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## Big Easy students face a hard choice

By Adam Fifield  
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Peter Seltzer is a lifelong booster of the Big Easy.

The New Orleans native and his family rode out Hurricane Katrina inside a French Quarter motel and, two days later, hitchhiked to their relatively unscathed house in the city's Uptown section. On the front lawn, Seltzer spray-painted a message: "New Orleans... Proud to Call it Home."

In his cluttered Temple University dorm room, where the visiting junior from the University of New Orleans has lived for three months, a large Mardi Gras banner hangs next to a flag bearing the Louisiana state seal.

"I always miss New Orleans when I'm away from it," said the buoyant business-entrepreneurship major.

After a sleep-deprived marathon of final exams, Seltzer was packing his bags, looking forward to going home. But only for a few weeks.

Next month, he plans to return to North Philadelphia to complete his college education at Temple. The school is processing his transfer application.

"I really like New Orleans," said Seltzer, 20. "But... I kind of got settled here."

Time is up for more than 270 college students who were taken in by the University of Pennsylvania, Temple, Villanova University and other area schools when Katrina chased them from New Orleans on Aug. 29.

With their visitor stints about to end, many are wrestling with the decision to leave Philadelphia for a city - and in some cases, a school - that bears little resemblance to the place they knew.

"It's 50-50 whether I'm going to be there in the long term," said Tulane freshman Cyrus Kanga, 18, who studied at Drexel University in the fall.

"I have to see the status of the city," said Kanga, of Cherry Hill. "I want to see it rebuilt, but if I'm going to a school there, I have to look at my education first and foremost."

Most of the displaced students are eager to return to Tulane, Xavier and Loyola Universities in New Orleans, among other Gulf Coast institutions that were forced to close temporarily or severely scale back operations. They want to reconnect with friends and participate in, or at least witness, the rebuilding of the Crescent City.

But more than a dozen students who sought refuge at Temple and Villanova have applied to stay on permanently. And others have expressed a menu of concerns that complicate the decision to return to their home schools.

Emotional ties to their host school. Fear about the integrity of the levees, future hurricanes, and the city's general quality of life. The prevalence of mold that could exacerbate asthma. Insufficient off-campus housing and part-time jobs. Operating cuts at their New Orleans schools. Even with many schools about to reopen, the list of Hurricane Katrina worries has grown for students.

"My mother is a little bit... concerned about me going back because you don't know if it's going to happen again," said Kanga. "I don't want to be under nine feet of water."

Tulane, New Orleans' largest employer, sustained relatively minor hurricane damage, yet still incurred \$200 million in recovery costs. The university announced that, to address that expenditure, it will eliminate 230 full-time and 200 adjunct and part-time faculty positions, phase out several academic programs, and discontinue some sports teams.

Nonetheless, say Tulane officials, 87 percent of the school's 6,300-plus undergraduates have registered for the spring semester beginning Jan. 17. The school's president, Scott Cowen, has told students to expect "a small to medium college town in a Peace Corps environment."

At Xavier, a historically black college, more than 3,100 of 4,050 students are expected back on Jan. 17. The school suffered \$90 million in

damage and lost tuition and has reduced its faculty by 35 percent, said Warren Bell, associate vice president of university and media relations.

Only 7,200 of the University of New Orleans' 17,250 students have registered for spring semester. "We're still compiling where our students went," said Sharon Gruber, vice chancellor for university advancement at the mostly commuter school, which will resume full operation Jan. 30.

The National Student Clearinghouse estimates that more than 18,000 students from six Louisiana schools were absorbed by over 1,000 colleges after Katrina. Most schools accepted no tuition so that the New Orleans institutions could apply the money they had collected toward recovery efforts.

Penn and other local schools say they are observing an agreement by the presidents of eight national higher-education associations to accommodate the evacuees "only on a visiting or provisional basis, so that they remain students of their home institutions."

"We're encouraging them to go back," said Lee Stetson, dean of admissions at Penn. "We don't want to be in a position of stealing them from their home schools," which need the students to remain viable.

