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EDUCATION

Colleges Now Offering Education in Disaster

By LISA W. FODERARO JUNE 9, 2011

NEW PALTZ, N.Y. — Carlene Pinto watched from her middle-school classroom in Brooklyn as the plane pierced the second tower; then she trudged the three miles home as paperwork and dust rained from the sky. Rebecca Rodriguez felt helpless as a teenager watching Hurricane Katrina unfold on television. And Lindsay Yates still shudders at the recollection of Hurricane Fran, which killed two dozen people in her native North Carolina when she was a second grader.

Now in their early 20s, these women might be members of a support group for those brushed by trauma at a tender age. Instead, they spent the spring term studying disaster mental health at the State University of New York campus here.

Their undergraduate minor is among scores of programs on emergency management and disaster response that have sprung up across the country in recent years at the same unflagging pace as the catastrophes that have inspired them. Just as earlier waves of college students were molded by long-running conflicts like the cold war, today's undergraduates have confronted an abundance of sudden, free-ranging calamity, both natural and not.

"This generation has never known a time without terrorism or disaster, and I think it has drawn many of them to this field," said Karla Vermeulen, deputy director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health, which was founded in 2004 at SUNY New Paltz. "They were 10 at the time of 9/11 and 14 during Katrina, and it's really shaped them."

They have had plenty to study recently, including the earthquake in Haiti, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the tsunami in Japan and the tornadoes and floods that have ravaged swaths of the South and Midwest this spring.

"It's a moving target," Dr. Vermeulen said. "You're watching the news in the morning and figuring out, 'How am I going to incorporate the last disaster into my teaching?'"

Programs like the one at SUNY New Paltz offer a range of diplomas, from associate's degrees to doctorates, and go by various names: disaster science, emergency preparedness, public safety administration, hazard policy, humanitarian action. While most are offered by large state universities, some are based at liberal arts campuses, like SUNY New Paltz, that are better known for teaching philosophy than more practical subjects like "psychological first aid," a linchpin of treatment for disaster victims.

Graduates often go on to jobs with nonprofit organizations; county, state and federal emergency-management agencies; and corporations, schools and hospitals that want to develop contingency plans for operating after a disaster.

"There's a wholesale recognition of the value and the need for these types of programs," said Carol L. Cwiak, assistant professor of emergency management at North Dakota State University. "Everyone needs to consider emergency management, whether you're in the public sector or private sector."

The number of emergency-management programs in higher education has jumped from about 70 in 2001 to at least 232 now, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency. In 1995, the year after FEMA began encouraging the development of new academic programs to supplement training at its Emergency Management Institute in Maryland, there were just five. In addition, there are now at least 112 "homeland security" programs, which focus mainly on terrorism — all of them begun since 9/11.

"We're seeing the addition of 12 emergency-management programs, on average, every year," said Dr. Cwiak, who is also executive director of the Emergency Management Higher Education Consortium, a group representing college-based programs.

This spring, Fordham University introduced a master's degree in international humanitarian action, which examines all aspects of disasters, from politics and history to ethics. At Eastern Kentucky University, enrollment in the department of safety, security and emergency management has grown

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The program at SUNY New Paltz is unusual both for its location — the Northeast, which has relatively few disaster programs — and for its focus on mental health. Students study geography, media, global terrorism and death in American society. They learn the latest approaches to aiding disaster victims, like attending to immediate physical and emotional needs rather than debriefing victims on the trauma itself.

And they pitch in on the ground. The institute's director, James Halpern, began a recent lecture by soliciting help for flood victims further upstate, in Plattsburgh. "There are natural disasters occurring in New York State," he said, "and it's pretty bad, so if anybody has two days to go up, let us know."

For several years, students have volunteered at ground zero for the 9/11 anniversary ceremonies, offering solace to survivors. And a few months after Hurricane Katrina, Dr. Halpern took a group of students to New Orleans.

"A lot of people were concerned that the students might not be mature enough or responsible enough or old enough," he said. "There were dead pets. There were people coming back to find their homes in ruins. It was really apocalyptic. But what I found out was, what they didn't have in experience, they made up for in enthusiasm, idealism and common sense."

At the sleek new Emergency Services Center in nearby Orange County, where student interns from New Paltz shadow 911 call takers, the crises on a showery afternoon in mid-May were decidedly less grave. Ms. Rodriguez, who has since graduated, listened as Cristina Facchini took a call from a woman who was frantic because her neighbor's pig had climbed on her car.

"She was inside the car and she stated that there's a pig on top and he's eating my car," Ms. Facchini said moments after the call. "She wanted to move her car but didn't want to hurt it. Apparently, it was a big pig."

During their visit to the emergency center, Ms. Rodriguez and the other interns moved to a conference room and took turns deconstructing famous catastrophes: what Shannon Fisher, the county's emergency management program coordinator, jokingly referred to as the "disaster du jour." Among them were Love Canal, the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, the 2004 school hostage crisis in Russia and the 2005 train disaster in South Carolina.

"I like getting a thorough history of disasters: what went well, what didn't go well," said Ms. Yates, a third-year student from Willow Spring, N.C. "Lessons learned is a big thing for me."

Then Ms. Fisher pulled out an envelope full of paper slips on which she had written the names of disasters to be discussed the next week. One by one, the students reached inside, drawing the European heat wave of 2003, the 1911 Triangle shirtwaist factory fire, and the tornado that killed seven children at an elementary school in Orange County, N.Y., in 1989.

Ms. Fisher urges the interns to use liberal doses of humor as a hedge against despair. So on the slip for Hurricane Katrina, she simply wrote, "You're doing a heck of a job, Brownie."

Not everyone got it; they were children, after all, in 2005. The next week, however, they would understand.

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