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## Rebuilding Vermont: Living and Learning Disaster Response after Tropical Storm Irene

Caleb Brabant  
*University of Vermont*

Hillary Laggis  
*University of Vermont*

Carrie Williams Howe  
*University of Vermont*

Kelly Hamshaw  
*University of Vermont*

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## Rebuilding Vermont: Living and Learning Disaster Response after Tropical Storm Irene

### *Introduction: Creating the Class*

On August 28, 2011 Tropical Storm Irene unleashed her fury across much of the rural state of Vermont-flooding homes, businesses, farm fields, and even the command center of the state emergency management office. Local and state emergency management officials quickly mobilized to open emergency shelters and coordinate evacuations. Thirteen towns were completely isolated from basic services in the immediate aftermath requiring the Vermont National Guard to airlift food, water, and essential medical supplies. It is believed that over 1,400 households have been displaced from their homes-either temporarily or permanently; more than 500 miles of state roads and 200 highway bridges were damaged.

While there were six Irene-related fatalities, many believe this number could have been much higher. Almost as quickly as the floodwaters receded, Vermonters began the difficult work of surveying the damage left behind under thick layers of mud. Vermont is not a state accustomed to experiencing disasters of Irene's magnitude, yet this lack of experience did not hinder the outpouring of hundreds of Vermonters who reached out to help their neighbors in the days and weeks following Irene.

The University of Vermont's (UVM) campus was largely spared any damage from Irene, despite having the first day of classes for the Fall 2011 semester canceled. The most affected communities were at least 30 minutes from the Burlington area so once students returned to campus they were mostly isolated from the damage. The morning after Irene hit, we received an e-mail from our service-learning colleagues in New Zealand, telling us about the course they had created in response to the Christchurch, New Zealand earthquakes. Inspired by this example, and feeling compelled to contribute to the response efforts ourselves, we rapidly developed a

**Caleb Brabant** is a junior majoring in Community Entrepreneurship at the University of Vermont. He was born and raised in Vermont and is from the small town of Calais. His strong ties to his home state are what motivated him to get involved in the relief efforts after Tropical Storm Irene.

**Hillary Laggis** is a junior public communications major at the University of Vermont. She grew up on her family's dairy farm in East Hardwick, Vermont. Prompted by her desire to remain involved in Tropical Storm Irene relief efforts following her experiences in this service-learning course, Hillary obtained an internship with the Vermont State Irene Recovery Office.

**Katherine Reynolds** is a senior statistics major at the University of Vermont. Service-learning gave her the opportunity to take her skill sets beyond the classroom and get involved in her local community. After participating in "Rebuilding Vermont" in Fall 2011 she served as the course teaching assistant and liaison to Waterbury, Vermont for the Spring 2012 semester.

**Carrie Williams Howe**, MEd is the Director of the Office of Community-University Partnerships & Service-Learning (CUPS) at the University of Vermont and has been supporting faculty who teach service-learning courses since 2004. She has also taught service-learning courses in leadership, civic engagement, and the nonprofit field.

**Kelly Hamshaw** is a research specialist in the Department of Community Development and Applied Economics at the University of Vermont. She is a member of a research team studying disaster resilience of mobile home park communities and has taught and supported service-learning courses at UVM for the past seven years.

Service-learning course to connect students to the response efforts while engaging them in the study of disaster relief. We envisioned a course that would attract students from a variety of academic disciplines across campus, and with the help of UVM's continuing education department, we got a course proposal pulled together in less than two days.

We sought and eventually received approval to offer this course, from three academic departments who knew our work and had collaborated on service-learning before (Community Development and Applied Economics, Natural Resources, and Social Work). In order to ensure the academic rigor of our course, we developed a reading list that included many articles from the academic disaster management literature (and were fortunate to consult with Dr. Alice Fothergill, a faculty member at UVM who teaches and researches issues in disaster sociology). We also took care to describe what we meant by "critical reflection" in our syllabus and the extent to which reflection assignments would require significant academic connections and be judged against rigorous expectations. In addition, we emphasized our approach to teaching as *facilitators* of learning, rather than experts, and conveyed our plans to integrate expert guest speakers (academics and practitioners alike) to add diverse perspectives to the course.

