The Student Storm Survey©: College Students' Thoughts on their University's Response to a Natural Disaster

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ABSTRACT

Hurricanes Gustav and Ike devastated the region that our University serves. Near the start of the semester, only one of the ten scheduled class days could be completed and administrators asked students and faculty to "continue the learning process" online via Blackboard©, our Electronic Delivery System (EDS). The Student Storm Survey© (SSS) examined student reaction to shifting from "brick-and-mortar" to "online" instruction on EDS as well as other storm-related decisions.

A small majority of the respondents reported that they wanted to work on EDS assignments, though most failed to complete them while the University was closed; most disagreed that such assignments helped them return to school. With respect to the University's decisions about when to close and reopen, overall, students were satisfied with these decisions, but those whose homes suffered the most damage were the least content. Suggestions for improving EDS effectiveness to continue learning, and making more informed decisions about school reopenings after future emergencies are presented.

Out of necessity, universities in the Gulf South Region are forced to prepare for the damage and disruption caused by tropical storm activity. Hurricane Emergency plans focus on public safety and the protection of property in the event of an approaching storm (Nicholls State University, 2008). However, efforts can be made to minimize the disruption of the academic workings of the institution and facilitate the students return to campus life.

Still, hurricanes are very disruptive events. There are a number of studies documenting the effects of hurricanes on the psychological wellbeing of the general populace. For example, Kelly et al. (2010) analyzed how exposure

to Hurricane Katrina contributed to negative parenting practices. Weems et al. (2007) suggested that "public policy" differences influenced how Hurricane Katrina evacuees experienced the storm and its' aftermath (e.g. their symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder). Phillips and Phillips (2008) used Hurricane Katrina as a "learning opportunity" to generate exercises for their college management classes. The current study concerns the effects of "University policy" on college students, and what occurred at Nicholls State University when students experienced two hurricanes within two weeks. Students were asked about the University's policies to ensure that learning would continue on the internet while classes were cancelled; as well as it decisions' about when to close and reopen.

On September 1st, 2008 Hurricane Gustav made landfall dangerously close to our small rural University in south Louisiana forcing the University to cancel eight class days after the start of the Fall 2008 semester. The University was damaged and surrounding parishes (counties) were declared Federal Disaster Areas. Over seventeen calendar days (including weekends and a holiday), the school lost seven class days due to Gustav, reopened, and a day later was forced to cancel night classes and then close for another full class day due to Hurricane Ike. Before the storms, the University instituted its Emergency Preparedness Plan, and asked faculty and students to perform a number of activities including continuing the academic process via web-based instruction. The current study was an attempt to examine student response to this unprecedented sequence of events.

The Student Storm Survey© (SSS) explored student reaction to the University's Emergency Plan, in particular the University's expectations for continued learning while it remained closed; Other aspects of the plan (i.e. the adequacy of the time it remained closed) are also addressed.

The SSS gauges student views of the Emergency Plan's effectiveness, what the University did right/wrong, and how students would suggest that it be modified for future hurricanes. A variety of descriptive statistics are reported and data examined for patterns based upon demographics. It is hoped that feedback from this instrument can improve the University's (and other institution's) responses to future storm emergencies. What follows provides a brief description of the University to provide context for the Student Storm Survey©.

The University

The current research was conducted at a comprehensive, regional institution serving a southern state. It is located approximately 60 miles away from the nearest major urban area. In addition to baccalaureate degrees, the university offers a number of master's programs and one Specialist degree in School Psychology. At the start of the Fall 2008 semester, there were 6926 undergraduate and graduate students (2593 men and 4933 women) (Nicholls State University, 2009).

The Emergency Plan

Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and much of south Louisiana in 2005. Nicholls' experience with Katrina led to its plan for "continued learning following an extreme emergency."

The plan (set forth in the Policy and Procedure Manual of Nicholls State University) presents Student Responsibilities as:

> **Continued Learning Following an Extreme Emergency**
>
> In order to make continued learning possible following an extreme emergency, students are responsible for:
>
> - reading regular emergency notifications on the NSU website;
> - knowing how to use and access Blackboard© (or University designated electronic delivery system);
> - being familiar with emergency guidelines;
> - evacuating textbooks and other course materials;
> - knowing their Blackboard (or designated system) student login and password;
> - contacting faculty regarding their intentions for completing the course" (Nicholls State University, 2008).

