

Why Wait for a Disaster When Your Local College Can Arrange One?

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Introduction

Disaster has struck tiny Lyndonville in northeastern Vermont each of the past two years. First, it was a fatal dormitory fire at Lyndon State College. Next, an ex-boyfriend shot up a classroom. We are still working on the tragedy to befall the town next year. A deadly outbreak of illness appears likely.

The disasters are scripted exercises. The fake blood looks real enough, but nobody dies. Police and firefighters rush to the scene. Paramedics perform triage. Dazed victims and worried townspeople wander about looking for help. Reporters descend.

The exercises began as an effort to help psychology and journalism students at Lyndon State respond to the types of traumatic incidents they could encounter on the job. We discovered the exercises benefit more than just students. Local and state police use them to hone a range of skills, including setting up an incident command, interviewing witnesses, controlling crowds and dealing with the media. Firefighters and ambulance crews learn to identify holes in their readiness. The state's Homeland Security apparatus learns what works and what doesn't. The college learns valuable lessons about responding to the unthinkable – before it happens.

Why not let journalists benefit?

This study examines the disaster exercises to date and spells out a plan to make the training available to community journalists throughout Vermont, which is served by 10 daily newspapers, all with less than 50,000 circulation, and more than 40 weeklies.

Community media throughout the country can team up with four-year and two-year colleges to emulate the program, gaining important training for their staffs and the students and building stronger, better-prepared communities.

Disaster Strikes I

At noon on a sunny but cool Saturday in October, a boiler explodes in the basement of Wheelock Hall, the freshman dormitory at Lyndon State College. Smoke fills the building and residents scramble for safety. Fire and rescue crews from Lyndonville and surrounding towns race to the scene. Anguished students try to check on missing friends, and parents flock to campus to look for children. Reporters arrive and have to be ordered away from the dorm.

If this scenario had been real, the headline in the local daily newspaper, the Caledonian-Record, could have read *Two Dead, 10 Hurt in LSC Dorm Fire*. We “killed” two students in the basement of the dorm. Among the “injured,” four merited an ambulance ride to the hospital. The actual Caledonian-Record headline read *LSC Students Study Disaster Drill*. Margaret Sherrer and I came up with the idea of a disaster exercise during a chance discussion about our mutual interest in trauma studies. Sherrer is an assistant professor in the Psychology and Human Services Department at Lyndon State. In 2003, she provided emergency mental health counseling to the families of victims and to the survivors of the Station Nightclub fire that killed 100 people in West Warwick, Rhode Island. She is also a former newspaper reporter. I am an assistant professor of journalism in the college’s Department of English, Philosophy, and Film Studies. My interest in trauma dates to my years working at CNN International under its president,

Chris Cramer, now global editor for multimedia at Reuters and president of the International News Safety Institute.

Sherrer and I designed a one-credit course, *Responding to Psychological Trauma*. The class met three times: a two-hour orientation that introduced the students to the subject of psychological trauma; a day-long Saturday session with role-playing exercises and guest speakers who had served in Iraq; and a final Saturday for the dormitory fire exercise. We secured the participation of the emergency responders through our campus public safety director, George Hacking, a veteran of the Vermont State Police. The presence of fully geared-up firefighters and paramedics provided a heightened sense of realism for our students. A campus-wide appeal for volunteers attracted more than 20 people willing to portray victims and worried friends and family members.

A father arrives on campus and learns his daughter was taken to the hospital in serious condition; then he overhears reporters saying she is dead. He explodes. A student is overcome by grief and guilt because he stepped out for coffee and bagels just before the explosion killed his girlfriend. A young man jumps from a third-story dorm window and breaks his ankle. His girlfriend jumps and lands on his back. His mother arrives on campus and turns hysterical when she learns they've been sleeping together.

