

I feel your pain: How and why the academic and professional communities must work more closely together

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To illustrate the common challenges that confront educators and practitioners involved in emergency management. To explore what the two groups can do to overcome these mutual problems.

Design: This article explores the similar situation educators and practitioners are faced with through the comparative method.

Results: Disaster scholars and emergency management practitioners are often seen as isolated individuals with distinct and perhaps even conflicting priorities. However, additional reflection about professors and professionals reveals that each community deals with virtually the same challenges.

Conclusions: This article argues our joint situation should encourage educators and practitioners to come together to resolve the difficulties we are currently facing. In particular, the article recommends that 1) scholars and practitioners must accept and support each other through awareness, marketing, and advocacy activities; 2) professors and practitioners can increase our reach and impact in the areas of education and training; 3) both groups should further the development of professional knowledge, skills, and abilities and 4) each group can exert efforts to improve the leadership and management over respective programs.

Key words: emergency management educators, emergency management practitioners, common challenges

INTRODUCTION

In the first edition of International City/County Management Association (ICMA)'s Emergency Management textbook—or the “Green Bible” as it is commonly referred to—there is an insightful (and perhaps damning) cartoon about the differences between scholars and practitioners.^{1(p329)} Rob Pudim, the artist of the drawing, depicted a professor and an emergency manager standing opposite one another above a deep abyss. Both are motioning to the other to come to his side of the chasm.

The message in the caricature is glaringly clear. First, the cartoon visibly illustrates a gulf that separate theorists in the “ivory tower” and practitioners who operate in the “real world.” Second, and as a result these distinctions, each one believes the other needs to accept and adopt the others’ point of view and *modus operandi*.

There are indeed obvious differences between educators in academia and professionals in emergency management. For instance, professors focus heavily on the motto “publish or perish,” whereas practitioners are more interested in the slogan “plan or perish.” Although these and other obvious differences are substantial, it might be wise to reflect on the common barriers that are inhibiting the attainment of our shared objectives.

With this in mind, the following article explores these mutual challenges and interests through the comparative method. It argues that our common plight



(Rob Pudim in ref. 1[p329])

should encourage us to come together to jointly resolve the problems we are currently facing. In particular, the presentation recommends that each community: 1) accept and support each other through awareness, marketing, and advocacy; 2) increase our reach and impact in the areas of education and training; 3) further the development of professional knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs); and 4) improve the leadership and management over our respective programs.

COMMON PROBLEMS

There are a number of common problem facing both scholars and practitioners in emergency management (Table 1). "Limited awareness and misunderstanding of emergency management" is one of those challenges. In the academic setting, university administrators, colleagues in other departments, and unaffiliated students may not know what emergency management is. Some have never heard of this subject area (although this is becoming much less common today than in the past). Others who are aware of emergency management do not fully comprehend it. For instance, academic officials and outside faculty members often equate emergency management to voca-

tional programs including fire science, emergency medical care and the like. Parents of one emergency management student even mistakenly thought emergency management is what is done to treat the critically injured in the emergency room at the hospital!

In the context of government, practitioners are also confronted with ignorance. Emergency management offices are not present in many jurisdictions, especially smaller communities. This omission limits the exposure of the profession among those involved in public administration activities. If a position or department of emergency management does exist, it is likely to be relegated to the realm of public safety or emergency services activities.

In either case, the lack of sufficient or correct knowledge about emergency management has negative consequences. If others are not cognizant of emergency management, the discipline and profession will never get the proper attention they deserve. Along these same lines, it will be difficult for disaster scholars and practitioners to illustrate the value they add to higher education or the broader community if people do not understand their respective roles. Disaster scholarship or emergency management will never garner sufficient consideration if they are misunderstood or viewed to be equivalent to some other subject or an extension of another profession.

One of the reasons for the lack of recognition and incorrect information about the disaster discipline and profession is because of the "emergency management has a fractured identity." On the one hand, disaster scholars and academic programs in emergency management are necessarily multidisciplinary in nature. Faculty and emergency management programs have traditionally had an emphasis on hazards and social behavior in disasters, but they may also have close relation to engineering, epidemiology, information science, political science, etc. In fact, the links to diverse fields of study is almost endless. An emergency management faculty member once asserted that disasters are associated with every academic discipline, with the exception of modern dance.* However, it is also possible to argue

*I credit Dave Neal for providing this information about a former professor in University of North Texas's Emergency Administration and Planning Program.

