

Guidelines for the Effective Relocation of Displaced Students

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Introduction

This fact sheet is a list of guidelines to be considered when your institution is inviting disaster refugees or evacuees to your campus. Since the catastrophic impact of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and more recently after Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, many universities in the mainland United States have offered to temporarily host college students that were displaced by disaster on their home campuses. The offers vary from institution to institution in terms of length of time and amount of aid. Some include travel expenses, tuition, fees, housing, health insurance, and meals. Others just entail an in-state tuition rate. Although these offers are generous and well intentioned, most host universities lack the formal protocols and/or institutional memory to deal with the process effectively, efficiently, and painlessly.

These guidelines were created by students that were displaced by Hurricane Maria and admissions officers and academic leaders in the institutions that hosted them as part of one of the most important initiatives of the RISE Network. These guidelines are based on the discussions held at the RISE Conference 2019, hosted by the University at Albany on November 18 to 20, 2019. The RISE Conference 2019 was the inaugural event for the RISE Network, an interuniversity collaborative platform that interconnects institutions of higher education, community leadership, agencies, and nongovernmental organizations to coordinate their response to disasters.

The intended audience of these guidelines is composed of educators, university support staff, and service providers that help open the doors of opportunity for displaced students.

Please note that you may be the first individual that displaced students and their families will be in contact with in a new and unfamiliar place in terms of culture, geography, environment, and support network. It is important to take proactive steps to ensure the well-being of these students. Their needs go beyond the economic aspect. The needs include issues of mental health, emotional well-being, and cultural and language adaptation.

These guidelines assume that displaced students and their families should not navigate this process alone or with additional stress or burden. Partnering institutions should keep at the forefront the well-being and best interests of these students at all times. We call for a cohesive effort between and within home and host university departments. Basic agreements and common protocols help establish clear communication and procedures to ensure incoming displaced students and their families are well informed before and during their transition to their host institution.

Facts About Students Displaced by Disaster

A displaced student is an individual who was enrolled, or was eligible for enrollment, but has temporarily or permanently enrolled in another school or district because of a crisis-related disruption in educational services (National Forum of Education Statistics, 2019). These students:

- Often do not have access to basic documentation such as official transcripts.
- May not have access to the internet.
- May not be able to pay the fee to begin the college application process.
- May not have access to provide documents for financial aid considerations in a timely manner.
- May not have adequate health insurance.
- Just experienced a traumatic event and may be in need of counseling/therapy.
- May have lost their personal belongings.
- May not be fluent in English.

Receiving Displaced Students

If your institution is receiving displaced students, the first recommended actions are:

1. Identify bilingual personnel at your institution who can serve as a resource and advocate for the incoming displaced students on your campus.
2. Define the aid package that the university and departments can offer to students considering that they will not have the means to pay for extra fees, room and board,

health insurance, or relocation costs. Also, consider that undergraduate students have different needs than graduate students.

3. Publish a statement that indicates that your institution will support them and make sure the information is disseminated through various networks (in English and in the language spoken by the incoming displaced students).
4. Engage faculty or academic advisors in the student's field of study to begin to discuss an academic plan or degree plan.
5. Create a tracking program for the number of displaced students received and their academic program status (graduate or undergraduate). This will help to keep track of the resources for each classified group, as graduate and undergraduate students have different academic needs.

Best Practices and Recommendations

Building and Strengthening University Relationships

- Create interuniversity partnerships between host institutions and home institutions to facilitate communication and collaboration during the transition process.
- Engage Student Affairs personnel to discuss options for housing and meal plans.
- Translate financial aid materials into more than one language, at least a short version, so that it can serve as an introduction to students for whom English is not their first language.
- Engage “transfer engagement” or “transfer admissions” personnel.
- Develop a course validation system among collaborating institutions that facilitates transferring to host institutions and avoid duplication of courses already taken. This also reduces the cost of tuition for the incoming displaced students.
- It is highly recommended to establish articulation agreements among partnered universities ahead of time to ease this part of the transition process.
- Design a buddy system that consists of pairing current students with incoming students to help with the social transition to the campus community and surrounding communities.
- Host institutions are encouraged to establish important partnerships in the surrounding communities to raise awareness and support of the needs of displaced students as they incorporate into these communities as well.

Supporting Students Prior to Arrival

- Identify mentors in host institutions that range from Enrollment Management, Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, and Student Engagement.
- Have a dedicated website with all details on the application process, financial aid, housing, and other students' needs and resources. Ideally have the information in the language spoken by the incoming displaced students as well.

- Admissions/Registrar/Academic Advising:
 - Establish relationships with students to communicate admissions requirements and procedures with displaced students and their families to better guide them throughout the transition process.
 - Establish if the student will be making a transient or permanent transfer to the host institution. Communicate with students the different student types and how this will impact financial aid, registration, housing, etc., according to the host institution's policies and procedures.
 - Allow for the evaluation of credits with unofficial transcripts so students to have a better understanding of how their credits will transfer prior to applying.
 - Allow for admissions decisions to be based off on unofficial transcripts in the case that the student cannot obtain official transcripts from their home institution.
 - Allow for deadline waivers for students due to complications in obtaining documents and expedite their review process.
 - Ensure that staff is well informed about the accreditation and curriculum of the incoming student's home institution to avoid issues in course evaluations or processing of transcripts and other documents.
 - Incorporate academic advisors in the admissions process to allow students to be informed of degree requirements and to assist in course registration at the host institution.
- Financial Aid:
 - Establish a system of financial support for both domestic and international displaced students that includes:
 - tuition waivers
 - application fees
 - academic and institutional fees
 - scholarships
 - travel costs
 - housing and food
 - health insurance
 - Have staff trained to evaluate financial documentation for students that are FAFSA eligible but that are not required to file for federal taxes (in case student has been selected for verification).
 - Provide assistance for grant, scholarship, and fellowship applications, keeping in mind students may have limited access to electricity, internet, or even a computer.
 - Communicate clearly with students and families the details of their aid package, the requirements to keep recurring aid, steps to accept their aid,

and any out-of-pocket costs prior to the student arriving at the host institution.

