

The Creation and Development of a Multi-Disciplinary Research Center in an Academic Library

Teresa S. Welsh¹

¹Associate Professor, University of Southern Mississippi School of Library and Information Science; Assistant Director, Katrina Research Center

Abstract: Hurricane Katrina was the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history and one of the deadliest. In 2006, the University of Southern Mississippi established the Katrina Research Center (KRC) as an multi-disciplinary center for research and education to facilitate the gathering of information on the effects of and recovery from catastrophic natural disasters such as Katrina. The purpose of this case study is to document the creation and development of the Katrina Research Center, including its mission, vision, organizational structure, funding, collection development, community outreach, research and educational activities.

Keywords: hurricanes, disasters, academic library, repository, research center

1. Introduction

Hurricane Katrina, which struck on August 29, 2005, was the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history and one of the deadliest. At least 1,836 people lost their lives and the cost of damaged and destroyed property is estimated to be over \$80 billion. In addition to the flooding in New Orleans, there was extensive destruction across some 12 Mississippi Gulf Coast communities (Scurfield 2009a). A 34 feet high storm-surge from Katrina in western Mississippi was propelled inland *as far as 10 miles* from the coast through myriad rivers and bayous. An estimated 350 buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places were washed or blown away, along with most of the evidence of 300 years of Gulf Coast history. According to Huffman (2006), Katrina was *the worst historic preservation disaster* in U.S. history.

The Katrina Research Center (KRC) was originally part of the University Libraries at the Hattiesburg campus but was reorganized in July 2006 as a multi-disciplinary center located on the Southern Miss Gulf Coast campus in Long Beach. The Center, which opened in November 2007, was established to facilitate research and education by gathering information on the natural, physical, social, political and economic effects of and recovery from catastrophic natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina (McCormack 2007).

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to document and examine the creation and development of the Katrina Research Center, including its mission, vision, organizational structure, funding, collection development, community outreach, research and educational activities.

Research Questions

- R1. What is the mission and vision of the KRC?
- R2. What is its organizational structure?

- R3. How is the KRC funded?
- R4. What types of items are in the KRC repository and how are they collected?
- R5. What activities are related to community outreach?
- R6. What activities are related to research?
- R7. What activities are related to education?

Limitations

This study is limited to the creation and development of the Southern Miss Katrina Research Center. The results may not be generalizable to other academic research centers.

3. Methodology

Participant-observation and case study methodology were used in this study. This type of research involves first acknowledging the perspectives of the researcher (Yin 1994). It is relevant to note that the participant-observer is an assistant director of the KRC and had access to primary-source documents related to the creation and development of the KRC.

Theory

Examination of formal and informal documents related to this study is based on Narrative Theory. Humans are narrative beings and human rationality is determined by an “inherent awareness of *narrative probability*, what constitutes a coherent story ... and testing *narrative fidelity*, whether the stories they experience ring true with stories they know in their lives” (Fisher 1987, 64)

Validity

Triangulation, “where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (Creswell and Miller 2000, 126), was used to test the validity of the study. Formal documents such as monthly and yearly reports were compared with informal documents such as email correspondence. The KRC director, historian, and librarian were asked to review the study for accuracy.

4. Results

R1. What is the mission and vision of the KRC?

Mission

The Katrina Research Center (KRC) serves as an inter-disciplinary center and a public clearinghouse to facilitate the gathering of historical and current information and knowledge including the natural, physical, social, political, economic and spiritual aspects of recovery from Hurricane Katrina and other disasters. The KRC includes these major components related to Hurricanes Katrina and Camille as well as other disasters:

- a repository/historical collection
- exhibit center
- digital information clearinghouse
- research and education concerning post-disaster recovery and enhancement of quality of life.

The library of the University of Southern Mississippi - Gulf Coast provides critical support and leadership to the KRC depository and collaborates with the KRC to promote community awareness and provide access to scholars and the

general public.

