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Professional Education for Emergency Managers

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Abstract

The education of professional emergency managers has been the subject of workshops by the National Science Foundation and the National Academies. There is general agreement on the content of curricula, except for components related to Homeland Security. This article looks at the broad issue of professional education and the need to include information on Homeland Security.

The emergency management discipline has grown and evolved in the past three decades (Neal, 2005; Drabek, 2007). That growth has led to greater professionalism (Oyola-Yemaiel and Wilson, 2005; Drabek, 2007) and increased demand for emergency management programs (Neal, 2000). Education has become a more central focus in professional certification, namely in the Certified Emergency Manager (CEM) program. But, the debate continues over how to educate and train prospective and midcareer emergency managers. The debate most frequently seems to focus on rather common issues of professional education, such as how to find the best balance of theory and practice, and issues related to the underlying professional values. In emergency management, the major issues have less to do with coverage of the four phases or functions of emergency management and the nature of particular hazards than they do with the basic skills necessary to be effective emergency managers and the organizational and political relationships between emergency managers and Homeland Security officials (Waugh, 2007). Coverage of the common professional values, as reflected in "The Principles of Emergency Management" document, are also taking hold in emergency management education.

Introduction

In terms of basic curricula, there is general agreement on basic coverage of the field – regardless whether there are specific courses on mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery and courses on such topics as risk assessment, communications, and particular hazards. The necessity to link management skills with scientific knowledge about hazards and human behavior in disasters is also a given. In short, how the program is packaged is less important than the overall content, i.e., the skills and competencies. Nonetheless, the debate has been revisited frequently.

The University of Colorado at Denver and the National Science Foundation (NSF) sponsored a workshop on "Designing Educational Opportunities for the Hazards Manager of the 21st Century," in October 2003, led by Dennis Mileti and Deborah Thomas. In some measure, the conclusions were that emergency management is a management (i.e., public administration) function with a clear imperative to integrate the science of hazards and human behavior. The National Academies and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) sponsored a similar workshop on "Educational Paradigms for Homeland Security" in April 2004. Some argued that the education of Homeland Security professionals should be similar to the education of emergency management professionals and that that might help resolve the fundamental cultural differences between the two groups. A better grounding in the liberal arts was a common theme, including arguments that Homeland Security programs

should include more coursework in American government, geography, and other social science disciplines. The tension between emergency managers and Homeland Security professionals was also a theme in the NSF-funded workshop at George Washington University in November 2003 on "Emergency Management in a Homeland Security Environment," lead by Jack Harrald. Clearly, the creation of the DHS in 2003 created the tensions and the workshops were efforts to find common educational goals and common content.

The debate continues, however. A working group with representatives from the emergency management community, including the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) and the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA), the Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1600 committee (the two standard setting bodies), the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the academic community was convened in 2007. The initiative was a response to the problems evident during the Katrina disaster when critical decisions were made by officials with little or no understanding of emergency management. The group identified eight values or principles that define the emergency management profession and practice: comprehensive (e.g., all-hazards, all stakeholders, all impacts, etc.), proactive, collaborative, integrative, coordinative, risk-driven, flexible, and professional. "The Principles of Emergency Management" have been endorsed by the participating organizations and are being integrated into FEMA training programs. The definition of emergency management in "The Principles" document clearly identifies the field as management rather than emergency response. The principles also more clearly differentiate between emergency management and Homeland Security for the benefit of emergency managers themselves, as well as other officials, the media and the public. The "Principles" are being integrated into undergraduate and graduate programs, albeit slowly.

