

When Disaster Strikes: The Critical Importance of Effective Communication and Teamwork

Constantia Constantinou

Dean of Libraries, Stony Brook University
constantia.constantinou@stonybrook.edu

1. Introduction

"When Disaster Strikes: The Critical Importance of Effective Communication and Teamwork" describes the communication and recovery efforts of the Stony Brook University Libraries during a major flooding incident in January 2014. The essay addresses the human factor and the importance of effective communication with the students, faculty, university administration and the academic community at-large during the different stages of managing the crisis.

Although, the physical, financial and operational consequences of such a disaster were considered catastrophic and disruptive to the university community, the effective team coordination and dissemination of information became the success of the story that enabled the Stony Brook University Library to respond to the needs of its users.

2. Stony Brook University

Stony Brook University was established in 1957 as a college for the preparation of secondary school teachers of mathematics and science. The first campus was located in Oyster Bay, Long Island, on the grounds of a former Gold Coast estate. In 1962, a new campus was built near the historic village of Stony Brook. Part of the State University of New York system, the University has grown tremendously and is now recognized as one of the nation's important centers of learning and scholarship — carrying out the mandate given by the State Board of Regents in 1960 to become a university that would —stand with the finest in the country. Geographically, the Stony Brook University campus lies about 60 miles

east of Manhattan and 60 miles west of Montauk Point. It is only a short distance to the Atlantic beaches of the south shore and the vineyards of the East End.

Stony Brook University is ranked one of the top 100 universities in the nation and one of the top 40 public universities by *U.S. News & World Report* and is included on their list of notable programs for undergraduate research/creative projects. Stony Brook is a member of the prestigious Association of American Universities, the invitation-only organization of the 62 best research universities in North America. Stony Brook University offers 68 undergraduate majors and 82 minors and more than 100 master's programs, 40 doctoral programs and 30 graduate certificate programs. Stony Brook is one of 10 universities given a National Science Foundation recognition award for integrating research and education. The internationally recognized research facilities of Brookhaven National Laboratory and Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory are nearby.ⁱ

3. Stony Brook University Libraries

The Stony Brook University Libraries represent world-class collections and services the Libraries are indispensable partners in research, study and teaching. Stony Brook Libraries are known for a wide-range of print and digital resources and world-renowned special collections. The Stony Brook Libraries belong to the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), with a Health Sciences Center Library that is a member of the Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries.

The Libraries' collection exceed 2 million volumes, including eBooks, print and electronic holdings of scholarly journal subscriptions, microforms, music recordings, and a sizable map collection. The SBU Libraries include 6 distinct facilities, including Melville Library, Marine and Atmospheric Sciences, Chemistry, Math/Physics/Astronomy, Southampton, and Health Sciences Libraries. The University's Libraries stand as the largest academic research library on Long Island, serving as a resource in the local community, state-wide, and nationally through the National Network of the National Libraries of Medicine.ⁱⁱ

4. Stony Brook University Health Sciences Library

The Health Sciences Library supports teaching, research and patient care in six programs: Dental Medicine, Health Technology and Management, Medicine, Nursing, Public Health, and Social Welfare. The Library also supports research and patient care for the University Hospital and the

Long Island State Veterans Home. The Health Science Library is located the Health Sciences Tower, which is adjacent to the University Hospital and Medical Center. The Stony Brook University Hospital with 603 beds, serves as the region's only tertiary care center and Level 1 Trauma Center, and is home to the Stony Brook Heart Institute, Stony Brook Cancer Center, Stony Brook Children's Hospital, and the Stony Brook Neurosciences Institute. (Image 1)