Table 1. Comparison of problems that face the academic and professional communities

Problem	Academic community	Professional community	Impact
Awareness	University leaders do not understand or correctly comprehend the nature of emergency management degree programs.	Politicians are not familiar with emergency management as a vital government function.	Lack of support.
Fractured identity	Disaster scholars and emergency management programs are often multidisciplinary in nature.	Emergency management is spread across many agencies and organizations in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.	Failure to appreciate shared responsibility.
Organizational location	Emergency management programs could be located within various departments (eg, geography, sociology, and public administration) or colleges (arts and sciences, public affairs) or as an independent unit.	Emergency management programs could be located in fire department, in the police department, in the mayor's office or as an independent unit.	Constrained aspirations.
Allowing others to define emergency management	University officials often constrain the boundaries of emergency management education.	Emergency managers have allowed others to dictate policies and standards in the profession.	Questionable policies or practices.
Fluctuating policies	Scholars are often presented with unfamiliar marching orders during administrative turnover (new university strategic goals).	Professionals in the field are confronted with continually evolving federal mandates (eg, Project Impact, Homeland Security, NIMS, Resilience, and Whole Community).	Interrupted or halted progress.
Apathy	Department and college leaders may not view emergency management as a legitimate discipline.	City leaders do not appreciate the importance of emergency management until a disaster occurs, and then interest quickly begins to wane.	Unachievable objectives.
Cash-cow mentality	University administrators might view emergency management as a means to bring in resources (eg, students or research grants) without a serious investment on their part.	Politicians only support emergency management to the degree that homeland security grants are acquired.	Money overshadows programmatic goals (ie, means and ends become confused).
Limited budgets	Emergency management programs are often run on a shoe-string budget.	Emergency managers do not typically have monetary resources unless a disaster occurs.	Difficulty in meeting demands and potential.
Insufficient personnel	Faculty members teaching emergency management are often limited in number, and academic programs are forced to rely on adjuncts.	Those working in emergency management have insufficient human resources in comparison to recommended guidelines.	Inability to get the job done correctly or completely.
Overwhelming workload	Professors have a plethora of responsibilities (eg, course preparation, teaching, and research and service).	Emergency managers have many duties including risk assessment, disaster planning, training, exercises, and community education.	Duties and responsibilities get neglected.

that modern dance is related to emergency management after all—especially if one falls and breaks a leg or if the theater has to be evacuated due to a fire.

On the other hand, emergency management also suffers from this unfortunate crisis of identity. Emergency managers are often mistakenly assumed to be first responders. In addition, emergency managers work with many agencies and organizations across the public, private, and nonprofit spectrum. This includes numerous departments horizontally within a jurisdiction as well as various organizations vertically across the three levels of government (ie, local, state, and federal). Emergency managers likewise network and collaborate with countless businesses, faith-based organizations and charitable agencies that are or should be involved in disasters. The breadth and boundaries of emergency management are often difficult, if not impossible, to determine.

Regardless of whether we are talking about scholars or practitioners, the consequence of this complex identity is a failure to appreciate the shared responsibility to educate students about disasters or recognize what is required to facilitate success in emergency management. Perhaps the following questions or comments sound familiar: “Why should that course be included in your degree program? It is outside your department.” Or, “that’s not my job. You’re the emergency manager – you do it!”

A related challenge is “where to locate emergency management programs,” and this affects scholars and practitioners alike. The discipline of emergency management could be located in many different academic departments. As previously mentioned, emergency management has emanated historically from geography and sociology. More recently, emergency management programs have been formed in public administration departments because management skills are increasingly required for today’s disaster planners. Furthermore, some programs have become independent (like that at North Dakota State University), whereas others have almost no home discipline at all (because the degree is labeled as being interdisciplinary). Thus, there is virtually no agreement on the best location for emergency management programs.

