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After Katrina, online university rebuilds in KC

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A university whose national operations sunk under 5 feet of water during Hurricane Katrina is inaugurating a new campus in Kansas City next week that will serve 10,000 students over the Internet.

The September storm destroyed Grantham University's main building in Slidell, La., filling deans' offices and admissions halls with overflow from Lake Pontchartrain. Students still could take tests online because the school's servers weren't downed in the hurricane, but most of the university's support staff lost everything they had.

Curriculum developer Sharon Morang said she wasn't sure she would have a job when she finally called into work from Hattiesburg, Miss., where she and her daughter were sent by evacuation crews.

"We had 150 staffers and eight days later we were 23 people. It was really mayhem," said Tom Macon, the university's chairman and chief executive officer. "When we saw the devastation I said, 'Go, everybody go.' We put people in motion and got them to go up to Missouri."

Grantham's core staff relocated almost immediately to temporary offices in Kansas City, while Macon set about hiring to replace administrators who stayed in Louisiana.

Though the university lost about \$7 million in damages and tuition payments, the school's distance-learning program never went dark. Grantham's 10,000 students, about 70 percent of whom are affiliated with the military, complete their graduate and undergraduate degrees in engineering, computer science and business online. The school's students, whose average age is 36, live in 50 states and 26 other countries, while its professors teach remotely from across the U.S.

The storm didn't affect Grantham's records, either. After going through Hurricane Ivan a year before, Macon had ordered all files to be digitized and stored on a secure server in Virginia.

"While the storm was ravaging our campus we still had people taking tests," said Macon. "As soon as we got here, people from Kansas City opened up their hearts, their arms, their pocketbooks, and supported us in ways that truly bring a lump to your throat."

As Macon scouted new locations for the administration, the staff moved into temporary condominiums. Next week, the university will inaugurate its new campus north of the Missouri River in an office building that will house the registrar, student services and academic deans.

The university has hired 160 new employees since arriving in Missouri, and Macon said he hopes to double in size by year's end.

"When we became a skeleton staff, I was happy to do anything to have a job," said Morang, a former student who started at Grantham as an admissions representative. "Now I'm working on the academic side. So Katrina did some good things."

ON THE NET

<http://www.grantham.edu>

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