ENSURING THAT COLLEGE CAMPUSES ARE CAPABLE of responding to — and recovering from — disaster involves planning, preparedness, and preparation. It's also “about changing the culture,” keynote speaker Michael J. Mulhare, director of Virginia Tech’s office of emergency management told attendees of the Summit on Safeguarding College Campuses, a first-of-its-kind event held during the 2016 ACCT Leadership Congress.

During the Summit, speakers focused on a broad range of security-related topics, including cybersecurity, gender violence prevention, new models for public safety, effective communications strategies, and disaster recovery. Attendees also participated in a simulation activity to help them assess their own institutions’ readiness to handle emergency situations.

It’s fitting that the Summit was held in New Orleans, a city which has emerged as a model for resiliency and recovery following the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. The lessons from that disaster point to the importance of preparation — and the roles leaders must play in ensuring that institutions are ready to help their region recover, said keynote speaker Michael Hecht, president and CEO of the Greater New Orleans Foundation, Inc.

“The institutions that are going to thrive are not the strongest ones, but the ones that are most nimble,” Hecht told Summit attendees.
Creating a Culture

Nimble institutions have the flexibility to respond to both anticipated and unanticipated crises, Summit speakers said. To create a resilient culture, Mulhare argues that institutional leaders must focus in four areas:

• **Individual preparedness** — ensuring that students and staff know what to do in the event of an emergency. Often the most important and most challenging issue, given that a significant portion of the student population turns over each year.

• **Departmental readiness** — ensuring that each department knows how to respond in an emergency and has a plan to ensure continuity of operations during recovery.

• **University resiliency** — determining the extent to which the institution as a whole has plans and procedures to continue operations at the enterprise level following an emergency.

• **Regulatory compliance** — ensuring that the institution meets federal and other regulations governing the development of emergency plans and the creation of committees focused on security issues.

At first, Mulhare believed enterprise-level policy and planning were the most important components of institutional preparedness, but over time he realized that preparing individuals to respond in times of crisis is critical. “If we don’t do everything we can at the enterprise level, it costs us time and money,” he told Summit attendees. “If we don’t do everything we can at the individual level, maybe someone doesn’t go home that night.”

Given the ongoing student body turnover on college campuses, educating individual students and faculty requires careful planning — and persistence. “The challenge is engaging students and faculty to overcome apathy and complacency,” Mulhare said. “We need to repeat and provide these services over and over, but change them up to keep people engaged.”

Another significant challenge faced by colleges is the horizontal, siloed nature of their organizational structures. That’s why it’s so important to focus on both institution-wide and departmental planning, according to Mulhare.

Principles of Planning

Institutions should focus their emergency management efforts in four areas, according to Mulhare:

• **Mitigation** — changing the physical environment and behaviors in ways that reduce the impact of emergency situations

• **Preparedness and prevention** — advance planning for emergencies and other foreseeable situations

• **Response** — the strategy for managing an incident

• **Recovery** — the short- and long-term plan to return to normalcy.

College leaders should create a matrix of these principles and ensure that each one is being addressed at every level — individual, department, and institution-wide.

Mulhare cautioned that recovery efforts take far longer than most people expect. “The goal is not returning to normal, but normalcy,” he said. “There’s a rhythm, a need to move forward at a pace that’s responsive to the needs of the community. As leaders of colleges, it’s our responsibility to ensure this occurs.”

At Virginia Tech, the office of emergency management
oversees the university’s Crisis and Emergency Management Plan. It also has encouraged the creation of 228 department-level plans, including ones for many functions that have no role in emergency response but still need to determine how to move forward after a disaster. The office coordinates communications across multiple channels and provides training for faculty and staff, including events that borrow liberally from current pop culture trends. “If you work zombies into your outreach program, you’ve done really well,” Mulhare joked.

Even at a large institution like Virginia Tech, the office of emergency management was a one-person department for several years after it was created. Today the department has a staff of five and has consolidated the roles and staff of multiple departments involved in emergency planning into 14 discrete functions, including transportation, communications, and infrastructure.

“We demonstrated opportunities for value and solved problems the university has,” Mulhare said.

**The Road to Recovery**

In the case of widespread disaster, community colleges also can play a significant role in their region’s overall recovery efforts. But to do so, their leaders must take a long-term approach, Summit speakers said.

As head of an organization that helped coordinate recovery efforts throughout the New Orleans region after Katrina, Hecht is aware of the importance of looking ahead. “The first mistake everybody makes is promising too much too soon,” he told Summit attendees.

Instead, it’s important to be aware of three connected timelines to recovery, according to Hecht. After Katrina’s widespread devastation, it took three years for “the dust to literally settle” and a decade for rebuilding to be complete and “turn the page,” he said. But it will take 30 years — a full generation — to make lasting changes that leave the community a better place than it was before, he added.

“The real disaster was the failed economic and social policies of decades” that preceded the hurricane, Hecht said. “New Orleans was dying for four decades before Katrina… There literally was the opportunity to build back something better. The challenge is finding opportunity in adversity.”

For Louisiana, the indelible images of flooded communities were inescapable, but they also allowed the region to become a global expert in environmental management issues associated with sea level rise — or as Hecht puts it, “the masters of disaster.”

Community and technical colleges have played a crucial role in the transformation of the region’s economy, according to Hecht. Following the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Nunez Community College in St. Barnard Parish began offering programs to train commercial fisherman how to handle environmental cleanup. Throughout the region, programs in petroleum technology — known locally as “ptech” — have been retooled to offer certificates in areas such as water management and coastal engineering.

Community colleges have a unique role and responsibility to help their regions take on these challenges and reshape their economies in the face of change, Hecht said.

“That kind of training can’t happen anywhere better than a community college, because they’re the most nimble,” he explained.