Journalists struggle every day with interviewing people in pain. What's the best way to approach someone who just suffered a loss? How do you ask questions that will not retraumatize the person? How sympathetic can you be? A cascade of man-made and natural catastrophes is bringing the subject of trauma home to the news industry – Oklahoma City, Columbine, 9/11, Iraq, the Indian Ocean tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, Virginia Tech. More and more news organizations recognize the danger of sending

unprepared journalists to cover traumatic events. Insensitive questioning can cause further anguish. In war zones, a rookie mistake can kill. Even on the police beat, a steady diet of murder and mayhem can take a toll; reporters can protect themselves by recognizing the signs of traumatic stress and being willing to seek help if they need it. Chris Cramer of the International News Safety Institute put it this way in a recent interview with “Fresh Air’s” Terry Gross on NPR:

People who fight fires don’t go off to fight fires without the most profound training and equipment and guidance and support before, during and after that particular incident. You don’t go and do this unless you are well-trained and well-rehearsed and well-prepped on what you might confront. Yet the media profession until fairly recently, and pockets of the media profession still, seem to think they can drift in and out of war zones without harm coming to them. Life’s not like that. Certainly it isn’t like that anymore. If we say that our most valuable resource are our staff, then we need to behave as though that’s true. ¹

Trauma Basics

Students began the class with an overview of psychological trauma. Studies suggest that up to 70 percent of us are exposed to at least one traumatic event in our lifetimes. As spelled out by Professor Sherrer ², a traumatic event can cause fear and anger, hopeless feelings, trouble concentrating, hyperarousal, withdrawal, disturbing dreams and flashbacks. People may become depressed or turn to alcohol and drugs. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is diagnosed if the symptoms persist for more than a

month. Ten percent of all women in the United States and five percent of men will experience symptoms that would qualify as PTSD, Professor Sherrer says. Prevalence of PTSD among war correspondents can be as high as 28 percent, according to a 2002 study.³ Alcohol consumption was two to three times higher among this group, too.

An important component of our *Responding to Psychological Trauma* course was the Journalism and Trauma module at News University (www.newsu.org), the online training portal offered through the Poynter Institute. The module was created by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma and includes a simulation in which the students “interview” a woman who lost three children in a traffic accident. From the simulation, students learn to avoid seemingly innocuous phrases such as “I understand what you must be going through.” Unless you’ve lost three children, you don’t. Students also learn that an interview can be a healing experience, a chance for a survivor to tell his or her story or to remember a loved one.

A 2007 study concluded that “the topic of trauma is not being discussed in journalism classrooms.”⁴ It reached the same conclusion about the topic of victims and how to approach them. Journalism students who covered a murder trial told the researcher they wished they had received better preparation.

For the dormitory fire exercise, Professor Sherrer and I prepared our students to play one of two roles – as human services workers offering support to people affected by the event, or as journalists covering the incident and interviewing witnesses, family members and victims.

Keith Whitcomb was one of the students in the first disaster class. At the time, he was editor of the Lyndon State student newspaper, *The Critic*. Now he is a reporter at the

Banner, a daily newspaper in Bennington, Vermont. He says a recent story reinforced aspects of the trauma class. The victim of a savage beating called Whitcomb to complain after reading a story Whitcomb wrote about her attacker's plea deal.

She says she used to be an outgoing person. Now she'll be talking to somebody and her mind will blank completely – not sure if it's PTSD or brain damage. She says it completely changed her life for the worse. I felt bad for her, but I never once told the woman 'I understand' or 'I know how you feel.' If you're talking to someone, you're not there to make them feel better, but to talk. I'm not a psychologist. I'm not there to ease their pain. If that's a side effect of them talking to me, that's okay.⁵

Jim Jardine, a veteran reporter for the Caledonian-Record, found himself covering LSC's first disaster exercise after hearing on his police scanner that fire and ambulance units were en route to the college. Jardine has covered a considerable amount of violence in his career. In November 2006, he was the first reporter on the scene of a murder-suicide in Lyndonville, a mile from campus. In January 2007, he stood in the early morning cold outside a home in nearby Sutton where a 15-year-old killed a man who was seeing the boy's mother. Jardine has covered fatal car wrecks and horrible fires.