Corresponding faculty responsibilities are listed in the Manual, as well.

At the time, the University's plan relied heavily on student/professor use of Blackboard©. Blackboard© (and competitors such as Moodle©) are advertised as a technology that: "improves every aspect of education . . . keeping students informed, involved and collaborating together" (Blackboard, 2008). Blackboard© and other electronic delivery systems (EDS) provide a website where professors can post assignments, course materials, communicate with students, and even test on-line.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 91 undergraduates registered for either a sophomore-level Developmental Psychology course, or a sophomore-level Social Psychology course volunteered to complete the survey. Of 65 students in Developmental Psychology, 60 returned their surveys, of 36 in Social Psychology, 31 students returned their surveys. Students received extra credit for completing the survey.

Students ranged in age from 18 to 35, one female participant did not indicate her age. The mean age of the remaining 20 male (22%) and 70 female (78%) participants in the sample was 21.6 years (SD = 12.8). Participants included 62 Caucasian Americans (72.1%), 18 African Americans (22.9%), 3 Asian Americans (3.5%), 1 Native American (1.2%) and 2 individuals (2.3%) of mixed ethnicity, 5 did not indicate ethnicity. A total of 77 participants (84.6%) were single, 11 (12.1%) were married, 1 (1.1%) was divorced and 2 (2.2%) were cohabiting. In addition, 75 (82.4%) had no children, while 15 (17.6%) had one or more children, 1 individual did not respond to this item.

There were 11 seniors (12.1%), 26 juniors (28.6%), 48 sophomores (52.7%) and 6 freshmen (6.6%). Participants had an average GPA of 3.14 (SD = .52), 8 had no/did not furnish a GPA. Participants reported 21 different major areas of study, the most common (49 students or 54.4%) was nursing.

In all, 7 (7.7%) of the students were employed full-time, 44 (48.4%) were employed part-time, 40 (44.0%) were unemployed and 4 (4.4%) reported they had lost their jobs due to the hurricanes.

A total of 14 respondents (15.4%) lived on-campus with a roommate, 1 (1.1%) lived on-campus with a spouse; 2 (2.2%) lived off-campus alone, 13 (14.3%) lived off-campus with a roommate, 19 (20.9%) lived off-campus with a spouse/significant other, and 42 (46.2%) lived off-campus with their parents.

Materials

All respondents completed *The Student Storm Survey*© between September 22nd and October 6th 2008, about three to five weeks after Gustav landfall and one to three weeks after Ike. The SSS contained demographic questions, items relevant to the students' use of web-based instruction while Nicholls was closed and items concerning the length of school closures. A calendar with storm related events affecting the University (e.g. days of landfall, days the school closed/reopened) was embedded in the SSS to help students with chronology.

The SSS utilized fill-in-the blank, multiple-choice, and Likert-type items. Most SSS items contained parallel items for each storm; the survey had an item about Hurricane Gustav, followed closely by the same item about Hurricane Ike.

Procedure

Surveys were distributed in class. Verbal instructions emphasized survey data might aid future students. Students were asked to complete the survey at home and return it as soon as possible. The vast majority (73.6%) completed the SSS from September 22nd through September 24th, though surveys were accepted until October 6th.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An alpha level of .05 was maintained for all statistical tests. Since a number of students failed to complete all the SSS items, sample sizes will be reported for each analysis. Unless otherwise noted, SSS Likert-type items ranged from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 10 = "strongly agree". Data are organized into two sections. In the first, items concerning continued learning while the University was closed are displayed; in the second, items relevant to the length of closure and related issues are presented.

Continued Learning while the University was Closed.

The Student Storm Survey© attempted to explore student opinions regarding the utility of University's designated EDS in the aftermath of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. Many of the remaining items treat Gustav and Ike as a single "event" since both resulted in emergency school closures: The following SSS items seem most germane: "Posting new assignments for my classes on Blackboard© while Nicholls was closed helped me prepare to return to school" (EDS-Assignments-Helped-Return); "While Nicholls was closed I wanted to work on my Blackboard© course assignments" (Wanted-EDS-Work); "While Nicholls was closed I was able to complete most of the Blackboard© assignments professors added to make up for missed classes" (Completed-Most-EDS-Work); and finally, "After Nicholls closed I checked the Blackboard© website for new assignments on the following days", days were aggregated into a summary statistic (Total-Days-Checked-EDS).

