

7-2015

Making Sense of Higher Educational Opportunities for ARFF Professionals

Rita "Rene" Herron Ph.D.
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, herronr1@erau.edu

Ann Light
Bowling Green State University - Main Campus

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Scholarly Commons Citation

Herron, R., & Light, A. (2015). Making Sense of Higher Educational Opportunities for ARFF Professionals. *Aircraft Rescue Fire Fighting Working Group News*, 26(3). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/publication/82>

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Making Sense of Higher Educational Opportunities for ARFF Professionals

by Rene Herron and Ann Light

For a working adult, the idea of going to college can be a daunting decision. First thoughts often center on the fact that it may have been years since they you entered a classroom. Are they you too old for college? How will you do since you have been away from school for years? Rest assured that nowadays you will not be the only one of your age, nor would you be the only one with work and/or family obligations. In today's higher educational environment, the majority of students are non-traditional. No one is too old for college and institutions have more flexible options for the working adult. While those question may be settled, more questions arise in regards to pursuing higher education: Why do you want to go back and will it assist with your career? What degree and program should you pursue? Who should you choose as your school? How will you pay for it? How much time will it take?

THE WHY

It is important to note that fire and emergency services field is evolving as a recognized profession and legitimate academic area of study. Factors such as consistent curriculum, a solid body of research, and access to qualified, credentialed faculty all contribute to the legitimacy of a field in the eyes of practitioners and academics (Neal, 2000, 2005).

Education is not a replacement for training and experience. Training prepares us for today. Education prepares us for tomorrow and the future.

(D. Onieal, personal communication, June 2014).

While rising through the ranks from firefighter to lieutenant, captain, and beyond by demonstrating technical expertise and performing well on written exams is traditionally how promotions have been determined, this model no longer provides adequate preparation for chief officer positions (Coleman, 2003). Undoubtedly, inherent traits such as intelligence, physical energy and social potential contribute to leader effectiveness. However, education, work experience, hardship, opportunity, role models, and mentorship all contribute to the development of a successful leader (Hershey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2007).

In addition to an increase in complexity, Fleming (2010) also identified a shift from using titles such as fire chief, fire marshal, or fire superintendent to those more generally associate with business such as director or executive director. In senior executive leadership roles, one of the most important things that a fire chief must do is recognize that the public he or she serves are stakeholders and that both the internal and external roles of the chief fire officer must be fulfilled.

Fleming (2010) used Mintzberg's (1973) categories of management roles as the basis for a framework to

describe the complexity of the chief fire officer position:

- Informational (monitor, disseminator, and spokesperson)
- Interpersonal (figurehead, leader, and liaison)
- Decisional (entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, and negotiator).

Fleming emphasized that, "failing to recognize and balance these often conflicting role sets can significantly compromise the fire department's effectiveness, efficiency and safety and has contributed to the demise of many careers" (2010, p. 141)

While there are obviously many examples successful chiefs who did not attend college or university, most report that it was not an easy path and, at that time, there simply was no viable higher education option available. Additionally, there is research to indicate that educated individuals within the profession may be held in higher esteem. In 1996, the South Carolina State Firemen's Association commissioned the Higher Education Committee survey the fire chiefs in South Carolina to gauge their attitudes toward higher education. Given a variety of sets of work factors, the fifty-four fire chiefs were asked to respond to how they perceived the work of college educated versus non-college employees. The majority of chiefs found no difference between the two groups on performance during response to emergencies; however they did report that the college-educated employees were superior in communication skill, problem solving, creativity and quality of work. Approximately 68 percent of the chiefs, many of whom did not pursue education beyond high school, stated that college-educated employees were stronger candidates for promotion (Rivenbark & McCall, 2000).

While training is the needed "how to" component of the job, education broadens an individual's knowledge base with more exposure to new practices and theories. For instance, critical thinking, writing and communication, problem solving, managing and adaptability are sharpened due to exposure to college courses. Individuals are exposed to a different group of individuals, from students to faculty, and ideas that cause an awareness of new practices, better ability to defend decisions and methods to conduct and analyze research. These added skills transfer from school to work and prove an asset when handling the outside influences mentioned previously.