The night the course was listed (a week after the first day of classes), we sat watching our computers, both surprised and delighted as the course quickly filled to capacity within a few hours. Once the course filled, our e-mail in-boxes began to fill with requests to be added. Some students told us they were native Vermonters and their hometowns had been affected -that they couldn't be there to help, but still wanted to be a part of the recovery. Others told us that they had volunteered after Katrina or other similar disasters and wanted to continue this commitment. Still more conveyed how this work was closely connected to their major. In the end, we had upwards of 60 students express interest in taking the course, and we were able to accept 27 students from a range of majors. Approximately half of our students were Vermonters.

The structure of the course included a two-hour seminar and approximately three hours of required service-learning each week. Assigned "readings" were chosen from scholarly and current publications and included not only written pieces, but audio segments and videos as well. Students completed weekly written reflections bridging their learning from class (readings and seminar material) and their community experiences and also reflected through in-class exercises on a regular basis. In-class presentations were required on the progress of service projects and learning they were gaining from those experiences, and a final independent, self-directed project or research paper served as the capstone component to the course.

Getting students into the field was our top priority when the course began. Drawing on an established research partnership, we were able to connect with a mobile home park community that had been heavily devastated by the flooding. For three consecutive weekends we brought students to Weston's to assist residents in mucking out their homes. During these service opportunities, students were working alongside homeowners while listening to them tell their rescue stories or convey what it was like to return home for the first time after the floodwaters receded. These service days provided first-hand immersion into the impacts of Irene; they had a powerful impact on our students and helped to frame the rest of the semester.

About a month into the course, we transitioned from large group direct service opportunities to ongoing small group service-learning projects with specific community partners. As instructors, we reached out to various response and recovery stakeholders to identify community partners and project ideas. The class was divided into five self-selected groups of between two to eight students. These groups were expected to work largely independently of the class and communicate directly with their community partner for the remainder of the semester.

The following reflections are written by students who volunteered in Waterbury, Vermont – a town about 20 minutes away from campus that was inundated by flooding from the Winooski River. A group of 4 students was assigned to this town as their weekly service site; and all of them chose to do a final project related to this placement.

*"Exploring Impact" by Katherine Reynolds*

The first week after Irene hit, my hometown of Waterbury, Vermont received over one thousand volunteers. Thanks to this massive volunteer effort almost all of the houses affected by the flood were mucked out within two weeks. Even after this massive amount of volunteer help, though, there was still a long road to recovery. The people of Waterbury were tired and exhausted, and the town had neither enough resources nor volunteers to continue these massive volunteer efforts on a daily basis. Instead, Waterbury decided to dedicate every Saturday as an organized volunteer day and appointed Belle McDougall as the Volunteer Coordinator. As my service-learning project for "Rebuilding Vermont" I became her assistant.

As assistant volunteer coordinator I was responsible for a number of tasks, including: gathering contact information from volunteers; calling homeowners to see if they had any project needs that day; matching volunteers to job sites; making a hot lunch for volunteers; and any other miscellaneous tasks which Belle might ask me to do. Immediately after the flood I had been constantly out in the field getting my hands dirty, so I had been a little weary about taking an office job. I wondered if my work would really have an impact on the recovery effort. I quickly learned, however, that even though I did not have the same satisfaction of being able to immediately and physically help people, my role was essential. Without office workers and coordinators such as Belle, efficiently using volunteer efforts would be much more difficult. Being behind the scenes in this office gave me an opportunity to see first-hand the theories and "best practices" for disaster management that we were studying in class. In fact, the class helped me to have patience and to reflect on my work, making me a more effective volunteer.

It isn't easy to define exactly how being the assistant volunteer coordinator impacted me. Having lived in Waterbury since I was four, I didn't think twice about frequently asked to reflect; I just try to figure out the steps you need to take to find a solution and do it. Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines "impact" as "the volunteering. Waterbury was my town and it was my duty to help. Until now, I had never really tried to reflect on why I helped. Being a statistics major, I am not force of impression of one thing on another" (retrieved March 20, 2012). Using that definition, one could say that this experience had a negative impact on my social life; who knew that going to bed at 10:00 pm on Friday nights and never being around on Saturdays was not conducive to a collegiate social life? But the largest impact this project had on me is how I view disaster and my role in response.