The most personally traumatic experience I have had was covering a murder trial several years ago. A 911 tape was played in the courtroom during which you could hear the murder taking place. The callers were the victims calling for help as the murderer shot each of them several times, eventually killing both victims, all recorded on the 911 tape. In addition, slides of the murder scene and slides depicting the murder victims as they

were found at the scene were shown. The trial more personally affected me than covering a traumatic event as it unfolds.⁶

Jardine says it is important for journalists to receive trauma training before they have to learn it on-the-job – as he did. “Arriving on scene at an event can be very confusing, frustrating, and overwhelming. It is important to have a real world understanding of what the scene will be like,” he says.

Disaster Strikes II

On a cold fall morning, a young man with a handgun strides into a classroom on the campus of Lyndon State College. He heads straight for a frightened female student and yanks her to her feet. The professor moves to intervene and the young man shoots him. Students dive for cover as the man fires wildly around the room and forces the young woman out the door.

This is the sort of scenario that keeps college administrators awake at night following the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech massacre, in which a student killed 32 people before killing himself. The Lyndon State gunman in our second exercise was a volunteer actor, as were his victims, so the Caledonian-Record’s headline read *LSC Students Stage Serious Drill* rather than *Deadly Rampage at LSC*.

More than 120 people participated in the second exercise, about twice as many as the first. Jessica Stolz was the added ingredient. Stolz plans exercises for the Vermont Homeland Security Unit. Her agency’s involvement boosted the level of professionalism of the exercise.

Professor Sherrer and I taught separate classes this time – she offered a three-credit course on response to trauma and I the one-credit course. Her students met for the entire semester, and mine joined them for a role-play training session and for the exercise itself. Sherrer was a guest lecturer in my course’s introductory meeting, and I gave a talk to her students.

Built into the exercise scenario were opportunities for Sherrer’s students to interact with victims in a supportive role, watched over by Sherrer and an experienced Red Cross crisis counselor. Journalism students interviewed traumatized survivors, crying family members and reluctant police. The presence of Vermont State Police officers was new this time. The previous year, there were no funds to pay for their overtime. This time, Jessica Stolz and her Homeland Security Unit picked up the check. At Stolz’s urging, the scenario included prompts for the journalism students to try to get too close to the scene – partly to train the students in dealing with the authorities but also to give the police experience dealing with reporters.

A witness tells police he saw the gunman place a backpack by the building’s exit before dragging the young woman off toward the school’s maintenance building. The Vermont State Police calls in its bomb squad, which uses a robot to blow up the backpack. Lyndonville’s police chief brings a tracking dog, which finds the gunman and the young woman behind the maintenance building. With police closing in, the gunman kills himself. The woman is spattered with blood and gore, but not injured.

The Caledonian-Record reporter who covered the exercise this time was Taylor Reed. He graduated from the University of Montana with a degree in history, and he started at the paper, his first journalism job, five years ago. He says he covers 10 or 12

traumatic incidents each year – usually traffic accidents and fires, with the occasional violent crime. Reed says the trickiest task is interviewing survivors of trauma and family members of people who have died. He worries about “saying the wrong thing, saying something I shouldn’t, being too aggressive. We could all use some training in dealing with these situations. At small papers there isn’t much.”⁷

Other Voices

Rural southeastern Alabama experienced two violent events two years apart. On March 1, 2007, a tornado tore apart the high school in Enterprise, killing eight students. On March 10, 2009, a 28-year-old man murdered his mother and nine other people in a shooting rampage that ended when he killed himself. Lance Griffin and Carole Brand are two reporters who covered both events, Griffin for the daily Dothan Eagle and Brand for the daily Enterprise Ledger. Griffin has been a reporter for 16 years. Brand has more than 30 years of experience. Neither reporter had formal training in covering traumatic events, though Griffin says the topic came up in some of his journalism classes at the University of Alabama. He also says he has read Poynter Institute articles about the subject and has had conversations about trauma-coverage techniques with more experienced reporters.