Currently, the Emergency Management Institute, the training arm of FEMA, is funding a curriculum mapping effort for bachelor degree programs in emergency management to identify the core competences that should be in such programs. There is also an effort to accredit emergency management academic programs using the NFPA 1600 standard as a benchmark. In short, the assumption is that degree programs should provide grounding in the range of emergency management skills found in the standard, from emergency planning to warning systems, and the necessary administrative skills, such as human and financial resource management and logistics, that are required to run effective programs. The accreditation movement is also a response to perceptions that the quality of many educational and training programs is not as high as it should be. One of the accreditation movement's goals is to make sure that the profession and the educational community, as well as the students, are not being served by poorly

designed and poorly delivered programs of study. Greater clarity on the essential components of undergraduate and graduate programs will help. Greater differentiation between education and training will also help. Professional education and professional training are two very different activities.

Professional Education

The problem of curriculum development is not unique to emergency management but one that other academic programs and professions went through in order to become recognized professions (Neal, 2005). Professional education takes a number of forms. Historically, emergency management has tended to attract experienced emergency responders, many of whom are highly trained but not highly educated. Firefighters, for example, often work schedules that make it extremely difficult to attend traditional college programs. Their training is highly technical, heavily weighted toward chemistry and physics and engineering, with relatively little focus on the broader liberal arts that commonly provide the foundation for traditional college education. Professional education is evolving in the United States, as well. Business schools are increasingly delaying admission to their programs until after students complete a liberal arts core. Accounting programs are moving to five year degree programs to assure that students get a solid foundation in the liberal arts and develop their basic communications and analytical skills before being admitted as business administration majors. In essence, the schools are trying to assure that students receive a broad education, rather than simply professional training.

Raising the educational requirements for Certified Emergency Managers (CEM) was a very controversial decision by the IAEM leadership. There was great opposition within the organization and the profession. The case was made that requiring a bachelor degree as a minimum requirement was necessary because it increased the likelihood that applicants would have the requisite communications and analytical skills to be credible managers who have to interact with other management level officials. Education does not assure greater competence, but it can provide a better foundation for technical skills. Also, emergency managers have to sell their programs to elected officials and the public and to compete with administrators in other departments for scarce resources. A college degree is increasingly a minimum requirement in many local, state, and federal positions. The CEM Commission has also stuck to the requirement that applicants have broad training and a broad perspective in the field. Decades of training and experience as a fire, law enforcement, or military officer are not necessarily a substitute for training and education in emergency management. Applicants have to demonstrate competencies related closely to emergency

management and in at least several different areas of the field. Comprehensive emergency management is just that – comprehensive.

Professional Education at the Undergraduate Level

What should an undergraduate curriculum look like? In the simplest terms, it should ensure that students graduate with useful skills that will help them become successful emergency managers. Thomas Drabek's classic study, The Professional Emergency Manager (1987) concluded that interpersonal skills are more important than technical skills. The FEMA curriculum mapping working group agrees. A good undergraduate curriculum should also provide students with basic effective communication, collaboration, interpersonal, research, and management skills. For instance, during an evacuation, good communication skills are vital to an emergency manager's ability to get everyone out of the hazardous area. Evacuation compliance will depend on many factors including clarity and believability of the evacuation message, which in turn depends on the communication skills of the emergency manager. Similarly, collaboration skills are quite important because of the numerous local, state, federal, volunteer, and private stakeholders that must work together to ensure an effective response to an emergency. Furthermore, a good undergraduate curriculum should, in addition to the basic skills, provide students with the opportunity to acquire more specialized skills. Specialized skills relevant to emergency management include Geographic Information Systems (GIS)/mapping and grant-writing. Entry-level positions most likely will be in a special skill area, like GIS, or planning. Having the requisite skills to run a meeting, make a public presentation, write a press release, and brief elected officials are also important.

A good example of an undergraduate program is the Emergency Administration and Planning program (EADP) at the University of North Texas, which began in 1983 (UNT, 2011). It is the oldest undergraduate program in emergency management. This EADP focuses on theoretical knowledge, practical experience, and important skill-sets that are necessary for a successful career in emergency management. The theoretical aspect emphasizes basic understanding of emergency management, including the history of the field, the four phases (i.e., mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery), and a capstone course that focuses on how all the emergency management components fit together (Neal, 2000). The practical component of the EADP is a mandatory Internship Practicum that gives students the opportunity to put into practice their theoretical knowledge. Internships can foster meaningful relationships among students, faculty, and practitioners (Neal, 2000). The last component of the EADP is designed to equip students with the necessary skills needed to tackle everyday emergency management problems. The Bachelor of Science program in Emergency

Administration and Planning ensures that students acquire basic management, communication, and interpersonal skills. In addition, students are armed with specialties in GIS and Emergency Operation Center (EOC) design and operation.

