Rethinking the Business Model
Responsibilities of Governing Boards
Fostering Resilience

BY MILES C. COLLIER

On Friday, August 13, 2004, Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Fla., sat in the crosshairs of Hurricane Charley. In the 72 hours preceding projected landfall, we diverted the freshman class scheduled to move in that day, evacuated students and guests already residing on campus, and sent our faculty and staff home to secure their residences. As we waited for landfall, President Donald R. Eastman turned our focus forward. He asked: “What next? If the winds lift our roofs and the storm surge floods our campus, what do we do?” Luckily for Eckerd College—but not for our neighbors to the south—Hurricane Charley spared us. That day marked the beginning of our college’s journey to building resilience.

Resilience—the ability to bounce back from disruptive change—is a concept that has been gaining momentum in the private and public sectors as well as in higher education the last several years. Until recently, our efforts were focused on the separate areas of crisis management, emergency management, risk management, and business continuity. Without coordination and collaboration, however, those disciplines become costly for an institution: with the hiring of professionally certified emergency managers, risk managers, and business-continuity planners comes the establishment of offices requiring additional resources and more staff.

Independently, all four of the functions mentioned above addressed risk, mitigation, preparedness, response, damage assessment, recovery, and continuity. Each function had its own set of questions. For example, the emergency manager asked, “What are the risks? How do we prepare? How do we respond?” The risk manager asked, “What are the risks? How do we manage them?” The business-continuity planner asked, “What are the risks? How do we continue operations?” It isn’t often that the people exercising those functions attend the same conferences or even work together in the same room on our campuses.

In order to become more resilient, that needs to change. Because building a resilient institution isn’t about asking the right questions; it’s about asking the questions right. It’s about knowing the ultimate goal. When our goal is resilience, we ask, “What are the risks to resilience?” “How do our mitigation/ preparedness/response/recovery steps contribute to resilience?” Asking the questions that way, Eckerd College assembled its emergency-management, risk-management, and business-continuity teams differently and began allocating its resources more wisely.

Responding to those questions isn’t only an administrative task. Building a resilient institution is a board responsibility, one that can and should be shared among all board committees. Eckerd College’s academic affairs, buildings and grounds, finance, investment, and student life committee agendas have all included presentations and deliberations on college efforts to continue operations no matter the emergency or disaster. The focus on resilience has required board action on policies, as well as an examination of the college’s mission and the role of technology in delivery of administrative services and the academic program.

As a result of our work over these past eight years, Eckerd College has taken steps that individually seem small and obvious. Taken together they foster resilience. The college has built unrestricted cash reserves that will act as an emergency or rainy day fund, modeled our revenues/expenditures cycle over multiple-year periods, granted more authority to the board’s investment committee, improved insurance coverage, created an IT environment that allows all work to take place at a distance, adopted human-resource policies that support telecommuting, articulated academic policies that position faculty members and students to continue the academic program away from our waterfront location, strengthened our partnerships with government agencies and other higher education institutions, and established communication technologies that ensure that our academic community can continue to work and govern together post-emergency.

Our work fostering resilience at Eckerd College isn’t finished. This kind of work never is. But our ongoing efforts will be guided by the overarching question, “How do our actions enhance our resilience?” All of our institutions face natural and man-made disasters and threats; how resilient is your institution?

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