- **Housing:**
 - Ensure that adequate and affordable housing is available to displaced students. Keep in mind that students may have lost their homes and belongings and should not be put under additional stress during the relocation process.
 - Communicate with students and families the required steps to apply for housing and any additional requirements prior to the student's arrival.
 - Be mindful that these students may not be able to return home during extended semester breaks and may need guaranteed housing throughout the year.
 - Train staff to attend the needs of displaced students with awareness, resources, and support programs available for them at the host institution and within the surrounding community.

Supporting Students Upon Arrival

- **Student Affairs and Engagement:**
 - Have a welcome event for students as part of their orientation process. Connect them with local student organizations and opportunities on campus to enhance their student academic experience (e.g., research opportunities, mentoring, library resources, tutoring).
 - Provide language support for students who are not bilingual.
 - Have bilingual counselors ready to take on students' and parents' questions.
 - Designate a "campus navigator" to help students with class registration, campus events, and overall student campus culture.
 - The "campus navigator" can also help students by providing information about the state or country public transportation, close malls, supermarkets, police department, and other important locations.
 - Provide mental health services to be able to manage trauma and the effects of the disaster and of having been displaced. The students have been relocated but perhaps their families continue living in the disaster zone.

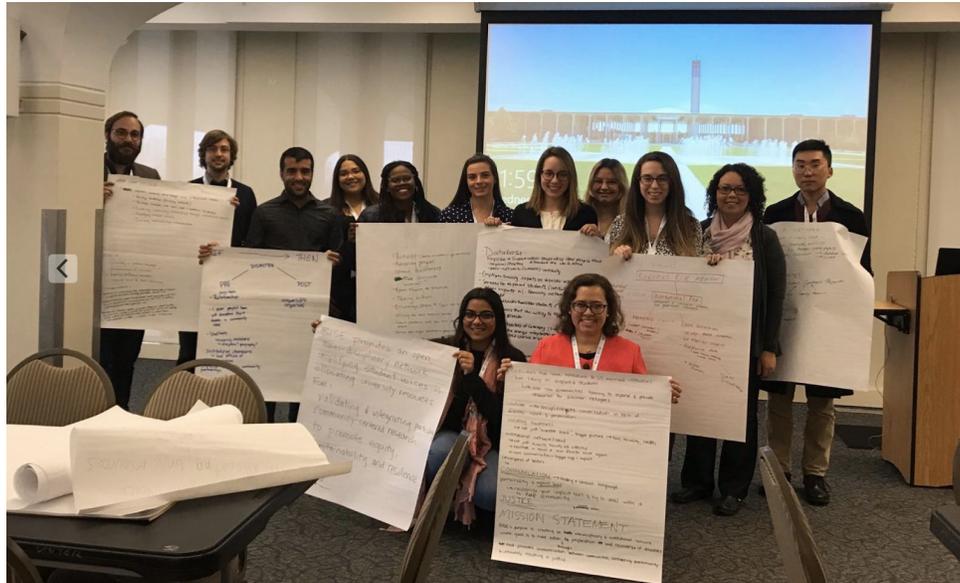
Supporting Students After Arrival

- After arrival, aid students with IT needs, internet, programs for communicating back home, etc. Units responsible for technology need to also be present in conversations and protocols.
- Monitor their progress and check on them periodically.
- Empower students to understand they are able to thrive in their host institutions and also be able to provide assistance properly after a disaster.

- Incorporate faculty to provide advising and additional support for students. Faculty have a crucial role in impacting student success for displaced students.
- Near the end of the first semester at the host institution, ask students about future academic plans and facilitate the transition. Consider that their future academic plans may include staying at the host campus and that their home is not a place they will go back to in a span of a year or more.
- If students displaced by disaster decide to stay on the host campus for another semester, it is important to ensure that the host institution can still provide the same or at least similar resources and services. If the host institution cannot extend this, the institution should notify the student at least two months before the current semester ends.
- Use an end of semester survey or meeting to receive feedback from the displaced students. This will help improve the institution protocol with future groups.



The authors, from left to right: Victor Ruiz, Melissa Morales, Adriana Castillo, Fernando Rivera, and Jeanette Altarriba at the RISE Conference 2019. They presented their experiences and ideas in the panel “Stories from the ground: Students Displaced by Disaster.”



Students that participated in the Student Cohort Meetings at the RISE Conference 2019, discussing their experiences and their roles in the university's response to disasters.



From left to right: Javier Nieves, Yiamar Rivera, Angelica Valdes, Anais Roque, Adriana Castillo, and Victor Ruiz. They are Puerto Rican students that transferred to or started their studies at other universities after Hurricane Maria.