Professional Education at the Graduate Level

At the graduate level, educational goals should change somewhat. The curriculum should emphasize analysis and management skills, including those skills more common to management decision making, such as GIS, financial management, project management, and grant-writing. Students in an emergency management master's degree program should be able to analyze data, use GIS to map hazardous areas, manage personnel and resources, apply for grants, and organize and run public meetings. Some of these skills are already part of some MPA curricula, along with skills in budgeting and finance, administrative law, program evaluation, and performance measurement. Curricula, however, should be tailored to student needs. Professional emergency managers may not need a refresher course on the four phases or functions of emergency management. They may benefit more from a course in program evaluation or public health. They also may not need an internship or related practical experience, although it is sometimes helpful to have a project that gives mid-career students broader understanding of the field, gives them additional contacts within an agency, or simply lets officials in the agency know that the students are earning a degree and may be ready for promotion or new job responsibilities. Having the requisite skills to understand the science of hazards and human behavior and the broader social, economic, and political context of emergency management are also important for decision makers. Hands-on skills in operations, public information, logistics, planning, risk assessment, and other technical areas can certainly enhance job performance and advancement, as well.

It should also be noted that graduate programs may also provide foundation for future emergency management scholars. The educational mission may focus more on research skills than on operations or management. The continued development of emergency management education requires the development of teachers and researchers. While faculty may be drawn from the practitioner ranks and from traditional disciplines, such as public administration, public policy, and sociology, the development of emergency management as a discipline will require the expansion of doctoral level programs.

Conclusions

The general content of emergency management curricula is easy enough to identify. The EMAP and NFPA 1600 standards detail what emergency

management agencies should be doing. EMAP accredited programs now cover over half of the U.S. population and the percentage is increasing rapidly. These are the agencies that will employ the graduates of emergency management degree and certificate programs. There are model educational programs, such as UNT's EADP, that are keeping up with developments in emergency management practice. The hazards common to the area or state or common to the program's market, audience, and student body should be guides, as well.

Now, what of the 800-pound gorilla in this analysis – Homeland Security? What do emergency management students need to know about Homeland Security? FEMA is part of DHS and many state and local offices are linked to Homeland Security programs. Emergency management funding frequently flows through Homeland Security offices. Therefore, it is important to include knowledge about DHS as part of both undergraduate and graduate emergency management curricula. Students need to understand how emergency managers and Homeland Security officials have to work together to address the terrorist threat and other risks associated with border security, transportation security, etc. Resources are shared. Emergency managers also have to compete well for funding and other scarce resources within DHS. The organizational cultures are very different, but working relationships have to be developed. That also means that Homeland Security education should also include the development of skills necessary to assure cultural interoperability so that officials can work effectively with emergency managers, nongovernment organization members, private entities, and volunteers. They, too, need to develop skills in public relations to build trust and cooperation.

Emergency management education is at the juncture where students and employers, as well as educational institutions themselves, should understand curricular missions, goals, and content. The content of programs should depend upon their missions and those missions should be clearly defined and communicated to all stakeholders. Diversity in programs is a good thing, but stakeholders should have a general idea what knowledge, skills, and competencies graduates should have. The accreditation of emergency management programs is a first step toward quality control. The development of benchmarks and standards is the critical element. Lessons can be drawn from the development of the disciplines of public administration and social work. Both have strong identities. The content of MPA and MSW programs is understood and employers know what knowledge, skills, and abilities to expect in graduates even though the programs may be packaged in different ways.

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