When the "Total-Days-Checked-EDS" variable was computed, the total contained all storm closure dates from 08/29/08 through 09/14/08 (including a holiday and weekends), plus the dates of 09/10/08 and 09/11/08 when

the University briefly reopened; therefore, "Total-Days-Checked-EDS" ranged from 0-17 days. Data for the EDS items are presented as Table 1.

Students' opinions of using EDS to continue learning after the emergencies are disappointing. The majority of students "disagreed" with the notions that EDS assignments helped them to return to Nicholls, or that they could complete most EDS assignments. The average number of times they checked EDS assignments was about once every other day, but 24 students (26.37%) looked at the EDS 3 times or less in 17 days, or 1.24 times per week.

One student's comments provided an explanation for why they did not check the EDS more frequently: "How could I check Blackboard© when I didn't have power, much less the Internet" (Anonymous Developmental Psychology Student, September, 22, 2008); her comment is echoed by certain survey items; for example, students indicated that on average, they were without electricity for over seven days (M = 7.83, SD = 4.70, n = 88) and that some remained without power (or had limited generator power) for as many as 20 days. Data indicate that the typical student was without Internet access for over nine days (M = 9.54, SD = 8.02, n = 89). Some remained without for 31 days. For comparison, cell phone service was reportedly down only about a day and a half on average (M = 1.61, SD = 2.64, n = 88).

It should be noted that some of the same students who reported being without internet access for weeks indicated that they checked the Nicholls EDS within days after Gustav *while they were without internet service!* It is possible that some checked at a friend's house, at public hot-spots, via internet-enabled cell phones, or relief-organization sponsored kiosks set up for storm victims.

To investigate internet access and student satisfaction with the EDS further, a Spearman's rho was computed between the: "EDS assignments helped me return to school" and the number of days "without internet service" items. The correlation was significant (rho = -3.46, p>.001, n = 89). The longer the student reported they were without internet access, the less they "agreed" that EDS assignments helped them return to school. You cannot surf the web on cut telephone/internet cables or when wireless does not function.

"The Total-Days-Checked-EDS" variable aggregates the times a student logged-on to Blackboard© over seventeen days. Figure 1 presents a graph of the data partialed out each day from 08/29/08 (when the University closed for Gustav) to 09/14/08 (the day before the University reopened after Ike).

The graph clearly shows dips in EDS access on the days of Hurricane Gustav's landfall (September 1st, 2008) and Hurricane Ike's landfall (September 13th 2008). There is also a "scalloped" pattern present after Gustav (a large dip followed by a general increase in reported EDS checks each day thereafter), until "checks" dropped sharply again for Ike.

At first the current authors thought this "scallop" was entirely due to the day-by-day recovery of the local infrastructure. As more of the local internet reconnected, more students had access to the EDS.

No doubt infrastructure recovery accounts for part of this trend; but upon reflection, the current authors would suggest a "Skinnerian" (Ferster & Skinner, 1957) modification to the infrastructure explanation. The students' response set may (in part) reflect a "fixed interval" reinforcement schedule. It is likely that the last thing most students wanted to think about after Gustav was school, they were too busy attending to their friends and loved-ones to as they put it "deal" with it; but as the "necessity" ("pay-off" somehow doesn't fit) of school reopening approached, the response of re-engaging with school via the EDS became more pressing and therefore, more frequent (more student "checks").

