7, 2017 and a 7.1 magnitude earthquake 12 days later. The Caribbean experienced back-to-back Category Five Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Irma has been described as “catastrophic” to several countries in the region, resulting in 100% of Barbuda’s residents evacuated. Two weeks later, the Caribbean was pummeled by Hurricane Maria, which has been referred to as the worst natural disaster experienced by Dominica in recorded history. It is without question the higher education systems in these countries have been affected as well. Given the recent natural disasters in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) in 2017, this essay draws from lessons learned from Haiti and offers recommendations for higher education officials to consider.

Lessons from Haiti

After the Haiti earthquake, the Interuniversity Institute for Research and Development (INURED) partnered with the Haitian Education and Leadership Program (HELP) and others to produce a report in March 2010 of the rapid assessment of higher education they conducted in the country. Drawing from my research on Haiti, including interviews with members of INURED and HELP, I offer recommendations for higher education in LAC. My recommendations include what can be done immediately, next steps post-disaster, and suggestions for developing disaster plans if ones do not presently exist for higher education.

Immediately after the Disaster

First, I suggest higher education actors conduct an analysis of the current state of higher education institutions (HEIs). Specifically, I recommend creating a database of the universities and determining the state of each them. University officials should seek to understand the impact to the physical buildings they oversee and other physical resources such as libraries, computer labs, and cafeterias. The purposes of this analysis are two-fold: to understand the severity of the impact to HEIs and to determine if the buildings are safe and can be used as a component of relief efforts for the surrounding community.

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Next, the question of who has been impacted needs to be ascertained, which may prove more difficult. Determining the human cost of disaster is a grim task that is compounded by the realities of the disaster impact. If faculty, staff, or students are among the deceased, university protocols for responding to such situations should be initiated. This recommendation considers the fact that higher education officials assigned this task as a part of their official roles may be among those who are injured or deceased. Thus, if disaster protocols do not presently exist that also include contingencies such as loss of life and leadership, senior higher education officials should seek to creating them when a more stable time presents itself.

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Furthermore, student learning suffers a great deal because of these disasters. If classes are on hold for the foreseeable future, university students can prove helpful in the recommended analysis of the state of HEIs. The feasibility of this recommendation can only be determined on a country-by-country or on an institutional basis. In Haiti, INURED used research students affiliated with their organization and university students from HELP, who lived in HELP housing, to support their research. Assigning students to assist with their assessment allowed for a different form of teaching and learning and provided students an opportunity to tangibly support their HEI in a meaningful way. An INURED administrator explained that participating in the assessment project allowed students to respond to one issue alongside the severe damage the country was responding to across the capital. Finally, institutional leaders should

make known to stakeholders what has been gleaned from this analysis so that it could be understood *how* higher education has been affected.

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When higher education is seriously disrupted

Natural disasters are challenging, complex, and multifaceted. If higher education needs cannot be met, the affected LAC countries may consider leaning on existing relations with neighboring countries. Likewise, I suggest that the LAC higher education sector, specific HEIs, embrace students from affected countries. For instance, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) helped to facilitate connections between universities in the region in support of Haitian students. After the Haiti earthquake, the Caribbean responded to the university needs of students, with some who were near completion attending universities in various islands. Items to consider in these partnerships are access to students grades or transcripts, potential language barriers, feasibility of university transfers, and challenges related to funding.

Likewise, drawing from current university partnerships with other countries to leverage opportunities for students may be a consideration. In the case of Mexico, which did not experience a country-wide breakdown in infrastructure, universities that were not affected by the back-to-back earthquakes may consider allowing impacted students to attend their institutions to minimize setbacks to their learning. This alternative for schooling has been most feasible for students from Puerto Rico who have been able to attend universities in mainland United States, notably the University of South Florida in Tampa and Florida International University in Miami.

Although the hope is that students could complete their degrees at the institutions they began, we know that the

longer students remain away from their studies, the more difficult it will be for them to resume and therefore less likely to complete. Like Haiti, a concern of providing scholarships to attend intuitions abroad is the issue of brain drain, of which Haiti has a reported rate of 84%. Thus, higher education officials in LAC must also consider the benefits and the potential unintended consequences for students who have no other choice than to leave their countries, namely Dominica, to complete their studies elsewhere.

Similarly, as transnational organizations, non-governmental organizations, and other groups seek to respond to the humanitarian crisis brought by natural disasters in LAC, I emphasize that support for higher education be specifically requested and earmarked. Notably, primary and to some degree secondary education is often included in responses when crisis or conflict occurs. Although concern for higher education *is* included in responses, it is to a lesser degree. Thus, as ministries of education or higher education actors seek more comprehensive approaches to responding to the challenges to their educational systems post-disaster, including higher education in their plans with external actors will be imperative.

Haiti's progress in rebuilding its higher education system can be attributed in part to the higher education consortia that were enhanced after its 2010 earthquake, particularly The Consortium for Rebuilding and Improving of Higher Education in Haiti. Likewise, LAC should tap in to the inter-university links that exist to learn from faculty, senior administrators, scholars, and practitioners from higher education institutions and related organizations within the region. These individuals can offer their

expertise for responding to the complex challenges facing each of the countries affected by natural disaster. From providing insight and reviewing rebuilding plans to offering potential solutions for strengthening systems and policies in preparation for future disaster, drawing from persons who possess expertise on disaster impacts to higher education can prove successful.

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Conclusion

When LAC higher education systems address impact to their higher education systems, I emphasize that current students be included in plans, process, and decision-making as they are the most impacted by the challenges and success of their higher education institutions. As in the case of Haiti, students contributed to the rapid assessment of its higher education system soon after its earthquake. Likewise, in the countries affected by the 2017 earthquakes and hurricanes, students can speak to the issues that should be addressed within their own higher education institutions or the broader system itself. Mexico and those countries affected in the Caribbean have much to consider in the months and years ahead. With purposeful approaches to restructuring efforts, their higher education systems can come out even stronger in the end.