While I was visiting Waterbury's long-term recovery office the new volunteer coordinator, Mame, said to my professor and me "Last spring when Barre [Vermont] had their floods, I never thought to go. That will never happen again." Last year after the Earthquake hit Japan, a student of Japanese descent sent around a donation jar asking for any change we could spare to support Japan's recovery efforts. I reached in my pocket and found a few quarters and put them in the jar feeling confident that being a poor college student I had given everything I could; I know that will never happen again. Why didn't I go up to him and ask him if he had friends or family who had been hurt, or even see if he just needed to talk? I could have offered to send jars around in my other classes. When I say that this project changed how I viewed disaster, I mean that I will never again settle for doing what someone else asked of me as doing everything I could. I will always know that I can do more.

*"Listening, Learning, Healing" by Hillary Laggis and Caleb Brabant*

We knew from the start that we wanted to capture and understand the unbelievable spontaneous volunteerism that was happening in Waterbury, Vermont. We had never seen such cooperation and community spirit in our lives. So many people came to help day after day, without one complaint. The devastation and emotion could only truly come to life through moving picture, so we decided to capture this story on video. What we never could have anticipated was how close we would become with that community over the course of one short semester.

Our engagement in Waterbury started out as a seemingly simple task -working in the disaster recovery center for three to four hours each week. We would make phone calls asking homeowners about their progress, if they needed volunteers, and whether or not they had applied for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) aid and Small Business Administration (SBA) loans. We soon found ourselves wanting to get out in the field, so we started volunteering on Saturdays. When we learned that a Halloween trick-or-treating tradition was in jeopardy, we helped to organize an event on a street that had been devastated by the flood. It was through these experiences that the community members were able to put a face to the person who had been calling them each week, and in turn we were able to get to know the people on the other end of the line. These personal interactions and relationships helped these homeowners begin to trust us as familiar faces.

As we set out to capture this story, we knew that we wanted our video to incorporate both the experiences of the homeowners and those of the volunteers. We came up with a few basic questions to guide the interviews and then we set out with a handheld video camera. We simply walked around the streets of Waterbury and asked people if they would be willing to share their story. Not only were people eager to help, but also they poured their hearts out to us. Many people cried about the incredible community support they had experienced. Both the volunteers and the homeowners told us that Irene helped to make their community better and stronger. We were completely blown away by the positivity, honesty and emotion portrayed in the interviews. These people had no facades. Their feelings were raw and real. In many ways, it felt like our video served as a chance for these participants to reflect on their experience and begin to think about how their own involvement had changed them. At the same time, we hope it will help other communities to consider ways to effectively respond to disasters.

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Making this movie and being engaged in Waterbury's response effort was a life-changing experience. It enabled us to put meaning behind our education; we could use what we were taught in the classroom to directly benefit a community in need. We *wanted* to go to Waterbury as often as possible. It no longer felt like schoolwork; it felt like the right thing to do. We learned about commitment and responsibility. Community members would not have been as open with us had we not built trusting relationships with them through our ongoing service. From this engagement we also discovered the importance of listening. Everyone in Waterbury had a story, and sharing that story was a huge part of processing what they had endured. We had never really understood the importance of being an active listener until faced with this natural disaster. The video was another way that we could really listen to what the community had to say. Lastly, we also realized how crucial relationships are in rebuilding a community that has been broken by disaster. We experienced first-hand, the unbelievable things that are possible when a small town bands together for the greater good. We will take this experience with us to share with whatever communities we are a part of from this point forward. Most importantly, though, we are now empowered with the invaluable knowledge that we can make positive change as individuals, if we are willing to collaborate.

### *Teaching "Rebuilding"-Instructors' Reflection*

From an instructor's perspective, teaching this course was incredibly intense. Evenings and days were spent at each other's homes, in each other's offices, and over the phone; for each of us, teaching this course was added to an existing job and other responsibilities that come with our respective personal roles (spouse, homeowner, parent, graduate student, horse/dog owner, etc.). We were living week to week, just barely knowing what the next day was going to bring. Whether it was figuring out transportation, service locations, or readings, we always felt like we were just one step ahead of the students who were looking to us for the answers. Yet the intensity in which we were operating was reasonable and manageable compared to those whose lives had been devastated by Irene, and we kept that at the forefront of our minds.

