

# 'We Lost Almost Everything'

**Disaster recovery plan, paperless system allows Grantham University to continue operations without interruption**

*with Christine A. Shelly*

Some people think bad things only happen to others.

Others realize that isn't the case and know to plan for the worst.

Without a doubt, executives at Grantham Education Corp. fit in the second group.

With weather reports forecasting Hurricane Katrina's every move, it wasn't a question if the hurricane would hit the New Orleans area. The question was when.

Grantham University executives met over the weekend of Aug. 26–28, and as the storm thrashed and thundered outside, they kept on planning.

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"We provided employees with a phone list and instructions to contact their respective managers for updates after the storm," says Christine A. Shelly, executive vice president of Grantham Education Corp. "We also had a pre-recorded message that employees could



call to get updates and information regarding the temporary closure.”

The hurricane's eye made landfall at about 6 a.m. Aug. 29 bringing with it winds of 175 miles per hour. By 11 a.m., several sections of the levee system collapsed, and water poured over from Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River, causing extensive flooding and leaving some New Orleans neighborhoods under 20 feet of water.

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By the time the hurricane ended on Aug. 31, it had killed more than 1,300 people and caused \$70 billion to \$130 billion in damage in the Bahamas, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

“We had our senior managers on conference calls from various parts of the southeast—Texas, Arkansas, or wherever they ended up to ride out the storm,” recalls Shelly. “Employees were housed in hotel rooms, relatives’ homes, even houses of some of the companies’ vendors, throughout much of the southeast. That first week we had teleconferences twice a day; we

had to make sure that all of the staff was accounted for and ensure the continuity of operations as best we could. We re-routed the main Grantham number to our corporate offices so that students and employees could call in to get updates and information.”

In addition, they used their Web site to communicate.

As soon as the storm was over, school officials began surveying the extensive damage the online university had suffered. Four out of their five buildings were destroyed.

“We lost almost everything—computers, textbooks, phones. Everything in four buildings was destroyed or rendered useless,” she says. “We were not naive to the fact that being in that area, one day we would suffer some type of outage; our chairman and CEO Tom Macon had been through Ivan and he was very adamant about disaster recovery planning.”

But if she has any advice for other schools, it's this. “Go paperless. Make sure your data is stored off site and have a disaster recovery plan in place as it relates to people.”

Luckily, Grantham University had been planning an expansion in Kansas



**CHRISTINE A. SHELLY** is executive vice president of Grantham Education Corp., which delivers online courses and degree programs to 8,400 students worldwide.

Since 2000, Shelly has managed the University's strategic initiatives to market undergraduate and graduate online degree programs to working adults. In addition she is responsible for managing sales and promotional budgets and marketing campaigns, developing and managing strategic, affiliate and vendor relations, implementing internal and external messaging, branding and communications plans, and more.

She previously was founder and owner of Atomic Grounds Coffeehouse & Cyberlounge in Arlington, Va., from 1995–2000; and was a researcher and editor at the Bureau of National Affairs in Washington, D.C. in 1995.

She graduated *magna cum laude* with a bachelor's degree in social work from James Madison University.

**Contact information:**

Christine A. Shelly  
Executive Vice President  
Grantham Education Corporation  
Grantham University  
2101 Wilson Blvd, Ste 110  
Arlington, VA 22201  
Phone: (703) 778-8506  
Fax: (703) 465-1273  
Email: cas@granthameducation.com



City for 2006, and had already undergone the licensing process required. “We had one last piece under review and the Missouri Department of Higher Education understood the situation we were in and expedited the process to get us into Missouri,” Shelly says. “If they had not worked hard to get us through the last part of the certification process, we couldn’t have done business there.”

But they still had to get their employees there.

“We made a blanket offer for all employees to come to Kansas City; we told them we didn’t know when we would come back to Slidell,” Shelly says. “Then we leased 60 fully-furnished apartments for six months to house employees and their families.”

Only seven days after the hurricane, nearly 60 employees had relocated and were settling into their new communities. Today, they’re operating out of a Kansas City office building, and are in the process of building out permanent space.

Shelly says that when you do business in an area frequented with hurricanes you need a disaster recovery plan in place. “We had planned for the integrity and security of our data. With

the increased threat of identity theft that we experience today we have to ensure that the personal information on our students is protected. We used document-imaging technology to establish a paperless office. We made sure our data was in a secure facility in northern Virginia.”

But they couldn’t plan for the destruction their employees would face.

“It was a wild card for us. As the winds were whipping through, we had to make sure that

our employees and their families were safe and at the same time take care of our students. With 8,000 students in many parts of the world unaffected, we knew hurricane news was going to be old hat very soon.”

They understood they had to continue serving their students as if a hurricane hadn’t happened.