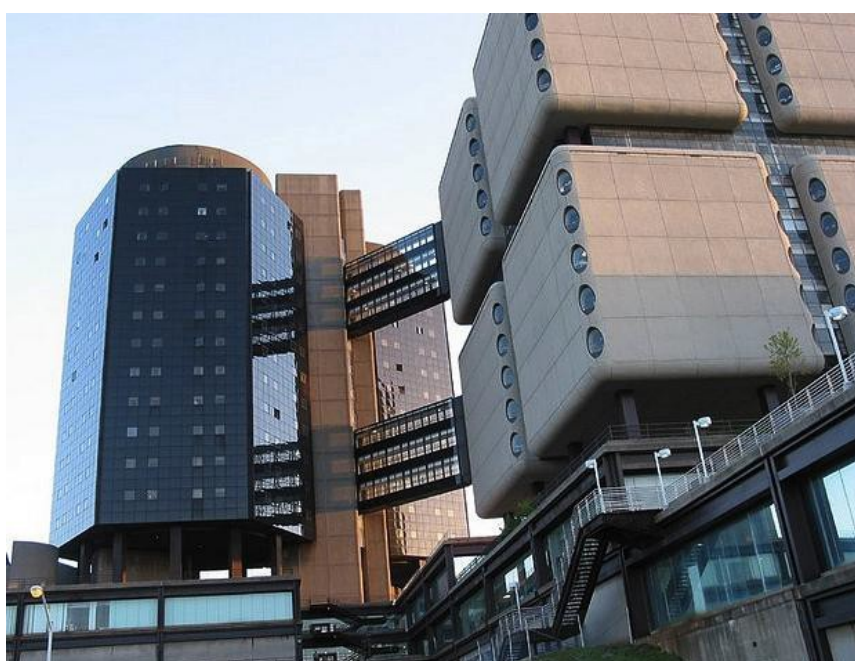


Image 1 The Stony Brook University Health Science towers

The Health Sciences Library is a Resource Library for the National Network of Libraries of Medicine administered by the National Library of Medicine, a division of NIH. A member of the North East Research Libraries consortium (NERL), the Association of Research Libraries, and the Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries (AAHSL).

The Stony Brook University Health Science Library also operates as a regional resource assisting health care professionals throughout Nassau and Suffolk counties. The library maintains a current print collection of over 280,000 serial and monograph volumes, more than 96,000 books, more than 4,200 electronic books, about 20 print journals, and over 10,000 electronic journals.

Additionally, the Health Science Library library supports access to over 290 primarily web-based electronic research databases, including ACCESSMedicine, ClinicalKey, MEDLINE, ScienceDirect, UpToDate, and Web of Science. Numerous sessions on improving the effectiveness of managing information resources are offered throughout the year. ⁱⁱⁱ (Image 2)



Image 2 Stony Brook University Health Science Library

5. The Flood

On January 9, 2014 after a long –week of subfreezing temperatures, the Library staff entered the library at 0900 to find the entire library facility flooded with water. A five-foot section of standpipe in a third-floor stairwell in the Health Sciences Center froze over nigh and split along its seam. The split triggered the pipe’s booster pumps to pump water into the space at approximately 2000 gallons per minute causing an incredible body of water to run through the library. It was estimated that the pipe broke around 2:00 am and the water was flooding the library from 2:00 am - 9:00 am

The University facilities and management guided people in the affected areas to leave for their own safety. While the pumps were running, an estimated 45,000 gallons of water flowed into the building, starting on the third floor in the Health Sciences Library and continuing down into the second and first floors of the medical academic tower until the water eventually reached the mechanical basement level.

The magnitude of the damage extended to all carpeted areas and flooring of the health science library. All furniture, wooden shelving bases and cabinets were soaked in water. The structural walls had to be reconstructed, and tile ceilings replaced. The library was covered in dirt and debris washed in by the running water and fallen ceiling tiles. The printed collections were saved from water damage because of —best library practices—. The collections were kept 18 inches above water. Image #3 shows the collections place above the base-shelve and the water flooding the stacks. (Image 3)



Image 3. Health Science Library Shelving Units flooded.

All electrical outlets and data ports were below the water line and all electronics such computers, printers, network jacks, were damaged beyond repair. (Image 4)



Image 4. Computer stations, Health Science Library flood.

During the flooding disaster, all Library personnel and operations were relocated, to the main Stony Brook University Library (Melville Library) in order for collections, equipment had to be secured and begin the recovery process. Most of furniture and equipment were discarded and the facility infrastructure had to undergo major renovations. The State of New York is self-insured; therefore it was easy to begin the recovery and repair phase of the flooding incident. Even with all the support received by Stony Brook University and the State of New York, the most crucial element of the incident was the University Libraries' ability to communicate effectively with the academic community and the its constituencies. The effective team coordination of all library

departments and communication of information became the success of the flooding incident.

6. Communication Strategies

In response to the disaster, the Stony Brook University Library's leadership quickly mobilized the senior management teams to prepare and issue information statements to the academic community.

Utilizing, the campus media such as campus newspapers and campus reporters' regular briefings were scheduled every week. The campus social media also played an important role in providing information with greater frequency and interactivity. The Library's official Facebook page allowed the campus community and the library staff to communicate updates with greater frequency and interactivity. (Image 5)

In-person communication was proved to be the most effective mode of communication. Town hall meetings were scheduled once a week with all students and student government, faculty and facilities employees in order to communicate and address issues and address questions relating to the timing and schedule of the recovery project, rebuilding the library infrastructure as the students prefer to see improvements with greater connectivity, more electrical outlets and larger areas for collaboration and team project assignments. Discussions were also focused on alternative spaces to study and gain access to library collections. The circulation services became a service on-demand, where the students requested library items and the library staff would retrieve them from the flooded library areas and lend them to the users.

Electronic media such as YouTube videos also served as a communication tool by encouraging the academic community and the students to be creativity and humorous. Most importantly, electronic media brought the students' message of support to the Library's attention.

