

PART TWO – TRAINING AND EDUCATION

This is the second in a series of articles about professional status for the Fire and Emergency Services through a system of training and education. In Part One, the need for a system of training for the fire and emergency professional was discussed, and the challenges with our current separate systems were identified. Comparisons among other professions (Medicine, Law, Nursing etc.) and the Fire and Emergency Services were examined. Part Two will discuss the Training and Education systems available to the fire service today – local, state and national programs and the way they compliment and supplement each other.

Training

Efficient training systems are those that identify what they do well and take advantage of the strengths and opportunities provided by other systems to supplement their efforts. Inefficient systems are those that try to be all things to all people, and in doing so, squander resources. The good news is that - as a system of training – fire training is pretty efficient.

The current roles of local, state and national emergency services training generally establish the boundaries for each to prevent costly duplication. Locally, larger departments are capable of training their own people to certain levels of competency. Smaller departments will either seek training from a larger organization, work with other small departments to combine training resources, or seek training from another government agency - either the county or the state training system. Depending on the size of the organization and its needs, local training tends more towards recruit, refresher and ‘hands-on’ training.

State training organizations generally attempt to provide training that is not available locally - ranging from basic recruit training to courses for chief fire officers, from hazardous materials awareness to firefighting strategies at petroleum facilities, and from farm rescue to wildland firefighting. State training organizations vary in their size and capacity, from a few people to a complex, university based system.

At the national level, each State Fire Training System works with the United States Fire Administration’s National Fire Academy (USFA/NFA) to deliver USFA/NFA curriculum. The USFA/NFA develops and delivers the kinds of training that aren’t available at the local or state level. Community Risk Reduction, Public Education, Codes and Standards, Detection and Suppression Systems, Executive Development, Terrorism, Command and Control of Incidents, Strategic Planning, Information Systems and Budgeting are among the USFA/NFA’s curriculum areas.

This system isn’t something that is planned for the future – this is the system as it exists today.

At the national level, most of you would probably be surprised to learn that the USFA/NFA does the least amount of training on its Emmitsburg campus - about 8,000 students per year. Most of our training occurs off-campus through the cooperative efforts of State and Metropolitan sized fire training organizations. In 2002, The USFA/NFA trained over 87,000 Fire and Emergency Services personnel in off-campus course deliveries, self-study courses, CD based simulation training and other alternative deliveries through its virtual campus (see <http://www.training.fema.gov>).

Six-day and two-day USFA/NFA courses are provided to individuals locally through the cooperation of individual state training systems. Each year, the USFA/NFA provides nine two-day courses to every State. The State selects the nine courses from a menu of thirty-seven courses, and tells the USFA/NFA where they'd like the courses delivered. The course materials and instructors are provided at no cost to the State.

Through the organization of State training systems and metropolitan-size fire departments (called the Training Resource and Data Exchange network – TRADE), the USFA/NFA also provides the instructors, course materials, site support, assistance, and a small student stipend for the delivery of 3 six-day courses in each of the ten federal regions. The States and metros in that region select the courses from a menu of twelve, and decide the locations for delivery. Again, the USFA/NFA provides the upfront costs for materials, instructors and facility rental if appropriate.

On some selected new two-day courses, and others that have been field tested, the USFA/NFA will provide Train-the Trainer courses, providing all course materials and student manuals for local delivery. These are available through individual state training systems.

Information about any of the USFA/NFA programs mentioned above can be found in our catalog or on our web page: <http://www.usfa.fema.gov/dhtml/fire-service/nfa.cfm>

Education

Locally, many colleges and universities provide two and four-year degree programs in fire science and/or administration. Over the past several years, a few Master's degree programs have emerged. For those who, for reasons of proximity or time, are unable to attend a local college, the USFA/NFA works with seven schools throughout the country to provide four-year degrees via the Degrees at a Distance Program; there are no resident course requirements for these courses.

Those who have attended two and four-year programs (currently there are 222 two-year and 26 four-year programs in the US)³ are usually people who are “in-service,” that is to say, are going to school part-time and working a full-time job. These individuals may be career or volunteer, but most don’t enjoy the luxury of full-time academia – it is a considerable sacrifice to them and their families.

The titles of “fire” degrees vary – from Fire Technology all the way to Public Administration with a concentration in Fire Administration. Some degrees are called Fire Science, Fire Administration or Fire Department Management, but the disparity creates misunderstanding among employers and other schools of higher education. Everyone understands what a Medical, Law or Nursing degree means. Few understand what a “Fire” degree means. This makes it difficult for other schools and employers to assess the education or skill of prospective students or employees. Hence, transfers of credits between schools (and true professional salaries) are elusive.

Since 1986, the USFA/NFA has been administering the Degrees at a Distance Program in cooperation with seven universities around the country. These “DDP Schools”⁴ use distance-learning technologies to permit students to earn their bachelor degrees. The program enrolls about 1000 students from all over the country, with approximately 100 students graduating each year. These schools use standardized courses (including course title), syllabi, and content provided by the USFA/NFA.

Over the past four years, the USFA/NFA has sought to expand these kinds of educational opportunities for degree seeking students, while at the same time seeking to strengthen the meaning and understanding of the value of the degree through its Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education (FESHE) initiative.

Working with over 100 two and four-year colleges, the FESHE National Fire Science Curriculum Committee curriculum committee has developed a model core and non-core curriculum, courses, syllabi and content for associate and bachelor degree programs. It is a *model*, not a requirement; but the work has established a direction for college programs that establishes a base for the transferability of credits (you don’t have to start all over again), and ease of understanding as to what a “Fire” degree means. Many current college programs have committed to following the model as revisions in their programs are made.

³ Sturtevant, Thomas B. “A Study of Undergraduate Fire Service Degree Programs in the United States – Fall 2000,” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, May, 2001.

⁴ See the USFA/NFA web page <http://www.usfa.fema.gov/fire-service/nfa/higher-ed/he.shtm> for more information

From an education point of view, model course descriptions, courses, syllabi and content increases the understanding of what a “Fire” degree means for students, schools and employers. It creates an atmosphere in which schools will be more comfortable accepting transfer credits from other degree programs, and encourages the writing of new textbooks specifically for college courses. As more Fire Science Associate Degree Programs adopt these model courses, we will see future leaders of the fire service having had the same courses and content as part of their professional development and credentialing... just like doctors, lawyers, nurses and other professions.

What is even more critical to the process is textbooks. All textbook publishers in the fire field have been invited to participate in the FESHE conferences and workshops. Some have already agreed to write textbooks to conform to the new model curricula and others have expressed interest in doing so. Following the model curricula gives publishers the guidance and structure to develop their texts, and the larger audiences that will purchase them.

Recently, the USFA/NFA has agreed to release its thirteen courses in the DDP program to other four-year college degree programs. The requirement for the release is that the college sign an agreement with the State Fire training system in their state. If it does, the USFA/NFA will release the thirteen third and fourth year fire college courses to the bachelor degree program. Although not required, we encourage both partners to agree that the college will accept certain certifications for college credit, and that State Fire Training systems will accept some college credit toward certification requirements.

To further encourage that effort, representatives of State fire training systems convened in Emmitsburg to “crosswalk” the thirteen DDP courses to the ProQual standards. Both the colleges and the State fire training systems now have a basis to exchange that credit.