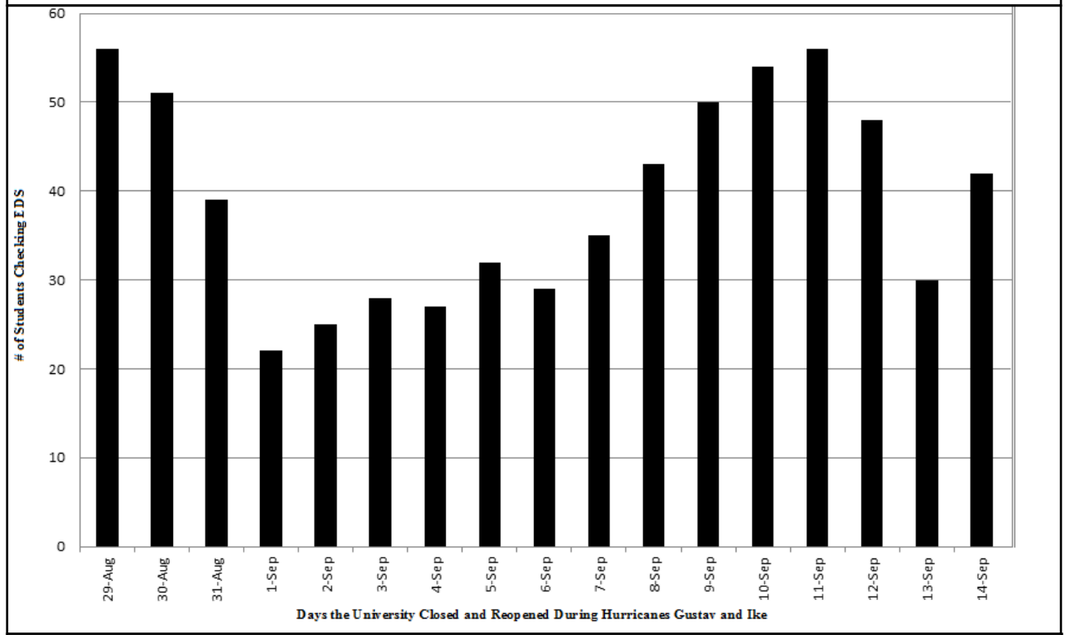
Administrators and faculty should remember this when planning for future hurricanes; sometimes academicians forget that students actually have lives.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Students' Ratings of Nicholls' Electronic Delivery System during the Storms

Question	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	Mode
Posted EDS assignments helped me return[a] (n=91)	3.69	3.10	2.00	1
Wanted to work on EDS Assignments[a] (n=90)	5.37	3.62	5.00	1
Completed most EDS Assignments[a] (n=91)	3.34	2.97	2.00	1
Total days checked EDS for Assignments[b] (n=91)	7.33	4.85	7.00	3

[a] where 1 = "Strongly disagree" and 10 = "Strongly agree"
[b] potential range for this item is 0 – 17 days including 2 days reopened after Hurricane Gustav.

Figure 1
Number of student respondents checking the Electronic Delivery System from closure for Hurricane Gustav to day before reopening after Hurricane Ike.



The University first closed on Friday, August 29th for Gustav, classes resumed on Wednesday, September 10th. The University closed again on Thursday night, September 11th for Ike, classes resumed on Monday, September 15th

Speaking of academicians, we need to mention another vital determinant of students' continued learning via EDS in emergencies, namely: CONTENT. Based upon informal conversations with our colleagues we would suggest that the main way faculty chose to continue the academic process after Gustav was an e-mail to: "read chapters 4-6 in your text". Whether or not that is appropriate and effective is a topic for later discussion.

To their credit, the majority of students (a slight majority) reported that they wanted to work on their EDS assignments while school was closed (Wanted-EDS-Work M = 5.37). To explore the relationship between wanting to complete the work and actually completing it, Table 2 presents the Spearman's rho correlations between the variables presented in the previous table.

Not surprisingly the correlation between wanting to work on the EDS assignments (Wanted-EDS-Work) is significantly correlated with the number of times students checked the EDS (Total-Days-Checked-EDS). The more a student self-reported that they wanted to work on the assignments the more they checked the EDS. The correlation between wanting to work on EDS (Wanted-EDS-Work) and completing most of the work (Completed-Most-EDS-Work) was even stronger. The more they wanted to work on the assignments the more they completed them.

The most striking correlation was between completed most assignments (Completed-Most-EDS-Work) and feeling that the Blackboard© assignments helped them prepare to return to school (EDS-Assignments-Helped-Return). Recall that when rating agreement with the item: "Posting new assignments for my classes on Blackboard© while Nicholls was closed helped me prepare to return to school" the modal response was "strongly disagree" (36 of 91 students or ~40%); however, the more a particular student completed of their EDS assignments, the more likely they were to indicate that the assignments helped them return to school (rho = .729, p<.0001, n = 91).

Table 2
Spearman's Correlations between Electronic Delivery System Variables

Question	Posted EDS Assignments helped me return	Wanted to work on EDS assignments	Completed most EDS assignments	Total days checked EDS for assignments
Posted EDS assignments helped me return	--	.413***	.729***	.430***
Wanted to work on EDS Assignments	--	--	.348**	.227*
Completed most EDS Assignments	--	--	--	.387***
Total days checked EDS for Assignments	--	--	--	--

* = p <.05, ** = p<.01, *** = p<.001
(n=91)

Did completing more assignments convince students the assignments were more valuable? Were those students already convinced of the assignments' value more likely to complete their assignments than students who thought the work of little value? Or, is the EDS-Assignments-Helped-Return x Completed-Most-EDS-Work correlation a function of a third intervening variable. The current data set makes deciding among these alternatives problematic.