THE WHAT

The first steps are to decide on which degree and program. All students begin at the undergraduate level and many students choose to first pursue an Associate degree, which is essentially the first 60 hours of college. This is a great first step to determine if balancing work,

school and family life is doable, and to reach the goal of earning a degree in a shorter timeframe than if pursuing a bachelor degree from the start. Many regionally accredited community colleges and universities have transfer agreements, which provides assurance that the general education courses (such as math, writing, social sciences) will transfer seamlessly to a bachelor program. A Bachelor degree, which requires approximately 120 credit hours, may also require additional general studies; however, the student will quickly focus on the classes in his or her declared major. Upon graduation with a bachelor degree, more individuals are pursuing graduate degrees at the Masters and Doctoral level.

This increase in the number of individuals with fire and emergency backgrounds who hold higher-level degrees provide knowledgeable persons to teach, lead academic programs, conduct research, and ultimately move the industry toward a more widely accepted and recognized professionalization.

There are a vast number of programs of study and in order to choose the best one for you some investigation is required. It is important to find one that focuses on the field of study that will best support your goals. While Fire Science, Emergency Services and Emergency Management are the most common degrees available in the industry, there are others that may be a good fit: Fire Administration, Public Safety, Public Administration, Management. Often there are specializations offered within a program that may increase its relevancy to your goals. For instance, a Fire Administration program with an ARFF specialization, may better meet the needs of an ARFF professional looking to go back to school. The number of hours within a major is also something to consider. Some schools require that a significant number of credit hours must be taken within a specialization, while others have a lower number of credits required for specialization, which allows students flexibility to add a minor in a related field. An example would be a student taking 39 credit hours within their major of Public Administration. The student could have up to 21 credit hours open to take a minor in Aviation Safety, once general education and other requirements are met. Be sure to meticulously research the programs offered by schools by examining their general education, specializations and/or minor requirements.

THE WHO/WHERE

When examining programs at schools, be sure to verify that the college/university is accredited. The accreditation of the school determines the worth of the diplo-

ma. If the institution does not denote regional or national accreditation, it is best to look elsewhere. There are benefits that can be received from attending regionally accredited institutions, such as transferability of coursework to another institution. Regional accreditation is the most difficult to achieve and maintain for an institution. There are six regional accrediting bodies throughout the United States, which set forth strict guidelines. A team of inspectors visits the schools every five years to examine the institution's practices in order to verify that the institutions is meeting the said standards. They review everything from admissions practices to the percentage of faculty that hold terminal, most often doctoral, degrees. It is important to note that regionally accredited institutions

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will not provide college credit for “life experience” but do often provide credits for training and other college credit that may have been attempted at an earlier stage in the prospect’s life. Be sure to provide all training certificates, especially if they have the American Council on Education (ACE) recognition and past college transcripts.

Fire Emergency Services Higher Education (FESHE) recognition from the NFA may also be of interest. Not all programs are FESHE recognized, nor are they required to be; however, an advantage of the FESHE approved programs is that the curriculum is based upon the guidelines from the NFA. Therefore, students are learning what the NFA believes to be most valuable. Additionally, students can apply for NFA certificates after completing certain college classes. So, college credits and certificates are received for one class.

It is important to ask if the program is run as a cohort or if students progress individually. Cohort programs have groups of students take classes together, thus forming a bond between the students as they progress in the program. Non-cohort programs allow individual students to take classes when they feel it best fits. In either case, you need to also ask if the program is lock step in nature, meaning you must take one class in order to progress to the next course, or if the classes are open to enrollment at any time. Some cohorts allow students to take classes with students outside of their group to accelerate or decelerate their own pace, while others do not.

