

STUDENT SECTION

Volunteerism in a Disaster: A Real-Life Engagement Learning Experience

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Like many of our neighbors, on April 27th of 2011 we sat in our living room watching on live television as menacing tornados destroyed several communities across Alabama. On that April night, the city of Gadsden appeared to have made it through the storm with minimal damage. Therefore, we spent the majority of our evening contacting our peers and colleagues who might have been initially impacted by the Tuscaloosa tornadoes.

We spent the morning after the tornadoes discussing several approaches to usefully assist our community in assessing the relief needs in Tuscaloosa. After consultation with friends and colleagues in Tuscaloosa, we determined that the best option was to address relief needs from our location in Gadsden, a town in northeast Alabama. The Director of The University of Alabama's Gadsden Center granted permission to use the Center as our relief drive distribution hub. Our goal was to establish a site for Gadsden community members to donate relief goods and items for persons in Tuscaloosa. The relief drive was scheduled for the first two business days following the tornadoes, in order to allow adequate opportunity to advertise the drive and communicate with our Tuscaloosa friends and colleagues about high priority current needs.

Many of our fellow students and colleagues who resided in Tuscaloosa were without power during those first few days after the tornado. However, cell phones enabled some limited access to social media applications such as Facebook. Through such real time reports, we were able to get a better idea of what was taking place on the ground in the Tuscaloosa area. Communication with Tuscaloosa residents was an important aspect of the relief effort. From Friday the 29th to Monday the 1st, the list of needed items changed to include more first aid supplies and toiletries, as opposed to bottled water and non-perishable foods.

The next few days were devoted to contacting local organizations to advertise the tornado relief effort. We called and emailed local Gadsden community centers, including the YMCA, libraries, two local community colleges, the Masonic Lodge, and over 20 nearby churches. The purpose of these phone calls was to notify the organizations about the relief drive, leave our contact information with an organization representative, and have the organizations assist us with advertising the event. *The Gadsden Times* included two articles about the relief drive, and we also completed an interview with a local radio station.

Interestingly, several community churches were relieved to hear about the relief efforts. We were told by many community organizations that they had already been contacted by people seeking assistance or seeking the opportunity to provide assistance. Our relief drive was a welcome focus for the community organizations that had yet to organize specific efforts.

By the end of the day on Tuesday, hundreds of donations had been made by the members of the community. We delivered much of the donations to Tuscaloosa, but soon learned that an initial outpouring of generosity had left many relief agencies in Tuscaloosa overwhelmed by donations. Because of this, we also delivered donations to previously overlooked communities in northeast Alabama that had also been affected by the tornadoes.

When it was over, the tornado outbreak was responsible for over 243 deaths within our state. The disaster relief efforts following the April 2011 tornadoes crossed socioeconomic, gender, ethnic, and geographical boundaries. For example, in the small community of Monrovia, Alabama, over 2,000 volunteers were documented in a single day, and many were actually turned away (McCarter, 2011). More than 3,000 volunteers came to the small community of Harvest, Alabama during the first week following the tornado (Bonvillion, 2011). There was tremendous diversity in the individuals who came to assist in the relief drive. Many of these individuals indicated to us that although they were impoverished, they wanted to give what little they had for the benefit of their fellow community members.

Through this relief drive, we were able to empower a northeast Alabama community to assist neighbors in Tuscaloosa, and in the process to draw several key lessons from our experience:

- Social media and communication skills were essential to the success of the relief drive, as detailed in the community engagement literature (Johnson, 2010; Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donovan, 2002).
- Coordination provided the essential links between people, places, and resources, each of which was required in all three phases of the operation. In particular, we relied extensively upon our friends and colleagues in Tuscaloosa and the Gadsden Center staff members. The importance of coordination is in keeping with previous findings regarding disaster relief (Zakour, 1996).
- As participants in relief efforts, we were able to initially cope with our shock and feelings of loss. The relief drive enabled our own spiritual and emotional growth (Steffen & Fothergill, 2009).

The events of April 27th were certainly tragic and horrific. However, this real-life experience drove

home to us the importance of conceptualizing community engagement as not being a one-sided affair, as we realized how much we became dependent on the knowledge, resources, and support of our community members.

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