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Taken in after the storm, Louisiana's kids go home

By **Lori Kurtzman**
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They are boxing books, packing clothes, removing pictures from their walls. Their exams are finished. Their dorm rooms are nearly empty. For Elliot Sanchez and Meg Lancaster, this semester at Xavier University will soon become a memory, a story to tell a grandchild, a jarring and sudden detour in what could have been a smooth college career.

They should have been sophomores at Loyola University in New Orleans. A hurricane - *the* hurricane - changed that. Katrina was on its way and Sanchez and Lancaster fled to Cincinnati in August, ending up in the unfamiliar classrooms and residence halls of Xavier. They stayed all semester.

Now it's time to go home.

"Now there's no way you can take it for granted," said 19-year-old Sanchez, placing clothes into the sole suitcase he brought north. "You know what it feels like to have it all taken away from you."

Months after Hurricane Katrina forced more than 18,000 Louisiana college students into other schools throughout the country, many, like Sanchez and Lancaster, are wrapping up classes and making plans to return to New Orleans, unsure what to expect.

Those evacuated schools, some hurting worse than others, want students - and their tuition dollars - back.

Loyola, which had just a small amount of wind damage, starts classes Jan. 9 and is expecting at least 82 percent of its students to return. Tulane University, which just announced plans to slice its budget and lay off more than 200 faculty, opens Jan. 17 and expects 86 percent of its 13,000 students back. Xavier University of Louisiana, hit hard by flooding, is planning to see at least three-quarters of its students at its Jan. 17 re-opening.

The school year was just starting when Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in late August and effectively canceled the fall semester for students at Loyola, Tulane and Xavier, as well as the University of New Orleans, Dillard University and Delgado Community College. According to a report from the nonprofit National Student Clearinghouse, students from those six schools enrolled in colleges in every state of the country.

Many displaced students ended up in Louisiana or Texas schools. A few, though, made their way to Greater Cincinnati, where they found open doors and, in many cases, no tuition bills.

"In the beginning, (administrators) said, 'You do what you need to do to help these kids,' " said Ann Larson, interim admission director at Miami University.

The College of Mount St. Joseph took in one Katrina student. Cincinnati State Technical and Community College received four. The University of Cincinnati had 10 undergraduates, two law students, one medical student, one pharmacy student and 14 other graduate students. Miami University accepted 26 guest students, including 11 freshmen who had been offered admission to Miami but instead



ZOOM Photos by Meggan Booker/The Enquirer
Meg Lancaster, a sophomore, packs up her dorm room in Husman Hall on Xavier's campus. She's headed back to Loyola University in New Orleans next semester.

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Elliot Sanchez showed up at Xavier with just one suitcase after fleeing August's Hurricane Katrina.

chose Tulane, Larson said.

And Xavier enrolled 27, including Sanchez and Lancaster.

Now that the semester is almost over at Xavier, and Loyola is set to open, those two are eager to get back. Not everyone is: At least five displaced students at Xavier have decided to return in the spring, officials there said, and six students at UC are expected back for the winter quarter. Cincinnati State has had five hurricane evacuees inquire about its winter quarter, said Admission Director Gabriele Boeckermann.

Across the country, some schools, such as Harvard University and the University of Virginia, are having to deny requests from Katrina students who want to stay, the Associated Press has reported.

UC junior Kristin Klettke, formerly an accounting major at Tulane, is one of the evacuees who's staying put. Klettke, who grew up in Colerain Township, made the decision to remain at UC even before she got there, knowing that transferring credits between the two institutions could be tricky. She went back to New Orleans a month ago to collect her things.

"It was disgusting," she said. "There was garbage everywhere. ... I'm glad I'm not going back. My first years there were amazing. The next couple aren't going to measure up."

But Sanchez and Lancaster, they're ready to go. The living-out-of-a-suitcase lifestyle can cease.

Lancaster, a 19-year-old music education major from Spartanburg, S.C., can stop missing all her shoes, the ones she perfectly matched to her outfits and that she had to leave when she evacuated.

While they have kind words for Xavier - which they found online and picked in part because it was a Jesuit school, like Loyola - Cincinnati just isn't New Orleans, Sanchez said.

"My mom kept asking me (if I was going back) and I'd get frustrated with her," Lancaster said. But some things are hard to explain to a worried parent: "I feel my heart is with that city."

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