The information I received from the informal, scattered training helped me to understand that observation is just as important – if not more important – during a traumatic event as trying to press for an interview from someone who has just suffered trauma. The details of observation can be more compelling. And one of the things I still remember from college is never, ever ask ‘How do you feel?’ after a traumatic event.⁸

The Enterprise Ledger's Brand arrived at the high school five minutes after the tornado. "Covering this was very hard, even for a seasoned reporter," she says in an e-mail interview. Her first reactions were shock and disbelief. She knew many of the students, "so I comforted them, but also did my job." She suggests that trauma training would be helpful for cub reporters, and her tips closely mirror some of the techniques favored by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma:

Be aware of other people's feelings. Even though your job as a reporter is to get their view of things in an awful situation, you do need to have some sensibility for them. [A] harsh approach to an individual who has just experienced a traumatic event will not get you your story. Listening to a person's dilemma may make a better story than you anticipate. Tell them you are sorry about their situation, but continue to ask them questions. If an individual feels comfortable enough with the reporter, they will tell you what you want to know. Be sympathetic and listen. The details and feelings of that person will come. After a tragedy, most people want to talk about it.⁹

Terry Knapp is the communications director for Montana's secretary of state. She worked in television news in Montana as a reporter and anchor after graduating from the Indiana University School of Journalism in 2004. Her biggest trauma story was a fatal stabbing in Helena, where murder is rare.

I also interned for a year or so at WISH-TV 8 in Indianapolis, where I received the bulk of my experience covering traumatic events. My resume

reels included triple homicides, fatal accidents, and fatal house fires where on one occasion I showed up to the scene and the burned bodies of a family were momentarily uncovered in the grass. While in college, we discussed with our professor how to approach traumatic situations while remaining aware of our personal safety, our crew's safety, and the safety/emotions of the involved parties. Journalism ethics was an integral part of my education, and I feel the courses were adequate, informative and appropriate.¹⁰

An Idea Forms

Lyndon State College calls a news conference to express sorrow and horror about the shootings and to update the media. One professor and one student are dead; 12 students are hurt, some with gunshot wounds. The gunman is dead. No identities are being released yet. A memorial event is being planned for the following day. Classes are cancelled for the rest of the week.

The second exercise received more media attention, thanks to an alert sent out by Lyndon State's public information coordinator, Sue Gallagher. A crew covered it for WCAX, the leading television station in Burlington, Vermont. The Caledonian-Record sent reporter Taylor Reed. A reporter and cameraman arrived from News 7, the daily student newscast at Lyndon State. The college's student newspaper, The Critic, was also there. Gallagher was part of the exercise, too, issuing statements about the incident and arranging the mock news conference at the end.

Next time, journalists will have the opportunity to join in. Professor Sherrer and I envision an Institute for Disaster Response and Trauma Studies. It would serve a wide range of people in Vermont and the region: human services and journalism professionals; emergency responders such as police, fire, rescue and Red Cross; and students pursuing degrees in fields where they will encounter psychological trauma. The institute would continue to use the campus disaster exercises as training tools, but would expand its offerings to include on-campus and off-campus workshops for interested groups. The one-credit course, which is structured in a way that accommodates a non-traditional student's schedule, would be open to responders, human services workers, and print and broadcast journalists.

We lay the groundwork with our next full-scale exercise, on April 30, 2010. The featured speaker is Chris Cramer of Reuters and the International News Safety Institute. News media will be invited to cover the event, participate in it as part of the course, or both.

Who Else is Doing This?