“How long before we were fully operational? Thankfully much of what we do can be done remotely. Many employees were working from hotel rooms or relatives’ homes even as

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they rode out the storm. For the most part, students could go online and take tests and progress through their coursework without interruption." Of course, there were delays and backlogs in some areas.

If students had just enrolled in class, they didn't receive their textbooks in a couple days, as they would have previously. But that's because all the textbooks had been destroyed. They worked with their publishers to get the books out as soon as possible, and they mailed them directly to the students.

"And the postal service stopped delivering our mail," Shelly says. "To have it forwarded wasn't an option at the outset, so we waited several weeks for mail. When the mail was finally redirected to our corporate offices, we would get several bins of mail each

day. It was filled with transcripts to be evaluated for upcoming coursework, applications for enrollment, and proctored exams."

If the student's proctor had copies of the completed proctored exams, they asked them to fax them to their corporate office, and they were then sent to Kansas City for immediate grading.

"But we didn't ever go down," Shelly says. We posted a new 800 number, fax number, and mailing address on our corporate Web site immediately after the storm. Shortly thereafter, our Louisiana 800 number and fax lines rolled over to our corporate offices," she says. "It took us a while to get back to people because of the sheer volume of calls, but there never was a time that the business was dark."

When you operate a business in that area, you know hurricanes are a fact of life from June through November, she

says. "We had actually invested heavily in a generator in case we would lose power for a couple of days. But it was a moot point. We never expected it to be so bad that we would have to physically

### **Grantham University At a Glance**

- The university was established in 1951 and offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs in criminal justice, business administration, engineering management, information systems, software engineering technology, computer science, computer engineering technology, electronics engineering technology, general studies and interdisciplinary studies.
- By 1959, Grantham had resident campuses from Seattle to Kansas City to Washington, D.C.
- As interest in Grantham's degree programs extended beyond its campuses, the college developed distance education programs to serve a geographically dispersed student body.
- As the demand for distance education increased, the University consolidated its residential campuses into one location just outside New Orleans—in Slidell, La.—where it offered degree programs exclusively online.
- In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina caused so much damage to the University that it was forced to move, at least temporarily to Kansas City. Operations have continued uninterrupted.

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relocate the entire operation, including employees and their families, to another state.”

They actually looked to relocate to areas closer like Baton Rouge “But so many people had left southern Louisiana that there were no relocation options; there simply was no vacant space available.”

Without any other viable options, they decided to move to Kansas City. “Some of our employees moved to Kansas City without seeing their homes,” Shelly says. “They made the trip to Kansas City with just the shirts on their backs.”

The company did offer a relocation package that allows employees to travel to Louisiana once a month for the first three months, she says. That gives them time to deal with insurance adjusters and settle their affairs.

“Some employees lost everything they owned. Others had just a couple shingles torn off their home.”

Not all employees could move, however, because of various situations. Some didn’t want to leave families behind, others had spouses who still had jobs and some simply didn’t want to leave home.

“It has been a great social experiment,” Shelly said. “We had to find

apartments to house people with pets; some apartments would only take pets of a certain size or weight. Others came with significant others or extended family members. Some were single parents traveling with children, and we had to find day-care options and get the kids enrolled in school.

“You think you have everything covered when you create a disaster recovery plan, but we quickly found out we hadn’t,” she says. “We had planned for the business, but we really hadn’t considered the employee care side. How would we make sure people were taken care of? How would we deal with the different emotions and decisions that employees had to make in the midst of a chaotic situation? People had to make some very significant decisions without even seeing their homes or without knowing exactly what the future would hold.”

Thankfully, none of the school’s employees died in the storm, although two employees did have relatives who died, one in the violence after the storm.

To help employees deal with the financial loss, Grantham executives, alumni, its board of directors and others established an employee relief fund as an independent, non-profit entity.



Each Grantham University staff member who was employed as of Aug. 29, 2005, is eligible for funds, and the first checks were distributed by mid-September.

“We operate under the philosophy that business is about people and that if you take care of your job, your job will take care of you. There is no way we could have kept the University running and service 8,000 students without our employees. Their health and safety was our No. 1 concern, but we wanted to get them back to work as soon as possible so they could take care of our students.”

Shelly says they really have a remarkable group of employees

“They made quick decisions to uproot their entire families with little information and they did it with such grace that it was truly remarkable,” she says.

“They really showed the strength and resilience of the human spirit.”

What the future will hold, at least for the Louisiana school, is still uncertain.

“Will we go back? I don’t know. The facility is still not safe for employees to work in. One day when full service is restored to that area, and we can safely operate our business there, we’ll have to decide.”

**Career  
Education  
REVIEW**

*Written by Barbara A. Schmitz*