But Tulane freshman Brennan Duty, who spent last semester at Penn, was apprehensive about returning. He hoped to try out for the now-nonexistent track team, and he fretted that his academic options had been winnowed by the cuts.

"They're asking me to pay admission to a university that was something I applied for in January 2005, and now [is] a completely different school," said Duty, 18. "There's just nothing left for me there."

Duty has enrolled for next semester at Xavier University in Cincinnati, his hometown. (The school is not affiliated with New Orleans' Xavier University.) He hopes to attend Penn, Georgetown University or New York University in the fall.

Tulane will "be different," conceded Richard Whiteside, Tulane's dean of admissions. But, he said, "it will be better," particularly for undergraduates.

Tulane's medical faculty suffered most of the cuts, Whiteside said - a result of diminished clientele for Tulane University Hospital. And doctoral programs will be reduced, he said, leaving more resources for undergrads.

Josh Ballen, a Tulane senior who was a visiting student at Penn's Wharton School, is looking forward to going back.

"It's what I consider home," said Ballen, 21, of Katonah, N.Y. "On a social level [Tulane] is a lot healthier environment and a lot more fun environment" than Penn.

Many students "are more than a little concerned," however, about transferring credits and whether they will graduate on time, Ballen said. Tulane has scheduled a short "lagniappe" - New Orleans slang for "a little something extra" - term after spring semester to help students catch up.

The finance-and-management major got a big boon from his semester at Penn. With the help of Wharton career services, Ballen will start a full-time job at a Los Angeles private-equities fund in July.

"I wouldn't have gotten an interview if I wasn't coming from the Wharton pool," he said.

Penn took in 116 provisional students from the Gulf Coast, including 72 undergrads, most from Tulane. At least a half-dozen other local schools - also including La Salle, St. Joseph's and Rutgers Universities - sheltered the academic orphans.

Admissions criteria varied - some schools required no transcripts - but, in a goodwill gesture, some relaxed their requirements, school officials said. To stay, provisional students must formally apply and meet the schools' usual standards.

Of the 37 students at Temple, Seltzer is among five who have applied to transfer. Villanova has accepted seven transfers from its 29 Gulf Coast students. Penn allows no midyear transfers.

All 37 students at St. Joe's came from New Orleans' Loyola University, an affiliated Jesuit institution, and all are going home.

For many, one of the most pressing questions is whether their clothes, laptops, books, CDs and other belongings survived the evacuation.

"They say it's all packed up in boxes and it's safe, but I don't want to go back and find out my laptop is missing," said Tulane's Kanga.

Lower Merion High School graduate Sydney Waldron, a Tulane senior, heard from a roommate's brother that a broken window in her off-campus rental had resulted in a moldy bed and a broken computer.

"I guess it's kind of a biohazard in the house," said Waldron, 21, who spent the fall at Penn.

Christian Stevens, 23, who is returning to the University of New Orleans from Temple, has asthma and is allergic "to just about everything."

"My mom's real concerned that the mold and the quality of the air isn't going to be good enough," said Stevens, who moved to New Orleans from Philadelphia when he was 15.

The first floor of his family's house in the city's Ninth Ward was ruined, and they are staying with relatives in South Philadelphia. Their future, like that of their home neighborhood, is unclear.

Yet Stevens is determined to get his degree in New Orleans in May.

"The risk of going back is worth it," he said. "I'm ready to be done with this chapter. Being this close, I can't justify not doing whatever I can to finish."

Whiteside, Tulane's dean of admissions, said the university's prospects depend largely on the city's ability to recover.

"Somebody asked me the other day, 'What do you need?' " Whiteside said. "I need the streetcar to run and somebody to plug the levee. If you do that, we will deliver a great freshman class."

## **Area Institutions Where Visitors Studied**

More than 300 Gulf Coast students sought refuge at Philadelphia-area schools after the hurricane.

### **University of Pennsylvania**

116 students

### **Drexel University**

45 students (includes 30 online students)

### **Rutgers**(all campuses)

37 students

### **St. Joseph's University**

37 students

### **Temple University**

37 students

### **Villanova University**

29 students

### **La Salle University**

3 students

SOURCES: University admissions offices

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