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Research is a partner in forward focused time

By Mary Kathleen Gorman, MDS and Rita I. Herron, Ph.D

The complexities of modern society and the dynamic forces of progress necessitate that professionals in every discipline be forward-focused, which is believed to come from gaining higher education. This is becoming standard within the fire and emergency services professions and is commonly a factor regarding upward mobility. With that in mind, the U.S. Fire Administration/National Fire Academy (NFA) developed the Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education (FESHE) recognition certificate. FESHE recognition acknowledges that colleges and universities are committed to the academic excellence of professional development education criteria set forth by the FESHE committees and the NFA (USFA, 2013). The underlying academic belief is that additional education will be a catalyst for academic research. This research will have a two-fold impact on public safety: academic/professional achievement for employees and new knowledge that will assist fire and emergency management professionals in their daily duties.

Research is a partner — rooted in scientific method, it is essential to continuous organizational and process improvement (Gunderson & Lindsay, 2011). As an example, fundamentals of physics and chemistry must be applied to increasingly multi-faceted situational parameters within diverse social constructs. Coupled with competitive economic conditions and higher professional standards, “non-traditional” adult students are seeking to augment experience with academic achievement (Mourchid, 2008).

The National Fire Academy (NFA) estimates that there are more than 1.1 million firefighters in the United States, with nearly half over 40 years of age (USEFA, 2012). The demographics suggest a transition to less physically-demanding roles, while leveraging individual and institutional “history,” as a win-win for the

professional as a whole.

The type of research conducted within the fire and emergency services varies from current topics within local level organizations: staffing, correlation response times and losses, impact of education via simulation only for fire training, to those on a more of a state/national level: standardized testing, feasibility of national response time to major disasters, technological advancements used to assist in incidents (USFA, 2013). Research is an important part of the FESHE mission, for it is believed necessary to advance the profession by increasing the body of knowledge (Smeby, Le-Ron, Lutz, Delorio, 2005).

All FESHE core curriculum courses have a research component to them — Associates and Bachelor level courses. These assist the students in learning the basics of research: selection of topic, locating credible sources of data, synthesizing information, compiling an assignment, and citing sources. An example of an online resource center available to everyone is the National Emergency Training Center Learning Resources Center (NETC-LRC), maintained by the NFA. It is through this research portal that materials on all subjects pertaining to fire and emergency services can be found (USEFA, 2013). In addition, the LRC maintains a collection of dissertations and theses written by academics and professionals in the field.

The NFA released a report on March 1st of this year which compiled institutions of higher learning having achieved the FESHE recognition and regional accreditation. The FESHE certificate represents that the program being offered meets the “minimum standards of excellence” set by the National Fire Academy for academic degrees. The report also lists colleges or universities which are regionally accredited. Accreditation reflects that the program is recognized by the Council of Higher Education

Accreditation (CHEA) and the U.S. Department of Education as achieving high academic standards. Both the FESHE recognition and accreditation status should be important considerations for prospective students when evaluating educational alternatives.

In addition, online learning offers another modality conducive to shifting schedules and geographical remoteness.

According to the USFA (2012) report, there are 92 regionally accredited colleges and universities in 39 states (two offering online degrees), with 15 others having achieved the FESHE recognition for Associate’s degree programs. For the Bachelor’s degree programs, 24 colleges and universities are regionally accredited in 25 different states (four offering online degrees), with another 16 institutions having the FESHE recognition.

What the USFA’s report indicates is that the academic community is increasingly responsive to the needs and challenges of today’s public safety professionals. There is no substitute for training, and the experience gained through history is invaluable. This is an interesting time of change for the fire and emergency management area. We are moving toward a forward-focus rooted in academic research combined with innovation which leverages science and technology. It certainly is a recipe for superior stewardship of the profession in this millennium.

Professor Gorman is an Associate Fire Science Program Chair at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU). Before coming to ERAU, she spent 27 years as a geologist in the environmental sector, responsible for regulatory development, emergency pollution response, incident investigation and remediation, disaster planning, and hazardous materials/solid waste management.

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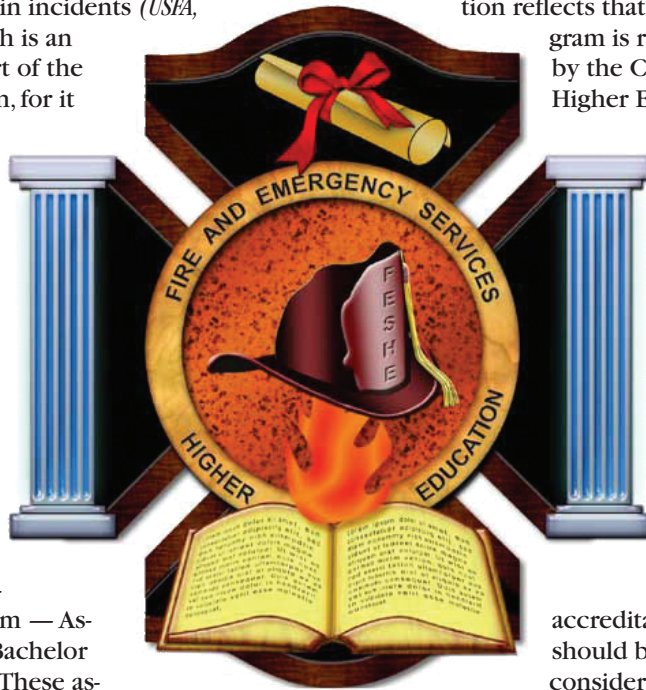
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This B.S. in Fire Science is one of only a few university programs to carry the “Certificate of Recognition” from the Fire Emergency Services Higher Education (FESHE). The program is based on the FESHE-model degree curriculum, and addresses all the critical areas that modern fire departments are tasked to perform.

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