We are no longer in the age of education via face-to-face lecture hall as the only means to gain a college education. Many programs, from Associates to doctorate level are 100% online and some utilize web-conferencing platforms. These formats afford more people the opportunity to attend school, work full time and balance family obligations. Additionally, many schools allow students to take courses via multiple formats. For instance, a student may be able to take a mathematics class in a traditional classroom setting, an English class via an online web-conferencing tool and Emergency Services class completely online. Be sure to question the types of modalities available to students at a school and if a mixing of different modalities is an option.

Since the faculty are the foundation of any program, it is key to consider the value that they bring. Reputable schools prominently post faculty credentials, professional experiences, and connections to the industry. Are the faculty involved in research, publishing, and professional organizations? All of these things indicate whether they are current and active and contributing to the knowledge base that supports the professionalizing of the industry. It is completely reasonable to ask to speak with a faculty member to determine class size, use of academic technology and expectations for assignments and communication. Assignments should be grounded in research and relevant to the ‘real world’ so students’ new knowledge can easily transferred from the college setting to the work environment.

THE HOW

As we said before, going back to school can be a huge decision and the cost and return on investment must be considered. There are many forms of financial assistance available to traditional and non-traditional students. For example, Free Application for Federal Student Aid, better known as FAFSA, is the first place to start. There are also many scholarships that are geared specifically to the fire and emergency services industry. Finally, military/veterans’ benefits, employer tuition reimbursement and traditional loans may be available.

It is important to make the right choice, because going back to school is a huge decision. You want to work with a school that understands your desires and needs and is a good fit for both of you. While there are not iron clad right or wrong answers, the questions below can assist in identifying the best option for you:

Cost:

In terms of tuition, what is or is not included (such as books)? Are there additional fees beyond tuition?

Completion:

Can you get a review of your prior transcripts and a solid estimate of how many classes and timeline for graduation before applying to the program?

Success:

What are the graduation rates of the program?

Structure:

Is the program face-to-face, hybrid, or online? If online, is it a cohort model? Are the terms condensed/accelerated? Are there any requirements to physically be on campus? Do you have to stay on a linear path or is there room to increase or decrease pace when life warrants? What is the average class size?

Support:

Will you have a single point of contact for such things as advising, registration, financial aid, etc.? Who will be your advisor and how will you contact him or her? Are the same resources available for on-campus and online students? How (and how often) will you be able to contact faculty? Do the faculty use Skype or provide chat access? Do they use a digital white board to explain topics at hand so that visual students can understand? Are they using virtual labs? Many of these answers depend on the faculty’s flexibility with the courses and/or their dedication level to the student and it is something that should be questioned prior to signing on to a program.

Personal:

Are you ready to commit the time, energy, and resources? What is your motivation to succeed? Is your family/significant others on board? What best fits your lifestyle: online face-to-face or hybrid classes?

Ultimately, it is about you making the right decision for you, your family and your career. This guide will assist you with preparing informed questions of programs in the colleges/universities that you consider and in asking yourself some honest questions about your readiness. Remember, higher education is a huge personal responsibility, but it is also consumer driven: a student can and should shop to find the best program that fits his or her lifestyle, financial

situation, and provide the best education and degree possible. Why spend effort, time and money on a degree program that does not help you achieve your goals?

While this is written with the ARFF fire/emergency response professional in mind, this advice applies to anyone who is considering options for higher education. While we represent different schools, we are both here to assist you with your educational aspirations, regardless of where or if you decide to pursue a degree. Please feel free to contact us about any questions you may have regarding higher education.

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About the Authors:

Dr. Rene Herron is an Associate Chair for the Bachelor of Science Emergency Services degree and an Assistant Professor at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. She has over 20 years of experience within academe and her interests in aviation and firefighting have led her to various research projects with an ARFF focus. Email: herronr1@erau.edu

Ms. Ann Light is the Director and Academic Advisor for the Bachelor of Science Fire Administration degree at Bowling Green State University. She is also the Director of the State Fire School, which began at BGSU. She is pursuing her doctorate in Leadership Studies. Her dissertation focuses on chief fire officers' experiences during ascension to and in the chief officer position. Email: abetts@bgsu.edu



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