

PART FIVE: THE FUTURE: WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

This is the fifth 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 discussed 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. Part Three discussed the Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education effort (FESHE), the development of model two and four-year degree curricula, syllabi and content, and the release of the thirteen USFA/NFA courses into four-year bachelor degree programs. Part Four discussed the Independent Assessment of Skills and Reciprocity. Part Five discusses the future.

Any trip, from a leisurely drive to a cross-country begins with “where you are.” You can’t go anywhere, or find any place, unless you know where you are.

Rather than try to describe the future, it might be helpful to describe how the system of training and education helps individuals at particular times in their Fire and Emergency Services career – determine where they are.

Understand that each of us has our own goals and ambitions. These articles may have described your situation, or someone you know. There is no “one best way;” each of us must decide for ourselves the paths we choose to take. These examples are meant to expose some of the potential opportunities for someone in the Fire and Emergency Services; but it may not suit a specific individual’s needs.

Right now, when someone begins a career in the Fire and Emergency Services, they are faced with professional development choices that have consequences that the individual may not fully appreciate. In some cases, some particular aspect of their job influences the individual; in others, a colleague, close friend or officer may influence them. In any event, the individual has several paths to choose from; but in many cases, they may see only one or two.

One path leads toward training and certification in particular disciplines. Of course, the one that is familiar to all is Firefighter I, II and III. Other disciplines in the training and certification include inspection, training, fire officer and a host of others. Depending upon the level of certification desired, these certifications can take a long time to complete. Depending upon the department and the personnel selection system, these certifications may lead to promotion to a higher rank.

Another path leads toward a degree - Associate, Bachelor and graduate. This path involves years of college coursework, research and writing. Formal academic pursuits typically occur outside the fire department on the student’s own time and often at his or

her own cost. Like certification, education may or may not increase the likelihood of promotion, depending upon the department's personnel practices.

A third path deals solely with the department's promotion practices. An individual seeks whichever path leads to promotion and decides that whatever the pursuit, the outcome must achieve advancement. In most departments, this involves some form of competitive examination, from multiple-choice questions to an assessment center. Any of these promotion processes may include an interview with the Chief, City Manager or Mayor.

Up until now, these paths were viewed as mutually exclusive, that is to say, an individual chose one over the others in order to achieve his or her goal. With a system of training and education, this isn't the case.

With an agreement between a State Fire Training system and a college in their state, as a firefighter moves through the certification processes, there is an opportunity to receive some college credit for certification (and the training behind that certification). Again, depending upon the agreement between the State Fire Training system and a college, a student who takes a college course may receive some credit towards certification. As an example, if someone took a Management 101 course in college, they may receive some credit toward certification in Fire Officer I.

Since State Fire training systems may issue National Fire Academy certificates for the NFA courses they deliver, it follows that they must also accept them. It doesn't make much sense to award something if you don't accept it. This is one step toward reciprocity. Hopefully, before long, all States will accept certification awarded by another state as many do now.

At the national level, and in cooperation with the American Council on Education, most of the National Fire Academy courses receive college credit recommendation. It is up to the local college as to whether they accept this recommendation, but most do. On the certification side, a panel of State and local fire academy representatives convened in Emmitsburg to "cross-walk" the NFA courses with the applicable standards. You can go to our web site, <http://www.usfa.fema.gov/dhtml/fire-service/nfa-abt7.cfm> to review the crosswalks. Look at a course and you'll find the standards it meets. Type in a standard and it will identify which NFA courses include that standard. It is up to the local jurisdiction as to whether they choose to accept this, but it is a fully peer-reviewed process accepted by many.

With model degree programs and syllabi developed by the Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education (FESHE) initiative, students will have more opportunity to transfer model course credits between colleges. Once established, employers will have a better understanding of the education underlying the degree.

With concurrence by the International Association of Fire Chiefs Professional Development Committee, this same training and education path is the one they've chosen to be used for chief fire officer development.

Simply stated, we already have a common system for certification, a common system for education, and the ability to have them work together toward one integrated system that leads to professional status. It is a path one can identify and choose to follow. No one must chose between one path and another. They are complimentary.

There is an already established system to assess competency and assure competence to the public – IFSAC and ProBoard.

The Future

This series of articles began with the observation that most of us can answer the question, “How do you become a physician, a nurse, an attorney, an engineer or an accountant?” For perhaps the first time, we’ll soon have the one answer to the question, “How do you become a fire chief?”

As we continue on this path well traveled by other professions, other elements of professionalism will emerge. One is a research journal, refereed by peer scholars. Another will probably be some level of continuing education requirements. But the final step, the end of the road, the time at which we will become a profession like all the others will be the time that a professional (career or volunteer) firefighter or officer can have his or her professional status rescinded independent of the employer. That’s when you’ll know. That’s when the light goes on.

The path isn’t easy, and it won’t be quick enough for some. To achieve the professional status enjoyed by others, we must do more than demand it. The path taken by the other professions is the model that we must follow. It works.

The time is right. The agreements have been made. The elements and systems are aligned; it is up to us to control and advance this profession of ours. No one but Shakespeare could have said it better:

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.⁵

⁵ Julius Caesar, IV, iii, 217. Brutus to Cassius arguing that the enemy should be met at Phillipi.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. What happens if my organization, department or college won't participate?

You have several options. One is to have them read this article. If anyone of them would like additional information, they may contact their State Fire training system. The program is voluntary; no one will be coerced into participation. However, the benefits far outweigh the costs.

2. Is the USFA/NFA trying to establish national standards?

No. The fire service professional standards are already established. This is a complimentary, organized system to deliver training and education that has reciprocity as its foundation and professional status as its goal.

3. What about colleges and universities? How do they fit into the system?

Colleges and State Fire service training systems are among the critical elements of professional education. In June, 2002 over 100 representatives from colleges across the nation convened in Emmitsburg to develop a model curriculum for fire science programs. The USFA/NFA has been working with these schools of higher education to encourage them to:

- Develop a model curriculum
- Seek ways, when and where appropriate, to award college credit for certification training.
- Seek partnerships with State training systems to explore ways for State training systems to include college courses as part of certification requirements.

4. What about the IFSAC and ProBoard?

Nothing in this plan changes what these organizations do; in fact, this process actually strengthens their standing. With a national, reciprocal system of training and education, these organizations become the outside agency that assures standards competency; the medical, law or nursing board (if you will) for the Fire and Emergency Services.