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It's the end of the world and we feel fine

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It's the end of the world and we feel fine

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In October of 2012, the New York University (NYU) Health Sciences Library was advancing on many fronts. Library staff members were in the middle of conducting strategic planning, developing a new liaison program, planning new knowledge and data management services, and starting to think about a much-needed renovation of our main facility. As expected for any academic health sciences library, we were deliberate and systematic in these efforts, confident that our tried-and-true methodical and careful work would deliver a steady stream of manageable and comforting progress and change.

SUPERSTORM SANDY

On October 29, 2012, a fourteen-foot storm surge produced by Superstorm Sandy was a reminder that plans are fragile in the face of the extraordinary. The complete inundation of the lower level of the library (Figure 1) devastated our on-site collection and staff offices on this level (Figure 2). The library's main floor was partially flooded by a surge of heavily contaminated water that destroyed everything it touched, sparing only a few topic-centered collections located on higher shelves. In the end, other than those collections, everything on the lower and

main level of the library was lost. The facility was wiped out.

Beyond the library, the lower level housed a 2-year-old, 100-seat student study area, the medical center's vivarium, and an archives storage room housing unique items related to the NYU Langone Medical Center's history. While Sandy claimed the



Figure 1
Flooded stairwell of the New York University (NYU) Health Sciences Library after Superstorm Sandy



Figure 2
Damage at the NYU Health Sciences Library after Superstorm Sandy

study area and vivarium, the disaster response company Belfor recovered and freeze-dried the material from the storage room. The medical archives is still working through this material. Despite remaining underwater for several days, it appears that much, but unfortunately not all, was restored at least minimally. Beyond our building, the damage to the medical center was extensive and recovery continues.

CONTINUING IMPACT

The storm's toll went beyond materials and spaces: over the coming months, the library was forced to lay off a number of staff because their jobs were tied to services delivered through the facility. Although the losses experienced by our staff and our users were wrenching, we began to see that this forced disruption, this destruction completely out of our control, also provided opportunities. These included moving more quickly and forcefully in new areas than would have been previously imagined. Some of these included: (1) improving infrastructure around online services and resources, and (2) engaging with our various user communities to better understand their knowledge and data discovery and management needs. These were directions we needed and had planned to go before Sandy, but the forced elimination of legacy services of diminished importance—for example, managing and circulating a little-used print collection—allowed additional

focus on new opportunities. This “disaster” had in fact been liberating.

SIX MONTHS LATER

Within six months of the storm, there were surprises. A legitimate concern after the storm was raising awareness that although our facility had been destroyed, the library was still providing nearly all the online and in-person resources, support, and services that were available prior to the storm. Around six months after Sandy, we discovered that many users were beginning to see this on their own. Unfortunately, this awareness is not universal, and we still need to actively promote our resources and services to counter a lingering perception that “the library is gone.” We also started to ask ourselves whether restoring the facility was necessary. The immediate success of the new liaison program and progress on improving the reliability and usability of our online presence led to discussion of how restoring a facility might shift focus and resources away from these areas. In the end, our users persuaded us that we needed to reestablish the facility. They expressed a great sense of loss for the “scholarly center” of the medical center—in other words, the library as place—an identified place for thought, study, reflection, and sharing of ideas. Beyond this, there was a demonstrated need for individual and collaborative study spaces, access to public computing, and a flexible technology-enhanced learning space. This combination of needs convinced us that reestablishing this facility was in the best interests of the library and the medical center. Fortunately, medical center leadership agreed and has been supportive.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In reality, the medical center was well prepared for Superstorm Sandy. Hurricane Irene, a much different storm, had descended upon New York the year before, so we had had recent experience in getting prepared. The medical center could handle a twelve-foot storm surge, the upper limit of what models predicted. We never imagined that a hurricane would merge with a northern front and coincide with a significant high tide. We believe this was not a failure of planning, rather, a failure of imagination. We take this experience to suggest that we likely have less control over where our institution is

headed than we think or hope. We suggest that this is likely for all.

Although we have shared that the tremendous destruction wrought by Superstorm Sandy was in some ways liberating, please do not misunderstand. We would not have volunteered to put our users and staff through an experience like this. It was costly, disruptive, and, for some, tragic.

Saying that, this experience showed that a deliberative and systematic approach to needed changes is not always going to be sufficient to meet unforeseen challenges. Strategic planning is based on likely futures that are imagined. What is not imagined is not planned for. We suggest the following thought experiment for your library: imagine that you awake tomorrow morning and your library is gone, not in a year, not damaged, but gone. What would you do? What would you replace? Can you reimagine what your library should be and start in that direction instead of recreating what was? What does the plan look like that would take you there? With the rapid changes buffeting our institutions and profession, perhaps it

is time to declare an emergency as devastating as a natural disaster, and push for the bold and dramatic changes that are needed.

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