A similar problem exists for practitioners. Yes, it is true that emergency management is often positioned under the fire department in many jurisdictions and this is a common organizational arrangement around the United States. However, in other cases, emergency management falls under public works, the police department or the city manager’s office. Regardless of the particular location, the organizational arrangement will have a determining influence on emergency management. A program in the fire department may have close ties to first responders, but it may not get funds to develop a Hazard Mitigation Action Plan. Emergency managers who are associated with public works or the police department may be able to obtain resources for heavy equipment or interoperable communications, but they will be less likely to develop the organizational links for hazardous materials planning or public health emergencies. The structure of emergency management programs has a significant impact on the range of possibilities for the profession.

Perhaps as a consequence of our identity crisis and locational setting, “we have allowed others define what emergency management is.” In the university setting, an emergency management program will often resemble the department it is housed in. For instance, an emergency management degree in anthropology will stress the cultural aspects of disasters and perhaps not be able to teach about budgets and grants. A program located in engineering will concentrate on structural mitigation while being constrained in its ability to cover the social dimensions of disasters. Moreover, a degree program affiliated with public health will develop expertise in disease outbreaks and mass inoculations but might not be allowed to address concerns about land-use planning or debris management. Departments often dictate the nature of curriculum or least shape its content.[†]

The same problem exists among practitioners. For instance, the increasingly well-known Standards on Disaster/Emergency Management and Business

[†]It is logical that individual emergency management programs will develop niches of expertise and this should be expected and valued. However, it is possible that departments may constrain the desired breadth of emergency management programs.

Continuity (<http://www.nfpa.org/assets/files/pdf/nfpa1600.pdf>) did not come from within the emergency management community. They instead emanated from the National Fire Protection Agency. NFPA 1600 is a solid document and it has been endorsed by many organizations in the emergency management community. However, it is ironic that these aspirational goals did not come directly out of a professional association in emergency management. Another example comes is witnessed in our national efforts to deal with terrorism. The Department of Homeland Security created the Homeland Security Advisory System, apparently with little input from those in the emergency management community. Because it lacked the proper research or experiential knowledge about warnings when it was developed, it has recently been discarded. Letting others define emergency management may often produce questionable policies.

This issue brings up the problem of “fluctuating policies.” New presidents and their accompanying administrations often bring about significant changes in emergency management. In the university setting, presidents or provosts may have a dramatic impact on the direction of emergency management programs. For instance, one leader may stress the need to increase enrollments at the university or improve the content and delivery of undergraduate education. A subsequent administration may alter direction abruptly and decide to promote graduate learning, grants, and research and publications. Those involved in emergency management education (as well as any other discipline at the university) are sometimes caught between these conflicting and dynamic policies. This results in a situation where progress in one area is temporarily interrupted or permanently halted.

Emergency managers face the identical situation in practice. The history of emergency management reveals constant change resulting from new presidents and administrative priorities. For instance, the field has shifted from natural disasters, civil defense and comprehensive emergency management to disaster resistance, homeland security, disaster resilience, and the whole community. Although these changes may represent the natural evolution of emergency management or reflect a reaction to pressing issues made

evident in prior disasters, the constant turmoil often creates frustration for emergency managers. As soon as they learn and become familiar with one program or system, it is replaced with another. Precious time and effort can be wasted as a result.

All too often, another problem confronts those involved in the teaching or practice of emergency management. “Apathy” about disaster education or the management of emergencies is a common attitude. This occurs for several reasons in the academic setting. First, as discussed earlier, key decision makers may not be aware of educational programs in emergency management or they misunderstand their value to the institution or broader society as mentioned earlier. Second, priority may be given instead to more well-known disciplines or fields of study that draw larger numbers of students (eg, required English, Political Science, or History courses). Finally, officials—whether at the department, college, or university level—may see emergency management as a fad that only arises when major catastrophes occur and they assume it will certainly disappear when media publicity fades over time. In any case, the ability to achieve goals is limited when leaders are uninterested in emergency management education.

Indifference is also a constraint facing the profession of emergency management. Politicians are confronted with many demands as well as insufficient time, energy, and resources. They often opt to address pressing and highly visible priorities such as crime, education, or traffic congestion. Consequently, emergency management is neglected and this subsequently results in missed opportunities for mitigation or a lack of preparedness. It is no wonder why events like Hurricane Andrew or Hurricane Katrina take us by surprise or illustrate an ability to react effectively.