The University's Closure and Reopening.

The most direct measure of student opinions concerning the University's response to the storms was the following general item(s): "Overall, I am happy with how Nicholls reacted to Gustav" (Overall-Gustav) and the parallel item for Ike: "Overall, I am happy with how Nicholls reacted to Ike" (Overall-Ike). A related item was: "Nicholls closed long enough to allow me time to recover and return to school after Gustav" (Long-Enough-Gustav), and the parallel item "Nicholls closed long enough to allow me time to recover and return to school after Ike" (Long-Enough-Ike). Data for these items are presented as Table 3.

The majority of students agreed with the statement that Nicholls reacted well to Hurricane Gustav (Overall-Gustav) and the parallel statement about Hurricane Ike (Overall-Ike). Similarly, more students agreed that Nicholls remained closed long enough for Gustav (Long-Enough-Gustav) and for Ike (Long-Enough-Ike) than disagreed; however, students agreed less strongly that the Gustav closure was long enough (Long-Enough-Gustav *Mdn* = 8) than that the Ike closure was long enough (Long-Enough-Ike *Mdn* = 9). Thus, student satisfaction with length of the Gustav closure (seven class days, twelve calendar days) was less than satisfaction with the length of Ike closure (one session of night classes plus one entire class day and a weekend, about four calendar days). A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test of the data indicated that the difference was significant $z = -3.10$, p <.002, n=91.

One hypothesis to explain this apparent difference is that Gustav made landfall much closer to Nicholls, caused much more damage, and affected more students/locals than Ike. Therefore, Gustav was a "greater threat" than Ike and students felt the time provided was less adequate even though the time off was about three times that given for Ike.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Students' Ratings of Nicholls' Reaction to Storms and Length of Closure[a]

Question	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	Mode
Overall happy with Nicholls' reaction to Gustav (n=90)	7.43	2.09	8.00	8
Overall happy with Nicholls' reaction to Ike (n=90)	7.32	2.59	8.00	10
Nicholls closed long enough for Gustav (n=90)	6.79	3.20	8.00	10
Nicholls closed long enough for Ike (n=90)	7.92	2.68	9.00	10

[a]where 1 = "Strongly disagree" and 10 = "Strongly agree"

To test this hypothesis, two other SSS items: "My home received significant damage from Gustav" ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 2.93$, n =90) and its parallel item for "Ike" ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 2.27$, n =90) were analyzed. A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test of the items indicated that students reported significantly more home damage from Gustav (*Mdn* = 3.5) than from Ike (*Mdn* = 1.0), $z = -5.67$, p <.001, n = 90. Test results support the notion that the "Long-enough-Gustav" "Long-enough-Ike" difference indeed may be due to the "greater threat" that Hurricane Gustav posed.

When the "My home received significant damage..." items were explored further, another issue was apparent. A Spearman's *rho* correlation was computed between the "Long-enough-Gustav" and the "My home received significant damage from Gustav" (Home-damage-Gustav) items. The correlation was nonsignificant (*rho* = -1.95, $p>.05$, n = 90); however, the Spearman's *rho* between: "My home received significant damage from Ike" (Home-damage-Ike) and its corresponding "Long-enough-Ike" item *was* significant (*rho* = -3.42, $p<.001$, n = 90).

Students with more home damage due to Ike felt the University should have stayed closed longer than a little more than three calendar days; but this effect was not apparent for the Gustav closure of twelve calendar days. The additional days for Gustav may have provided students who suffered property loss time to better recover; the time off for Ike might not have been sufficient. An alternative explanation might lie in "bereavement overload;" Hurricane Ike occurred less than two weeks after Gustav. The effects of Ike might have been exacerbated by Gustav.

The patterns in the "Long-enough-..." and "Home-damage..." data indicate how complex decisions to reopen after a disaster can be. When deciding to reopen administrators should consider damages on both a community-level as well as an individual-level, recognizing that some students may have suffered much more than others (e.g. the substantial number of students whose homes were devastated by hurricanes twice in two weeks). Perhaps there should be greater attention paid to these students after a disaster.