This feeling of running to keep up was connected, for us, to two important concepts. First, our class was no different from any other response effort -trying to do the best you can as quickly as you can without messing anything up in the process. It didn't go 100% smoothly, and that wasn't always easy for us, but we tried (and are still trying) not to kick ourselves for the bumps in the road that we encountered. In retrospect, we wonder if we could have been more transparent with our students about the unpredictable nature of disaster recovery that was playing out for us in managing this class. By trying to seem on top of things, we may have set an unrealistic standard that made it easier to notice when things didn't work out as planned.

The second connection that arose for us was that the teaching and learning style that we were aiming for – that of a learner-centered, collaborative environment – was in direct opposition to the concept of students looking to us for the "answers." Our desire to stay one step ahead of our students, to be ready with the answers -may have detracted from our ability to create the learning environment that we desired. If we had slowed down, let the students in on the complications and frustrations, said "we don't know" more often, would more of them have taken greater responsibility for their learning? Next time around, we

decided, we'd address this issue head on. The first reading we assigned during the second iteration of "Rebuilding Vermont" (Semester 2, 2011) was a reading that elaborated on the role of the teacher in learning-centered education – and our first class session opened with activities that asked students to learn from each other, followed by direct conversation about what we expected from them and what they could expect from us.

A reflective student evaluation that was administered at the end of the course helped us to learn a great deal about what worked, and what didn't – lessons that we took with us as we designed and implemented a second version of the course. Group work, for example, proved challenging and less enjoyable for about half of the class. Though we felt strongly that students needed to take more ownership of this component, we also got a clear indication in these evaluations that there was an issue with the sheer number of hours in a day. Students expressed a desire to have dedicated more time and energy to this course, coupled with a reality that didn't make that possible (between taking so many other classes, working, etc.). So, we limited group size, gave options for individual placements, and made space in class for group collaboration and project planning. On the other hand, students told us that the large group service projects that we did at the very beginning of the semester were pivotal to helping them understand and connect with the damage that Irene had done. Without those personal connections, it was just another newspaper article, third-hand telling of a dramatic story, or a theory without any relative context. So, when the second semester rolled around we made sure students got out in the field early to see the houses that were still not repaired, and to talk to the homeowners and community volunteers about the recovery process. From a pedagogical point of view, we were bolstered by the number of students who appreciated the multimodal approach to information delivery -the very nature of the course allowed us to use audio, video, guest speakers, and images in addition to academic readings and readings from current press coverage, so we made an intentional effort to maintain and improve that balance.

Yes, the experience of teaching this course was intense. However, it was also incredibly fulfilling. When Tropical Storm Irene hit Vermont, we (like many Vermonters) wanted to contribute to response and recovery. Carrie, a relatively new mother, struggled with many of the challenges that others in her position face – wanting to contribute but also having family responsibilities and priorities that make it hard to spend weekend days mucking out houses. Kelly, whose research was connected to mobile home community's resilience to disaster, wanted to go beyond her researcher role to support the people she had been interviewing and getting to know long before Irene took away their homes. This class met both of those needs. By utilizing our knowledge of service-learning pedagogy, we were able to mobilize 27 students to contribute to recovery and reflect upon it -arguably a more valuable contribution than we could have made on our own.

The student reflections in this article provide a glimpse into the impact that three of our students were able to make, and the learning that they achieved. There are over twenty others who could probably tell equally as compelling stories. This class was not easy for our students; while some seemed to embrace the circumstances smoothly, others struggled. Yet everyone found success somewhere. For some, group projects were disappointing but they came through with flying colors on their final project. Other students, who struggled with in-

class reflection papers, were fondly praised by community partners. The variety of ways for students to demonstrate learning and to contribute to the community ensured that every student had some element of the class in which they shone - an element that should make them feel proud. We are so proud of these students, and we are grateful to them and to our community partners for joining us on this journey.

#### Works Cited

Merriam Webster Dictionary (n.d.). Retrieved March 20, 2012 from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impact>