Vision

- To be a world-class inter-disciplinary center that promotes and supports scholarship and education concerning the 2005 Hurricane Katrina and other disasters and contributes to the expansion and preservation of knowledge about Katrina, disasters and their aftermath.
- To facilitate the development of disaster-related research and/or program evaluation studies and knowledge through collaboration with the offices of Research and Economic Development, Research Foundation, the various colleges and departments, and/or for the KRC to develop and submit proposals to various funding sources.
- To develop, promote, implement and consult concerning cross-disciplinary educational, training and other learning opportunities to disseminate knowledge, assessment and actions about the human, social and economic impact of and recovery from disasters.
- To oversee the KRC Repository of historical and scholarly information and materials and to interface with the University's Gulf Coast Library concerning (a) the development and usage of repository and special collection of artifacts, photographs, documents and other items relevant to the impact and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and other disasters, (b) library resources regarding disaster-related mental health, economic recovery and disaster relief services and (c) developing a comprehensive database of Katrina, post-Katrina and other disaster materials that are accessible locally and nationally.

R2. What is its organizational structure?

The KRC is a research center that is led by a director, several assistant directors, an historian, a librarian/clearinghouse coordinator, and other associated faculty and staff. Initially, the KRC reported to the Gulf Coast Provost but in year two, the Southern Miss organizational structure changed. Now all research centers and institutes report to the Director of University Research Centers and Institutes, who reports to the Vice President for Research and Economic Development, who reports to the President of the University.

Physical structure:

The director, historian, and librarian have offices in the Katrina Research Center, which is located in an area of 3,000+ square feet on the third floor of the Southern Miss Gulf Coast Library. The KRC has a public area with reading tables, reference desk, a section of book shelves, display cases, and an art exhibit space. The private area consists of two offices and a conference room with cabinets for archival materials.

Faculty and staff

The librarian/clearinghouse coordinator, who is an archivist and digitization specialist, is the only full-time person who works at the KRC.

Other faculty and staff include:

- KRC Director Dr. Ray Scurfield is a Professor of Social Work who also teaches and has written several books on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Three KRC assistant directors are teaching faculty whose fields are in psychology/mental health, coastal ecosystems/environmental impacts,

and library/information science. Another assistant director for economic development served for two years.

- The KRC historian/exhibit coordinator is also teaching faculty in the history department.
- The program development specialist works on a part-time basis with faculty and staff on grant applications.
- The KRC Web developer is the Director for Web-based marketing for the Southern Miss Gulf Coast campus.
- Four graduate assistants, one for each of the assistant directors, were funded in year one, three were funded in year two, and none in year three.

Other

- The KRC is closely affiliated with and works in association with University Libraries, particularly the Gulf Coast Library where the Center is physically located.
- The KRC is affiliated with the Southern Miss Center for Oral History & Cultural Heritage and archives Katrina-related oral histories from the OHCH collection (OHCH 2009).
- Photographer Keith Fishman serves as the Fine Arts Advisor.

R3. How is the KRC funded?

The University originally committed funding for the KRC for two years, but this was later extended to three years. The start-up budget for year one was about \$400,000 for personnel costs, furnishings, equipment, and travel. The Gulf Coast Library donated space for the Center and shared in furnishing costs. The budget for year two was about \$250,000 and year three about \$200,000. The director and assistant directors were allowed one course buy-out in spring and fall semesters and two course buy-outs in summer for the three years. Four graduate assistants were funded in the first year, three in the second year, and none in the third year. The director and assistant directors are expected to obtain research grant money to fund course buy-outs and other research-related expenses after the initial three year funding ends in August 2009.

Donated funds are deposited in a Southern Miss Foundation fund and used for special events and acquisitions. Additional funds have been obtained through silent auctions of donated items.

Due to the recession, all Southern Miss budgets were required to be cut by 5 percent in year three (2009). To meet this requirement, one of the assistant directors who had resigned in 2008 and the graduate assistants were not replaced.

R4. What types of items are in the KRC repository and how are they collected?

Physical repository

In spring 2009, the KRC collection consisted of a set of IMLS reference books, several hundred additional books, several dozen DVDs, archival materials such as newspapers, diaries, letters, meeting notes, and maps. Three sets of limited-edition prints have been donated to the KRC permanent collection by photographer Keith Fishman.

Digital repository

Many hundreds of digital images on CD-ROM have been collected for the KRC digital repository. Selected images have been uploaded to the Mississippi Digital Library available at: <http://cdm.lib.usm.edu/cdm4/katrina.php>

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) has been signed by the KRC and the *Sun-Herald Newspaper* to archive Katrina-related images and stories on a server at Southern Miss. A similar agreement is being worked on for WLOX-TV, which has a cache of raw news footage from Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Hurricane Camille in 1969. University Libraries is developing an institutional repository that will house the digitized archival materials.