CONCLUSIONS

It is easy to conclude that in the face of a hurricane the educative process cannot resume until things get entirely back to normal. The current authors would suggest such reasoning is tantamount to learned helplessness and just as ineffective. The Student Storm Survey© suggests that a substantial number of students will not want to "deal" with school until it reopens; but a substantial number do! EDS instructional techniques will have to be designed to engage both those students wanting to continue instruction via the internet and engage those who do not.

While we cannot offer much in the way of specific advice regarding when a university should close and reopen, we can say surveys of student opinion should not be the sole (or even the primary) determinant. We can however, offer the following suggestion to administrators based upon survey data: Administrators should not reopen before the university community is ready, nor fail to reopen when it is. Make the decision after weighing community-level as well as individual-level factors. Be fair to all, but make allowances for students who may have suffered more than others; these are not easy tasks, especially while trying to respect academic integrity.

Make students aware of the resources available to them and their families. Nicholls distributed supplies shortly after the storms, but some students reported they could not attend class because they had to wait in a line to apply for government disaster aid. It would be a good idea to make applications for government disaster assistance available on campus as well as knowledgeable people to answer questions about the same. Make students aware of opportunities to volunteer to help others in their community, and where on campus they can receive counseling if necessary.

Finally, don't forget that faculty members may have suffered losses as well. Treat them with the respect that you expect in return; the success or failure of your efforts will largely depend upon their good works.

To shift focus now to what faculty members can do, the current authors would like to return to the subject of counseling again. Most educators are not psychological counselors, so we are ethically bound to direct troubled students to trained counseling professionals. We can however, definitely tell them that nothing, not even academics is as important as their well-being and the well-being of their loved ones.

Immediately after the storms, some of our students lost their jobs; many others had to quit school to help their families. Weems et al. (2007) identified symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Katrina evacuees. Some of our students' experiences rivaled those of Katrina evacuees, and were traumatized by their experience. Unfortunately, as a direct result, several tried to commit suicide. As faculty, we should let our students know that our institution is also a "community" where caring people will work with them to stay in school and (if necessary) help to put their lives back together. A recent article in a local newspaper reminded us of this fact by citing the State's mental health needs after Hurricane Katrina and noting that: ". . . college and university suicide prevention and intervention programs are often the first line of defense for those battling mental illness" (Buskey, 2013, July 26).

We can offer the following additional suggestions to faculty based upon survey data and general observations:

1. The time to communicate what you want students to do during an emergency is BEFORE the emergency. You can't give students the perfect assignment after the school has closed and the internet is down. Perhaps initial assignments should be a printed in your syllabus at the start of the semester, clearly labeled "do not attempt until school closes due to an emergency".
2. The Nicholls State Continued Learning Policy advises faculty to be "flexible" in the assignments given while the University is closed. We take this to mean that work should not "overwhelm" already stressed students; faculty should realize that some students may be incapable of completing the assignments; partial-credit anyone?
3. The Policy also suggests being "imaginative" in fashioning assignments. Not everyone is imaginative, so we have a simple solution called "ancillary materials". A book-rep near you is just dying to tell you about them. Any faculty member who avails themselves of these mostly free (they come with the book) materials will improve their teaching. Any faculty member who lives in a coastal area who does not avail themselves of these materials (or create their own) is one major hurricane away from shortchanging their students during an extended school closure.
4. The current authors would suggest that faculty make assignments that can be accomplished easily without reliable electricity. If a student has to stay on-line to read web-pages hour after hour draining power from their laptop, or print out an assignment to complete it (duh! No power), it probably won't get done. Follow the *GOGOLF* (*G*et-*O*n-*G*et-*O*ff-*L*ine-*F*ast) principle for communicating assignments. Pick and choose assignments using the *GOGOLF* principle.
5. Finally, a number of students went online to the EDS trying to continue learning only to find that their instructor had nothing there. Post something immediately, even if it's just a message telling them to be safe and some simple assignments easily accomplished. As far as you can, let students know when you expect additional assignments to be posted during the closure if you don't have them ready, if you do, post them immediately. Reassure students that you will be flexible when classes begin again, and that they will be able to finish the work necessary to complete the course. Take into account their circumstances, lighten-up, and where possible, don't leave them twisting in the wind.

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