For a news organization wishing to equip its staff to cover traumatic events better, the first step is to find out what resources are already available. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma offers a treasure trove of information at its Web site, DartCenter.org. Journalists can read booklets explaining traumatic stress and giving tips on covering disasters and wars. Articles on the Web site focus on how individual events were covered – and their aftermath – such as Virginia Tech or the Sichuan earthquake in China. A reporter can order a free DVD about Columbine, watch a video about coverage

of the 2008 shootings at Northern Illinois University, or click through a slideshow of Dart Award photos.

A small but growing number of universities include trauma education in their journalism programs. At the University of Washington in Seattle, where the Dart Center was established in 1999, the *Advanced Reporting and Newswriting* course includes a module that teaches students how to cover tragedies.¹¹ Students apply what they learn during an interview simulation in which actors portray victims. At Michigan State University in East Lansing, students in all introductory and advanced reporting classes benefit from instruction developed by the School of Journalism's Victims and the Media Program, which began there in 1991.¹² The Victims and the Media Program also provides workshops for newsrooms and media associations. At Central Oklahoma University in Edmond, students can take *Victims and the Media*, a semester-long course taught by Dr. Kole Kleeman.¹³ Professor Kleeman holds statewide seminars on trauma for the Center for People and the Media, which is housed in his school's Department of Mass Communication. At Temple University in Philadelphia, a photojournalist who covered the Iraq War for the Associated Press, Jim MacMillan, has developed a course titled *Journalism and Psychological Trauma*.¹⁴

The trauma programs and courses outlined above do not tie their training to disaster exercises. A check of college media advisers and state emergency management agencies around the country turned up several universities where journalism students do take part in exercises, though without a strong trauma training component.

Arizona State conducted a drill over spring break this year in which broadcast majors portrayed reporters.¹⁵ Students are sometimes used as mock media interviewers

during exercises conducted by Texas A&M's Texas Engineering Extension Service.¹⁶ TEEX, as it is known, operates Disaster City, a 50-acre emergency training facility in College Station. University students in the Vicksburg, Mississippi, area portrayed journalists at a recent exercise involving the Grand Gulf Nuclear Station.¹⁷

Montana's Disaster and Emergency Services Division has involved students (and professional media) in its exercises for years, says public information officer Monique Lay. "This has been extremely successful," Lay says.¹⁸ "If anyone out there isn't incorporating colleges and media into their exercise process, I would highly recommend it. They are missing out on extremely valuable insight." An earthquake exercise in September will use students from Carroll College in Helena, she says. A terrorism exercise last September, Operation Sweetgrass, involved media and criminal justice students from Lethbridge College across the border in Alberta, Canada.

Trauma training for the journalism majors was not a part of Operation Sweetgrass, but students who participated indicate they experienced traumatic stress in one form or another. In the Lethbridge magazine *Wider Horizons*, Scott Schmidt writes about trying to get pictures of a cloud of simulated poison gas:

My first thought was to get the best photograph possible. My second thought was that this is the last thing I'm ever going to do; this canary cloud is clearly toxic and I'm going to die. Organizers had taken such care in this so-called exercise, that I had to convince myself I wasn't filling my lungs with deadly chlorine fumes.¹⁹

Another Lethbridge student, Quinn Ohler, writes that she gained experience that will help her in her career: “You have to take in everything that is happening now, focus on it and still be able to handle your nerves and emotions at the same time.”²⁰

At North Carolina State University in Raleigh, the coordinator for student media advising, Bradley Wilson, is also a medic who has been running emergency drills for 15 years. He often cooks up scenarios for the staff of the Technician, the student newspaper, and says he gives the students guidance on dealing with traumatized people. An exercise in the spring simulated a shooting:

A student was shot in the student center. A photographer got through police lines and took pictures of it. It was a great ethical debate. He was walking around with blood all over him. Would you actually use those pictures? I was interested in how they would interview the guy who had been shot.²¹

Wilson said the students’ work was “frighteningly amazing. They got quotes from lots of people, lots of photos.” Working in teams, they had four hours to cover the story and post their work on Web sites that they created on the spot. Alumni portrayed victims and university officials.

