Flood waters draw heroics from college communities

by Candi Helseth

As the Sheyenne and James rivers roared over their banks this spring, college students at Valley City State University (VCSU) and Jamestown College shifted from book lessons to community lessons.

“It definitely wasn’t the way I expected to end my freshman year,” said Brian Dahlberg, a VCSU student who is employed at the campus Internet help desk. It wasn’t how Dr. Steven Shirley, who joined VCSU in 2008, expected his first year to go either. But students and staff weathered the formidable weather with remarkable resiliency, Shirley said. The campus’s approximately 1,000 students were evacuated April 13. They completed the last four weeks of Spring semester online from their homes.

"The mayor's city wide evacuation plan, which included residents and non-essential businesses in the 500-year flood plain, covers about one-half of our campus, with a good majority of that being our academic buildings," Shirley said. "We shared the city's concerns about the pressures on the sanitary system and we knew not having students on campus would relieve some of that strain."

VCSU's IT Center and campus servers were moved to higher ground in the Regional Technology Center. Shirley gave faculty members a few days to readjust their course work and then classes resumed online. “In three days after moving it all, we had everything back online,” Dahlberg said.

VCSU was the second university in the United States to implement a laptop initiative in the mid-1990s. Instructors' familiarity with teaching online courses made the transition fairly seamless, Shirley said.
While Jamestown College’s campus wasn’t harmed by flood waters, campus dynamics were definitely impacted said college president Robert Badal.

At the height of the crisis, Badal cancelled classes twice. Students were bussed to Valley City to sandbag and then called into action when the river peaked at Jamestown. For several weeks, students and staff also sandbagged daily. National Guardsmen moved into dormitory rooms, the first time since World War II that military members lived on campus.

College athletes came to the rescue at Jamestown’s Anne Carlsen Center (ACC) when 56 students with an array of disabilities – along with their specially equipped beds, wheel chairs, and medical equipment – were evacuated.

"It was absolutely incredible how the entire community helped," said Brenda Scholten, ACC marketing and communications director. "We evacuated in less than five hours because we had so many volunteers."

Jamestown Hospital, two nursing homes and the civic center became temporary homes for ACC students. Area churches volunteered space for therapy and other student activities. Stutsman County Housing Authority provided office space.

"Our residents continued to receive their education and therapy and our staff was awesome in helping keep residents comfortable with the situation," Scholten said.

In mid-June, nearly three months after being evacuated March 23, ACC held a welcome home ice cream social to celebrate students' return to the campus and Valley City celebrated with a thank-you party for its volunteers, who logged 25,000 hours at Sandbag Central.

This spring, community leaders in the Greater Fargo-Moorhead area were also applauding thousands of college students who helped get 62 miles of sandbag levees constructed in about a week. Students from the campuses of North Dakota State University, the University of Minnesota – Moorhead, and Concordia College helped convert the Fargodome into a flood fighting headquarters that came to be known as “Sandbag U.” The college corps also included faculty and hundreds of students from the local branch of Rasmussen College.

Meanwhile, local leaders across the state continued repair and restoration and gratefully acknowledged assistance.

"Ongoing support and communication with the state and federal officials was an important part of our progress," said Larry Robinson, State Senator from Valley City and VCSU Executive Director of
Advancement. "The legislature provided initial emergency funding to move the computer systems and telephone switch gear. That was a big help. The Congressional delegation, Governor Hoeven, and Adjutant General of the National Guard visited the campus several times. We are fortunate for the services of the Salvation Army and FEMA programs. University officials are working with FEMA to further our recovery efforts."

Valley City Mayor Mary Lee Nielsen said the Corps of Engineers has been helping develop solutions for the impacted sewer system. She credited Sen. Byron Dorgan for helping secure $3.1 million for the project.

College spring recruiting took a back seat this year. Badal and Shirley say they won't know until fall if new admissions were negatively impacted. But they prefer to look at the positive outcomes.

Jamestown College had already begun a multiple-year campus program to help students become more effective members of society. This coming school year, curriculum focuses on encouraging students to be good community stewards.

"We got an early jump on that," Badal said. "I think everyone learned the power of a community coming together under adversity. Our students saw firsthand how vital community service is."