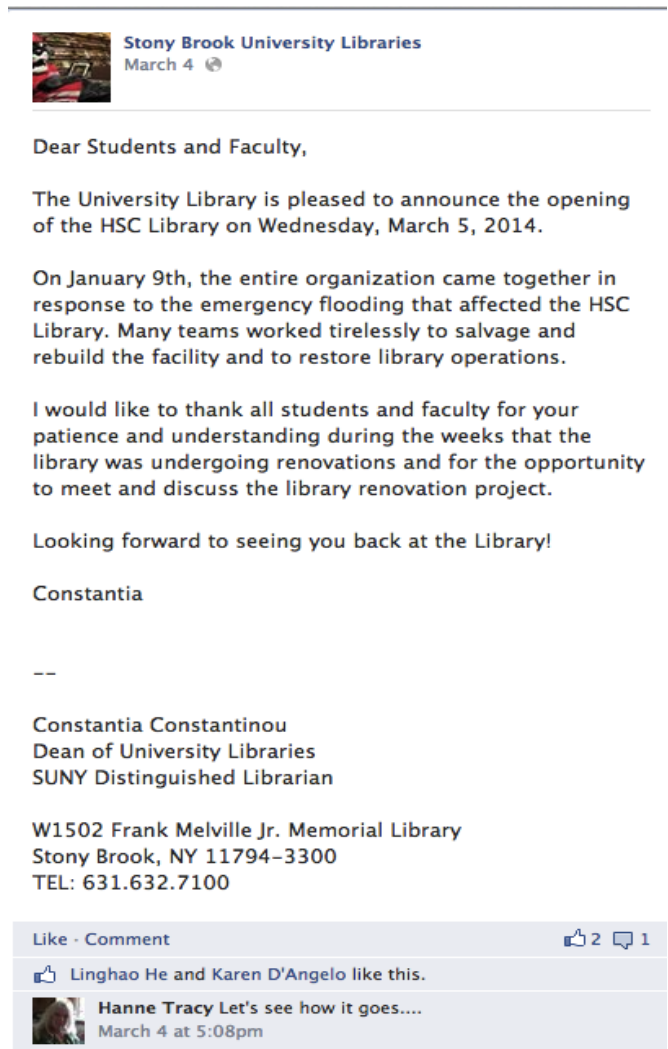


Image 5. Stony Brook University Library Facebook

Equally important and critical in expediting the recovery process of the library flooding were internal communication mechanism for keeping all library staff, recovery workers, facilities and university leadership coordinated with information sharing. Methods of internal communication included coordinated group emails; town hall meetings with all contractors and recovery

teams; news reports to the Stony Brook University media and newspapers; in-person communication and conversation; and sharing of information working from —punch lists and projected timelines.

It became evident effective communication eliminates frustration, increases understanding and patience and promotes appreciation and support for effort and attempt to recover and normalize the situation. Messages such as:

“Wow, heroic efforts – many thanks!

What a mess ...; You managed to turn lemons into lemonade. Great job!;

Your team was such a pleasure to work with throughout this project. Thank you for your professionalism and understanding. Have a wonderful day and enjoy the new library.

And finally from the medical students, class of 2017 made all the communication efforts worthwhile:

... , while you’ve probably only been hearing the complaints, the medical student body most definitely recognizes and appreciates you and your staff’s hard work and dedication to getting the library up and running. Please pass on a “thank you” from me and my fellow students to those who are still working hard for us!

7. Conclusion

The lessons learned from implementing effective communication methods were the realization that the Library had to maintain constant communication on regular timelines and intervals throughout the week.

We also had to remain flexible and creative in our planning and communicating the message as well as to provide as much as as information possible in great detail. We maintained

communication at all time through social media and continuously reiterate and re-examining project and progress-made timelines.

The implementation of all these measures enabled the library organization to successfully manage a situation of crisis. It has also become important that moving forward in order to minimize the risks, the injuries, and loss of assets that happen when such disasters occur it is essential that the library organization needed to formalize a communication strategy for disaster management.

Open communication not only encourages and coordinates collaboration of all departments and units but it also enhances and strengthens collaboration; it invites support and creates a spirit of teamwork from all parties affected by the information. According to the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), guidelines for emergency response are that —Emergency communications planning is key component of any disaster plan.^{iv}

ⁱ Stony Brook University website. Retrieved November 15, 2015.

<http://www.stonybrook.edu/sb/ataglance.shtml>

ⁱⁱ Stony Brook University website. Retrieved November 15, 2015.

<http://library.stonybrook.edu/about-us/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Stony Brook University website. Retrieved November 15, 2015

<http://library.stonybrook.edu/health-sciences-library/hsl-about-services/>

^{iv} FEMA website. Retrieved November 15, 2015

<https://transition.fcc.gov/pshs/emergency-information/guidelines/first-responders.html>

<http://www.oktrik.com> *www.oktrik.com*