Four years ago, NC State conducted a huge exercise simulating a bomb that released Sarin gas at Carter-Finley Stadium. Wilson organized the media. A dozen students played reporters while local media covered the event. “My students love it,” he says.

At Syracuse University in New York, the Public Safety Department holds an annual drill for graduate journalism students enrolled in a summer “boot camp.” Two

years ago, the exercise involved a shooter in a dormitory. Last year, a gunman took hostages. An audio slideshow on the Newhouse School of Public Communication's Web site attests to the realism of the simulation.²² Reporters interview traumatized witnesses. A medical helicopter swoops in to take away wounded. A minivan is torched. And a suspect, portrayed by a campus police officer, is Tasered. Emilie Davis, a professor at the Newhouse School, has been the organizer of the annual exercise for eight years. She describes the "boot camp" as an intensive, six-week news writing and reporting course:

Students know nothing of the event in advance. On the morning of the drill, they meet in class as usual. One of the professors starts a lecture and then takes a call that something is going on and gives them a location. Then they are off to cover it. What we do tell them in the weeks before is how to cover spot news. So their training in spot news is what they rely upon when they go to cover the news in real time. ... We do this to give them an opportunity to cover breaking news. Every event does involve trauma of some kind, but the objective is not specifically to train them in covering traumatic events.²³

Davis says the Newhouse School recruits teaching assistants, friends and relatives to portray victims and witnesses. Staff from the university's Residence Life office also take part, she says, "which was good experience for them." It is also a good experience for campus police officers, according to the Syracuse public safety chief, Anthony Callisto. "The role play is really the most important part," Callisto says. "To have the unknowns associated with human actors really gives us a chance to test our skills."²⁴

What a Newspaper Can Do

- Contact the nearest college and find out if an emergency response exercise is being planned; suggest one if it is not.
- Encourage the college's psychology or human services department to offer a trauma workshop in conjunction with the exercise. A journalism or emergency management department could probably arrange this as well. The workshop increases the value of the exercise for the newspaper. Without it, a reporter could still learn things from the exercise: how to interview police and other first responders; where to stand without interfering with emergency crews. With a trauma workshop, however, the journalist would learn how to identify and interview a traumatized person, and how to lessen the risk of becoming a trauma victim himself or herself.
- Involve the state's newspaper association and invite other publications in the area to join in. The prospect of a larger media presence can be a powerful motivator for a college.
- Ask to be involved in the planning. Some emergency management officials will oppose media involvement, fearing journalists might expose flaws in a community's disaster response capacity. Jessica Stolz of the Vermont Homeland Security Unit says the presence of journalists at after-action sessions could have a chilling effect on participants' candor.²⁵ On the other hand, Monique Lay of the Montana Disaster and Emergency Services Division says it is important to include local media in every step: "[T]he partnerships we have developed are invaluable. These are experiences that

improve our abilities to do our job and will help us through our next disaster.”²⁶

- If the state’s homeland security or emergency management agency is not involved in the exercise, call the director and suggest it. These agencies have trained people who can help plan and execute the drill, and they often have grant funding to help defray costs. The Federal Emergency Management Agency maintains a Web page with contact information for each state’s agency.²⁷

Conclusion

Disaster exercises are win-win events for all parties. They prepare police officers, firefighters and paramedics for the unexpected and can help make a town a safer place. Putting a college in the mix helps the school tweak its emergency response plan. It also opens up new educational avenues. A theater department can supply actors, a journalism program can supply reporters, an emergency management department can provide exercise monitors, and a psychology department can add a trauma training layer. Given the right planning, much of a newsroom’s staff could take part – and come away better equipped to handle the next tragedy to strike the town.

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