The KRC collection has been built with limited funding. The Center librarian has successfully solicited Katrina-related and coastal disaster-related books, DVDs, posters, and archival materials from authors and publishers. Some of the authors generously donated signed copies of their books including President Bill Clinton, Dr. Douglas Brinkley, and Anderson Cooper.

The KRC was successful in obtaining two awards for materials: Alibris Award for \$1,500 in books and DVDs and an IMLS set of archival reference books, *Connecting to Collections*, worth \$800.

R5. What activities are related to community outreach?

Since the Center opened in November 2007, it has hosted two exhibits of Keith Fishman images that are now part of the permanent collection and two traveling mixed-media art exhibits. Each of the traveling exhibits began with an opening reception honoring the artist and their work.

Another exhibit was of donated plates painted by elementary, middle, and high school students from local schools affected by Katrina. The exhibit opening reception was attended by the students, families, teachers, and other interested parties and the plates became part of the Center's permanent collection.

KRC historian supervised local eighth-grade student in an historical survey of a Biloxi neighborhood. A booklet, *As Time Keeps Turning: Biloxi Houses*, was produced and a reception was held in the local school to honor students who contributed. Students and other reception attendees received a copy of the booklet and additional copies were archived in the KRC.

The KRC Web site includes information about the Center, the faculty and staff, and collections: <http://www.usm.edu/katrina>

Students, teachers, and the general public are invited to view the exhibits on display at the KRC. Numerous tours have been conducted for various organizations and groups such as the Society for Mississippi Archivists, student groups, and the general public.

Books in the collection are catalogued and entered into the University Libraries OPAC. Circulating books may be checked out by faculty, students, staff, and the general public who have membership in the Alumni Association (any interested party can join the Alumni Association for \$35 a year). Non-circulating and archival materials may be viewed on-site after patrons fill out a form for researchers.

The KRC and Center for Oral History & Cultural Heritage have contributed images and oral histories to the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank* (<http://www.hurricanearchive.org/>).

R6. What activities are related to research?

KRC faculty presented Katrina-related research in numerous scholarly conferences and their research has been published in scholarly journals and conference proceedings. The director and two of the assistant directors are each under contract for and are working on books related to Katrina (Scurfield 2009b, Aten 2009, Welsh 2009).

The KRC librarian has produced finding aids such as “Hurricane Katrina and other Natural Disasters” and “Hurricane Preparedness Resource Guide” to help educators, researchers, and the general public locate materials.

The KRC librarian has worked with the director, assistant directors, and others associated with the Center to identify Katrina-related research, particularly research conducted by Southern Miss faculty, to update finding aids and for sending requests to archive the researchers’ work at the Center.

LIS students, as part of a government publications course, compiled a list of online resources: “Katrina-Related Online Publications: Non-Government Publications, State Government Publications, U.S. Government Publications” (<http://www.usm.edu/slis/KatrinaDocs.htm>) and “Katrina-Related Oral History Projects” (<http://www.usm.edu/slis/KatrinaOralHist.htm>).

Grant-writing is an ongoing process that is accomplished with the help of a program development specialist and CREATEs (Southern Miss Center for Research, Evaluation, Assessment and Training Services). The KRC has been successful in obtaining some small grants and awards; several larger federal grant applications have been submitted and are pending.

R7. What activities are related to education?

The KRC Librarian supervised and instructed several part-time graduate assistants whose duties included: organizing news articles; indexing; copy cataloging; desk duties; scanning; metadata entry; and administrative support. An LIS student is scheduled to complete an archival practicum in the Center this summer.

KRC has hosted and provided guided tours to various educational and service groups: elementary, middle, and secondary school students; college and university students; and other interested groups such as archivists, friends of local library group, AmeriCorps, Habitat for Humanity, and a boys/girls club.

For an historical research project funded by a History Channel Save our History Grant of \$10,000, the KRC historian supervised local eighth-grade students in an architectural survey of an historic Biloxi neighborhood. A booklet, *As Time Keeps Turning: Biloxi Houses*, was produced and distributed to students with some copies archived in the KRC collection (Nuwer 2008).

