Education vs. Experience: Solving the Puzzle

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There has been a great debate in emergency management about whether education or experience is more important to emergency managers, specifically when hiring new emergency managers. The troubling issue with this debate is that the arguments I am hearing make this an “either-or” argument without a middle ground. There should be no “versus” in this argument. In fact, there should be no argument, as emergency managers need both education and experience.

I have known and worked with dozens of emergency managers over the decades, many with little formal education outside of the emergency management courses they have taken locally, through their state or through FEMA. Many of these emergency managers were and are the pioneers who have gotten us to where we are today, which is not such a bad place.

Looking for Balance Between Experience and Education

A very good friend of mine was hired as a county emergency management coordinator. He had a lot of good business skills, people skills, and already was an all-around good leader, but he had little emergency management education or experience. Over the past few years, he has been able to acquire the emergency management skills he needs to lead his county, while using his previous skill set to further bolster the position in the eyes of the elected officials.

We need to find equilibrium, because some emergency managers with experience and no education struggle in today’s emergency management climate, but conversely, some with education and no experience also struggle. We need to find the proper balance.

Students Are Valuable EM Resources

This is where I think that regionalization concepts can help everyone. Emergency managers are looking for staffing, and equally, schools and students are looking for experience opportunities. During the past several years, we have had quite a few students volunteer for our local emergency management agency (EMA), our county EMA, and our regional EM task force. Students have written procedures, developed emergency operation plans, and assisted in emergency operation centers for both exercises and real world events.

How many of us have the staffing or time to keep up with the latest EOP updates? How good are we with social media? Unless you have been under a rock, you know that social media has taken off like wildfire in the emergency management field. Think about the earthquake in Haiti or last year’s Boston Marathon event. How would you react if you had a major natural disaster and the regular channels of communications were down?

These are just a few of the areas in which students can assist you in doing your job, while you assist them with opportunities to gain experience. Our regional task force uses students to assist with various committees, to act as victims and participants in full-scale exercises, and to produce various pamphlets and training materials.

These are all areas where we would struggle to get things done without this “free” help. During Tropical Storm Lee, when we opened up our regional multi-agency coordination center, I showed up with a recent meteorology graduate who helped tremendously with explanations and forecasting.

Use Change to your Benefit

I realize that higher education is quickly growing and that it represents “change.” We can either continue to fight it, or we can embrace it and use it to our benefit. In order to get the politicians, the public and the business community to listen to our call for preparedness and heed our warnings, we have to accept the change and use these new formal methods of education to add new talent, to continue to grow our profession, and to become even more professional.

Emergency managers no longer have the benefit of receiving money because we request it or because a disaster strikes. We need to understand budgets, technology, scientific methods, and reasoning. Education will help bridge this gap. We need to understand and work with scientists to better understand sustainability and resiliency through environmental factors. We need to work with economists to create methods of influence in the language of money. We need to work with political scientists to understand and work better in the political system for change. We need to work with engineers to design better products, warning systems and disaster resistant shelters to assist the population in areas where disasters
will strike. We need to work with our local communities to stop building in the wild land interface, flood plains, and behind man-made walls. We need to work with the insurance industry to create incentives for those who are making their properties more resilient and sustainable while not protecting those who chose to let insurance be their only method of preparedness.

We continue to have issues with the education vs. experience debate between some practitioners and some academics. As a person who lives on both sides of this fence, I can understand the concerns of both sides. Like a lot of practitioners and academics, I know that we need both education and experience in order to be properly prepared to protect our citizens and nation from all types of disasters.

Two Types of Faculty

Colleges and universities are utilizing two types of faculty for successful outcomes: experts in their various fields and emergency management practitioners. We need professors in earth science, English, political science, government, occupational safety, social work, and mental health and trauma for theoretical and practical educational purposes. Just as important, we need educators who are practitioners in emergency management, educators who have been in the field, understand the field, and work or have worked in the profession, to offer a successful educational experience. As for those of us who are teaching emergency management in higher education, we need to remember that the practitioners, especially those early pioneers, created the field. We need to pay respect to them and develop our lessons and learning outcomes based upon the field these practitioners have created and the profession these practitioners are still developing.

At the FEMA Higher Education Symposium in June, Dr. Wayne Blanchard spoke about his initial task of creating more educational opportunities for emergency managers through higher education. He spoke of those first few schools and how he thought it was an insurmountable task to get one university or college in each state to teach emergency management. Today we have nearly 300 schools, and the list is growing.

As I thought about the development of higher education in emergency management, I began reflecting on how I got my start in the field. As a young career firefighter 30+ years ago, a chief told me to make sure to pursue my education. In those early years of study, I was often chastised by senior members of my organization, who asked, “What do you need college classes for to be a firefighter?” I was told that firefighting was a practical application career, not a profession that needs books. I was told, “You don’t put out fires by reading books and sitting in a classroom writing papers!” This was the mentality of that generation of firefighters, and I am sure the same held true for law enforcement officers. Today, most departments require a college degree for promotion, while some even require a degree to be hired. Those degrees in fire and police science and various other related programs were developed out of the working knowledge of firefighters and police officers. Academia then helped further develop those programs with some assistance from the respective fields.

As I thought about the above and my educational experience, I finally had that light bulb moment. The emergency services, excluding emergency management, are decades ahead with their respective education and professional needs and time frame. The fire service and law enforcement professions are hundreds of years in the making. In a few years, most of us in the profession will realize that higher education is a requirement of emergency management, especially from a leadership standpoint. Yes, we all need experience, and we cannot be emergency managers without it, but we also need to understand and realize the need for a solid educational foundation.

As for those of us in the field of academia, we need to accept that to build this bridge, we must understand the EM profession from the practitioner’s standpoint and also know where the field was developed and where it is in its growth process. Just as the fire and police services, we are all response-based, applied sciences that will grow with both solid experience and a strong education. However, remember that response is just one part of the equation, which is why education is so vitally important.

Conclusion

As newly educated emergency managers, honor the experience that built your new profession. Build upon what those emergency managers created, and add to it in order to make our profession what we need it to be in the eyes of the public and the politicians. EMI and its higher education project would not have been so successful had the emergency management field refused to acknowledge the need for formal education. Education and experience working together are vital in emergency management.