In some cases, the opposite problem of apathy occurs—“leaders view emergency management with a cash-cow mentality.” Presidents, Provosts, Deans, and Chairs may give lip service to the importance of emergency management, but their ultimate goal is to bring money to the university. Some leaders see increased enrollment or grant acquisition as a desirable product of emergency management degree programs. However, as these ultimate goals overshadow other priorities,

quality instruction in the classroom suffers. The profession is diminished when money is valued over an educated workforce.

Emergency managers face this issue too. Politicians normally do not care much about emergency management. However, at times they do realize that emergency management may bring considerable federal funds (eg, homeland security monies) into the jurisdiction. City and state leaders consequently encourage the emergency manager to apply for these grants, but the priority to acquire this money may come at a cost to other programmatic activities (eg, planning, training, and exercises). If not carefully managed, grant programs may ironically weaken the emergency management programs they are intended to strengthen.

Despite the fact that it is possible for notable amounts of dollars to flow into an academic or community emergency management program, there is paradoxically a “reluctance to provide adequate financial resources” in these areas. Investments for degree or emergency management programs are typically inadequate and there is a potential for even less funding in light of the ongoing and worsening debt crisis. Even if funding were available, neither the professor nor the practitioner controls the purse strings and allocation of resources. Such decisions are made by those in positions of authority (who do not fully understand or appreciate emergency management).

In the university setting, leaders often want to invest in STEM areas (science, technology, engineering, and math). They do not foresee a major return on investment in emergency management education (perhaps because they do not fully understand the breadth of disaster issues). Likewise, emergency management programs are not given lavish budgets. It is hard to convince politicians to spend money on disasters they do not anticipate happening. Higher education programs and community emergency management programs can never meet unfolding demands or reach their potential without sufficient financial backing.

A correlated matter pertains to “insufficient personnel,” and this affects scholars and practitioners alike. Higher education programs do not have ample instructors or administrators. According to Carol

Cwiak’s survey of higher education programs in 2010, 68 percent had two or fewer full-time faculty members (<http://training.fema.gov/emiweb/edu/surveys.asp>). Some programs do not even have one full-time dedicated professor. This results in a situation where the responsibility for the teaching and management of the program falls to adjunct and part-time instructors. Although adjunct instructors are great assets to an academic program, an over-reliance on them may ultimately produce a disservice to students and the profession alike.

A similar trend is evident in community emergency management programs. Most jurisdictions have one part-time or one full-time emergency management coordinator, even though one FEMA publication recommended staffing of 6-20 individuals for a population more than 1,000,000 (see prior version of Emergency Operations Center Management and Operations Course IG-2-25). This guideline is rarely followed. In Los Angeles, there are 4 million individuals but only 11-13 individuals working in emergency management positions. This means there is likely a potential shortfall of nine professionals. Obviously, this leads to circumstances where there are not enough people to get the job done correctly or completely.

The lack of personnel automatically brings up another difficulty—“overwhelming workloads.” Whether in higher education or community emergency management programs, there is simply more to do than can be done. Professors of emergency management are responsible for teaching, research and service obligations. This includes course preparation, classroom instruction, and grading. If the professor is involved in a PhD program, he or she is also responsible for comprehensive exams and dissertations. Duties also incorporate literature reviews, theory construction, method development, data collection, writing, and publications. Program administration, internship coordination, committee work, and community outreach also fall under the professor’s purview. For this reason, it is likely that faculty members will become stretched too thin and be unable to obtain success in each area of their job description.

Emergency managers are no different. These practitioners are tasked with all types of mitigation

and preparedness activities. These duties consist of risk assessments, Hazard Mitigation Action Plans, structural and nonstructural mitigation measures, grant applications and management, planning, training, exercises, and community education. This is indeed a substantial amount of work, but the breadth of the involvement before and after disasters is equally impressive. All types of hazards (eg, natural, technological, and civil) along with numerous functions (eg, damage assessment, warning, evacuation, sheltering, search and rescue, emergency medical care, public information, volunteer management, donations management, mass casualty management, debris management, individual assistance, public assistance, and care for special populations) are related to the emergency manager's responsibilities. Despite the professionalism of our nation's emergency managers, it is doubtful that any single individual can network and plan sufficiently to cover the broad range of duties in his or her community. Vital functions will be neglected in this situation.