5. Conclusions

Several themes have emerged from formal and informal communication and

documentation related to the creation and development of the KRC:

- The professional experiences of the director, who had previously established a research center, and the librarian, who previously worked in a research center and an academic library, have been valuable in guiding the Center through its creation and development.
- The development of the KRC collection can be attributed to having a dedicated archivist/digitization librarian. The librarian's professional affiliation with groups such as the Society of Mississippi Archivists enhanced professional networking, which led to resource-sharing and increased visibility.
- Cooperation/affiliation with related university entities, such as University Libraries, the Center for Oral History & Cultural Heritage, and the Center for Research, Evaluation, Assessment and Training Services, has been essential in effective and efficient use of resources.
- Networking with other community groups, such as local historical societies, public libraries, schools, and media has led to increased visibility in the community and donations of documents, images, and artefacts to the KRC collection.
- Dissemination of Katrina-related research has led to increased visibility and additional professional and academic contacts, such as with the director of the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank* and faculty associated with the University of Pennsylvania Center for Public Health Preparedness.
- Obtaining funding by large federal grants is a competitive undertaking and each large grant application takes about one year from time of initial conception and planning to receiving word of funding or rejection. Typically, feedback from the first attempt is used to revise and reapply so it may take several years to get a large federal grant.

Research is ongoing but results include:

- Identification of the six stages of disaster recovery (Scurfield 2007)
- Identification of post-catastrophic disaster needs by LIS graduate students affected by Katrina (Welsh and Higgins 2008).

Future of the Katrina Research Center

The KRC, just as any other academic entity, must adapt to a changing academic environment. Possible changes for the future include:

- Collaboration and affiliation with similar university centers such as the Center for Biosecurity and Public Health Preparedness at the University of Houston (2009) and the Center for Public Health Preparedness at the University of Pennsylvania (2009)
- Collaboration and affiliation with federal agencies such as the Emergency Management Center (EMC) at Oak Ridge National Laboratory (2009)
- Organizational change from KRC assistant directors to KRC associated or affiliated faculty to include more faculty who are involved in Katrina-related research.

References

- Aten, Jamie D. "Jamie D. Aten, Ph.D." (2009)
<http://www.jamieaten.com/index.html> (accessed 2 May 2009).

- Creswell, John W. and Miller, Dana L. "Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry." *Theory into Practice* 39, no. 3 (2000): 124-131.
- Fisher, Walter R. *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987.
- Huffman, Alan. "Does it Matter if the World Knows Mississippi's Story? Yes. Here's Why." *Sun Herald*, (February 11, 2006): C-2.
- McCormack, Edward. "The Learning Center: A Reconfigured Space at the Gulf Park Library." *Library Focus* (Fall 2007): 1-2.
- Nuwer, Deanne, ed. *As Time Keeps Turning: Biloxi House*, an historical research booklet produced by 8th graders of Biloxi Junior High (May 2008).
- Oak Ridge National Laboratory. *Emergency Management Center* (2009) <http://emc.ornl.gov/EMCWeb/EMC/EMCINFO1.html> (accessed 9 May 2009).
- OHCH. *Center for Oral History & Cultural Heritage* (2009) <http://www.usm.edu/oralhistory/> (accessed 5 May 2009)
- Scurfield, Raymond M. "Six Common Stages of Disaster Recovery" (April 2007). <http://www.usm.edu/gc/health/scurfield/files/Six-Common-Stages-Disaster-Recovery-rev-April-2007.pdf> (accessed 25 April 2009).
- Scurfield, Raymond M. "Post-Katrina Storm Disorder and Recovery in South Mississippi Over Two Years Later." *Traumatology, The International Journal* 14, no. 2 (2009a): 88-106.
- Scurfield, Raymond M. "Ray Scurfield, DSW" (2009b) <http://www.usm.edu/gc/health/scurfield/> (accessed May 2, 2009).
- University of Pennsylvania Public Health Practice. *Center for Public Health Preparedness* (2009) <http://www.prepare.pitt.edu/> (accessed 9 May 2009)
- University of Texas Health Science Center. *Center for Biosecurity and Public Health Preparedness* (2009) <http://www.sph.uth.tmc.edu/biosecurity/> (accessed 9 May 2009).
- Welsh, Teresa S. "Teresa S. Welsh, Ph.D." <http://ocean.otr.usm.edu/~w146169/vita.htm> (accessed 2 May 2009).
- Welsh, Teresa S. and Susan E. Higgins. "Reflections on the Katrina Experience: LIS Students' Stories," In *2008 Hawaii International Conference on Education Conference Proceedings held in Honolulu, HI 5-8 January 2008*, 1245-1258.
- Yin, Robert K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 2d ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994.