Word from the Chair - FESHE Fire-EMS Education

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Fire and emergency services is a complex world that presents responders with problems to solve under significant time constraints. We value people who can make decisions on their feet and actualize them quickly with precision. This requires training, education, and experience (TEE). One comes to the emergency services with an expectation to do meaningful work in the context of a challenge. The challenge is sweetest when it involves time pressure and overcoming the odds. These are our best calls. After the hiring selections are made, the first order of training is some orientation to the department. Traditionally, the training was oriented toward “what to do when…” and “how to do…” In days past, in a simpler world, the lack of complexity allowed for many of one’s everyday life skills to simply be applied to the tools and equipment we had on the rigs. With the advancement of technology, infrastructure, and human diversity, our contemporary emergency responder must have a greater foundation of knowledge, skills, and abilities before truly becoming an expert.

The emergency professional of today does less firefighting and more emergency medical treatment. At least this is true for the suburban departments with newly developed neighborhoods and commercial districts. Moreover, technical rescue operations and haz-mat release incidents fall to the emergency services and have added complexity to our work. Basic knowledge of physical science, social science, and medical science has become increasingly important for when the need arises to don PPE in the field. At Utah Valley University we have re-arranged the prerequisites for Recruit Candidate Academy training. There is a body of courses outlined by the US Fire Administration (2012) entitled Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education (FESHE) Model Curriculum. The associate degree courses outlined in FESHE provide entry level firefighting students with the foundational science and practices of fire protection and emergency response. This means an introduction to fire and emergency services, fire behavior, building construction, fire protection and detection systems, fire prevention, and firefighter safety and survival are all given to the students prior to actually applying the knowledge in simulation or the field.

In addition to some prerequisite mathematics and writing composition, these FESHE courses give students a theoretical foundation for the applied science of firefighting and emergency response. The RCA can subsequently be a more enriching experience because this is where it is all brought together and embodied within the students. If a student has done well in FESHE, the ventilation operations, flashover survival, and other practical simulations and exercises can be more meaningful. It’s like knowing the magic tricks before watching the magician perform them on stage. He or she may still be able to conceal part of the illusion, but the audience knows what is happening behind the concealed parts. Traditionally, the Firefighter I and II certification process introduced trainees to the science and principles, however the education was mostly learned through physical experience and practice. FESHE gives the person 18 credit hours of didactic knowledge so that the lectures in the RCA become more of a review than an introduction. Consider how much more ready a young
student will be with nearly two whole years of school before coming out to compete in the job market. Let’s face it, an 18 year old high school graduate competing for a firefighting job with a person 24+ years of age most often lacks the maturity and general life experience to compete.

Learning occurs in training and education. We often divide these as “book smart” and “street smart”. College has traditionally been regarded as book smart while skills and drills amount to street smart and common sense acquisition; the fire and emergency services of today need both of these. Moreover, they need to be put into practice in the field so that through lived-experiences of crisis management and mitigation, the person actually “becomes” an emergency responder. It takes real life consequences under time pressure that provides the context for one’s transformation into being an emergency responder. Learning is the union that exists between these three: training, education, and experience. There is an overlap of these different domains and systems of learning. We make distinctions between them to organize our use of them, but learning only happens in any or all of them when the learner engages in a project.

At Utah Valley University, we understand that many experienced fire and emergency services professionals have learned much through training and experience. It seems disingenuous to go to college to learn a job that one already has and performs well. However, FESHE provides the theoretical and scientific basis for a world that the professional is already navigating. Additionally, a broader knowledge base about many different disciplines has been found to expand one’s ability to solve novel problems with novel solutions. That means, when things don’t go the way they typically go, adaptation and overcoming requires a professional to switch gears quickly. There is not room here to go into this cognitive theory. Nonetheless, the more one knows, in more depth and breadth, the more one has to draw from when thinking on his or her feet in an emergency. To be the best professional responders we can be, one must prepare by mastering skills and equipment and pass this knowledge on to our students.

References

Dr. Broomé is a public safety psychological researcher/professor serving as chair of the department of emergency services at UVU. He retired as a battalion chief and fire marshal from West Jordan Fire department after 23 years serving the city as a firefighter/EMT and police officer. Rodger serves on the Utah Critical Incident Stress Management team and works part-time for Woods Cross Police. His teaching and research interests are in the psychology and human science of emergency and disaster response.