JOINT PRIORITIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As has been illustrated, there are numerous problems that confront both higher education programs and the profession of emergency management.[‡] However, it should also be pointed out that there are also many issues that bind us together, and these priorities may encourage us to overcome our weaknesses and further support our mutual interests. For instance, both scholars and practitioners desire to move beyond the reactive response-mentality of the past. The academic and professional communities want to see vulnerability reduced so the deadly, destructive, and disruptive nature of disasters can be minimized. There is also a collective emphasis in promoting disaster resilience. In addition, professors and professionals realize that they must be more vocal in conveying the importance of emergency management programs for universities, communities, states, and the nation as a whole. Instructors and practitioners now admit that everyone

around the world needs to play a role in risk reduction and disaster management. Finally, there is a growing recognition that success in emergency management will require further education and a strengthened profession. Professionals and practitioners now recognize that our individual goals are mutually reinforcing.

With this in mind, there are a number of implications associated with this discussion. The following four are particularly noteworthy:

1. *Scholars and practitioners must accept and support each other through awareness, marketing, and advocacy activities.* Both communities already play a role in educating and training society about disasters and emergency management. However, much more needs to be done and completed in a deliberate manner. For instance, scholars can write letters to familiarize politicians about disasters and testify before congress about recommended policy changes. Professionals, in return, may reiterate to university administrators the need for an educated workforce to meet the requirements of future disasters. Both groups have a stake in informing others about the importance of higher education and emergency management programs.

2. *Professors and practitioners can increase the extent of our reach and impact in the areas of education and training.* Scholars can help emergency managers by reinforcing the fact that emergency management is a collaborative process, which requires active participation of multiple levels of government, a broad range of agencies and departments, and the private and nonprofit sectors. Professionals working in the field can, in turn, be invited to the classroom to inform students about new policy developments and a variety of programmatic concerns (eg, NIMS, changes in grant programs, and the new Disaster Reserve Workforce).

[‡]Another joint problem relates to the tenuous nature of employment in these areas. Faculty and professionals may be fired for vocalizing their request for further support for emergency management interests and/or blamed for failures when things go wrong.

3. *Both groups should further the development of professional KSAs.* Faculty in emergency management programs should acquire new capabilities to influence decisions in the university setting. Professors need to network with chairs and deans and find ways to alter the choices they make when allocating resources. Professionals must also seek to obtain additional competencies so they may influence policy in the public administration context. This may include public speaking skills and the art of persuasion and marketing. Emergency managers must elevate themselves to the level of public administration decision makers.

4. *Efforts should be made to improve the management of our respective programs.* Our prior performance in higher education and in dealing with disasters indicates that there is much room for improvement. As an example, scholarly research can inform emergency managers about future disaster concerns as well as needed mitigation and preparedness activities. Professionals in the field should serve as curriculum advisors to ensure academic degrees cover the material that would be helpful to the emergency management community. If these steps are taken, each group will benefit from the success of the other.

CONCLUSION

Although there are indeed differences between higher education and emergency management programs, this article has attempted to illustrate that there are a number of commonalities as well. These similarities include mutual problems as well as joint interests.

The good news is that scholars and practitioners are now working more closely together than in the past, and prior achievements have been visible in activities



that have culminated in the publication of books (eg, ICMA's Emergency Management textbook) and FEMA's Principles of Emergency Management document. However, professors and professionals should recognize that their individual and collective potential will be determined, in large part, by the success of both higher education and community emergency management programs. For this reason, both groups should work together to promote advocacy, extend the reach of our respective programs, develop additional KSAs, and improve the management of our individual programs.

In short, gaps need not divide the academic and professional communities as depicted in Pudim's 1991 cartoon. Instead, bridges can be built to replace chasms, and both scholars and practitioners can benefit from working together.[§]

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REFERENCE

1. Drabek TE, Hoetmer GJ: *Emergency Management: Principles and Practices for Local Government*. Washington, DC: ICMA, 1991.

[§]The author thanks Rob Pudim for accepting the request to create this new cartoon to show the potential of academic and professional collaborations.