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Faculty members lured by challenge

N.O. colleges find recovery is a draw

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Staff writer

In the realm of surgery, Dr. Christopher Baker had become a major player. A Harvard Medical School graduate, he was a professor of surgery at his alma mater, and he directed the residency program in that specialty.

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But when Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center offered him the surgery chairmanship this year, Baker jumped at the chance to move to New Orleans, even though it would mean forsaking the resource-rich Harvard environment for a medical sector struggling to recover from a historic flood. "My wife and I got excited about getting involved in the process of rebuilding," Baker said.

Baker is the second recent Harvard export to New Orleans' medical community. On Nov. 1, a month before Baker started his new job, Dr. Benjamin Sachs, an obstetrician and gynecologist, became dean of Tulane University's medical school.

"I love challenges," Sachs said.

That kind of gung-ho attitude pervades a new class of applicants for faculty positions at New Orleans colleges and universities, local college representatives say. Twenty-eight months after the flood, rebounding college enrollments have sparked the new round of hiring, and the city's plight has in many cases proved a marketing tool.

"I tell people, 'You can be one of those people who read about people who make history, or you can be one of the people who make it,'" said Dr. Steve Nelson, the dean of LSU's medical school.

"Katrina is going to be the instrument of our transformation," he said. "We don't want to go back to

where we were before. We want to be better, and shame on us if we don't take that opportunity to do that."

While it's difficult to quantify or compare the recruiting successes of different campuses, examples of faculty expansion abound. Xavier University, for instance, has added four chemistry positions. The University of New Orleans will beef up its faculty by 44 in the areas of education, engineering, liberal arts, science and business. And Our Lady of Holy Cross College has doubled the size of its nursing faculty.

And many of the new applicants appear eager to join the rebuilding. Prospective Dillard University professors, for instance, "want to be part of the new Dillard and part of the revitalization of a great American city," said Walter Strong, the school's executive vice president.

That spirit extends even to Southern University at New Orleans, despite its expectation to operate in portable buildings until 2009.

"Many of (the applicants) are interested in the city of New Orleans . . . and some of them are interested in joining us to help rebuild the city," said David Adegboye, SUNO's associate vice chancellor for academic affairs. "They feel teaching on the faculty would be part of their contribution to the recovery effort."

Getting practical

To capitalize on the desire to restore New Orleans, Tulane University's economics department has created a buzz in academia with a new focus on the practical side of the discipline in fields such as urban economics, public-sector economics, medical economics and environmental economics, said Michael Bernstein, Tulane's provost and senior vice president for academic affairs.

"If you look at New Orleans right now, it's a great applied-social-science laboratory," he said.

In that vein, Loyola University recruiters would look kindly upon applicants to the business faculty specializing in entrepreneurship, said George Capowich, the vice provost.

"We're encouraged" about this professorial state of mind, he said. "Cautiously optimistic."

One problem in luring people to New Orleans, college officials say, is the assortment of negative impressions about rampant crime, the difficulty in finding affordable housing, a higher cost of living and the state of the public education system.

"It used to be that we could attract faculty because New Orleans is a wonderful place to be," said Elizabeth Barron, Xavier's vice president for academic affairs.

Now, she said, Xavier is attracting faculty applicants in spite of the city's struggles.

"The reason that Xavier faculty chose Xavier to begin with is that they're mission-oriented," Barron said. "They wanted to make a difference."

Two uneventful hurricane seasons have helped the schools' recruiting efforts.

"It helps to underscore that this was a rarity and not an annual event," UNO Provost Rick Barton said. "I pray that we have another dozen consecutive ones."

Luring workers home

Community college aren't having the same recruiting successes because they draw from a different pool of applicants, almost all of them local. These institutions are having a hard time filling vacancies because they often can't compete with the salaries that faculty members in fields such as accounting and nursing can earn outside academia.

"I'm having a hard time finding accounting teachers," said John Hoffman, Nunez Community College's dean of business and technology. "In my division, the people with trades are hard to get on a full-time basis unless they're retired."

To fill vacancies in its nursing faculty, Delgado Community College is working with organizations that cast wide nets, said Carmen Walters, assistant vice chancellor for human resources.

Delgado's recruiters also are going to states where people evacuated after the storm, such as Florida and Texas, she said. "We're going there, saying, 'Come back home. Come teach at Delgado.'"

As a result of such approaches, "they're calling us," Walters said.

Local faculty members who have stayed at their jobs are "committed," said Joe Savoie, the state's commissioner of higher education.

"They've got a little attitude about them, and deservedly so," he said, "and I believe and I hope that that's going to have a long-term impact because they're going to carry that with them for a while. They will have earned their keep, and I think they will expect more of others who are just joining them. Ultimately, the institutions will be better for that."

Firings draw censure

One possible hiring hindrance arose in June, when the American Association of University Professors, a 43,600-member organization that specializes in academic freedom, censured Loyola, SUNO, Tulane and the University of New Orleans. The association contended the schools overreacted and violated faculty rights when they dismissed professors and reorganized departments after the flood.

In response to an incident unrelated to Katrina, the association also censured Our Lady of Holy Cross College for an allegedly improper dismissal of a faculty member.

While censure carries no penalty, it indicates that "unsatisfactory conditions of academic freedom have been found," according to the association's Web site.

However, censure hasn't been brought up in job interviews, and it doesn't seem to have driven down the number of job applicants, representatives of all the censored schools said.

When the association imposed censure, officials of the schools scolded for Katrina-related actions called the decision unfair and contended that the association failed to understand the massive disruption that Katrina wrought.

"I still get mad about it," Barton, the UNO provost, said six months after the vote. "Who needs somebody to poke you in the eye while you're on your knees?"

In conversations with his counterparts around the country, "their reactions have been unanimous," Barton said.

"They are indignantly appalled that the AAUP, at this time in the city's history, would choose to pick on New Orleans to add to the misery."

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