A vision of growth for the emergency management higher education academic discipline: A program management perspective

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The emergency management academic discipline has been growing for more than 20 years and a strong foundation and passionate community has evolved in this time. The US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has dedicated resources toward supporting the growth of the emergency management profession through education and while it can be argued that more could have been done; through the dedication, creativity, and community much has been achieved! There have been several articles written on the history of this academic effort as well as the anticipated future. In 2018, the community celebrates the twentieth anniversary of the FEMA Higher Education Symposium, highlighting the theme of “Honoring & Past & Future.” As the academic discipline moves toward the next 20 years of growth, it will serve the community greatly to continue to develop a strong academic discipline identity balanced with a culture of open dialogue, iteration, and whole community connection.

The first 20 years of the FEMA Higher Education Program have been focused on supporting the growth of emergency management academic programs across the nation. Leveraging the best minds of the community, core courses were created and openly shared. A list of programs has been compiled and shared, focus groups to cultivate shared vision on specific topics have been hosted, publications have been supported, information has been exchanged, and a community has grown. As individual academic programs have evolved, they are building their own courses, developing their own expertise and an eye toward standards, and accreditation has gained momentum. Beyond the core of the emergency management academic programs, the community has refined competency areas for the next generation of emergency managers, collaborated with the disaster research community to develop a collective research agenda, and is working toward developing better collaboration processes with practitioners in all phases of emergency management to provide students experience and to capture case studies to inform education and practice.

The Higher Education Program has encouraged the development of special interest groups (SIGs) to support the increase exchange of knowledge in specific areas and applications of Emergency Management Education. It is anticipated that these SIGs will both broaden and deepen areas of study and understanding of practice in emergency management. SIGs have been organized by the community to cover topics such as theory and research, international programs, accreditation, jobs and internships, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), service learning, race, ethnicity and economic impacts, science and technology integration, ethics, student perspectives, new programs, and unity of effort. These groups are at different levels of development and within a very short time have already made significant impacts. For example, the Case Teaching and Learning Special Interest Group offers a forum for educators interested in developing emergency management cases and the pedagogical approaches to use them. They have already begun to establish a strong partnership with the field disaster operation stakeholders to develop and test a viable system to coordinate researcher, emergency managers, teaching faculty and students to develop case studies in disaster response and recovery environments.

Over the past 2 years, the FEMA Higher Education Program has organized all their activities to support
the continual development of an academic learning community. Peter Senge\(^1\) has provided several characteristics of a learning community to include: the community is connected to what matters, members are stretching, building and sustaining their capacity, they understanding the benefit of collective action, there is access to share ideas, vision comes from all corners of the community, learning is important and space is provided to learn, it is expected that people will take risks and honestly assess the results to learn and redesign approaches as needed.

This approach is complemented through the creation of “Gracious Space” as defined by the Center for Ethical Leadership.\(^2\) Gracious Space is an effective focus tool to facilitate collective leadership. It comprises four basic elements, being mindful of the spirit of the community with an intention of invitation and welcoming both from a personal perspective of fully sharing an individual’s gifts and presence as well as making space for others. The next attribute is setting; the setting generally addressed attention to the physical space and is also inclusive of how we plan for the time together to ensure that we format engagements that optimize exchange. The third and fourth aspects are to welcome the guest and learn in public. These last two elements are of paramount importance to the emergency management academic discipline in that they call us to cultivate compassion, treat others with respect, and operate with fairness and integrity as we acknowledge and learn quickly from mistakes collectively. In short, gracious space is a roadmap for keeping FEMA’s core values of compassion, fairness, integrity, and respect at the forefront of what we do.

As the Higher Education Program moves into the next 20 years of our development, we expect to experience a life cycle where new aspects will emerge and develop while other aspects retire and fade—adaptability is key to resilience. Over the last 15 years, emergency management has experienced the emergence and growth of the Homeland Security academic discipline. Some have seen this emergence as a threat or distraction while others have been exploring points of commonality and divergence. As these academic disciplines continue to grow, it will be important to clearly define the unique characteristics of each as well as the points of overlap between the two disciplines. This will ensure continued scholarship and preparation for graduate employment that results in increased resilience of the communities they serve.

To this end, the Higher Education Program has been supporting community efforts and dialogue around the SoTL. In 2017 and 2018, the Higher Education hosted Focus Groups in concert with the American Education Research Association (AERA) annual meeting. The AERA has been around for over a hundred years as a central hub for the academic system to assess and evaluate how education is delivered, how learning occurs and is this learning is applied in practice. The academic disciplines of emergency management and homeland security have had little presence in this community, and there is great value to learn from and contribute to this learning community. As a result of only 2 years of meeting attendance, there has been a notable growth in the focus of SoTL as applicable to emergency management and homeland security academic disciplines as demonstrated in the development of a SoTL SIG, emergency management-specific articles being submitted and accepted to journals and the creation of a community SoTL Award.

Systems’ thinking has been explored by many great contemporary scholars and provides a valuable conceptual framework for emergency management to map connections, see the network of interrelation and to make visible the cascading impact of our decisions and/or lack of decisions. Senge shares that we do not simply achieve systems thinking or a systems view, we need to cultivate and practice it through addressing our own personal mastery and expanding our mental models. The FEMA Higher Education program provides several spaces for sharing and expanding mental models through hosting webinars, focus groups, the annual symposium, and a new effort was instituted last year to host regional collaborative events across the nation.

Regional collaborative events provide a space to build awareness, capture successful regional practices of collaboration between faculty, students, and researchers working with emergency management practitioners as well as to identify untapped
opportunities in specific FEMA geographical regions. The desired outcome is to support regional community connection and collaboration as well as create a dynamic regionally specific report that highlights the academic and broader community resources, capabilities, and expertise. These events facilitate sharing the expertise and successful practices of regional stakeholders across the nation. They strengthen our collaborative network creating more opportunities and possibilities.

As the emergency management academic community grows and evolves, the FEMA Higher Education Program provides a space for academic faculty, researchers, and practitioners to connect, dialogue, debate, share, collaborate, advocate, and grow the emergency management discipline to realize the vision of a prepared and resilient world. It is important to highlight that the Higher Education Program provides the space and the academic community guides how the space is filled as part of the broader National Training and Education Systems (NTES). The NTES consists of the nationwide network of training and education providers and students who build and sustain capabilities for a more security and resilient Nation. In the context of the higher education academic community, NTES specifically links colleges and universities to the national preparedness community with the expressed goal of developing the next generation of emergency managers to address our Nation’s evolving preparedness challenges. Systems and structures are in place to support development, dialogue, and dissemination, yet without the academic community building, refining, updating and sharing curricula, ensuring programmatic and administrative quality, integrating high quality research, assessing the pedagogy and andragogy needed to ensure learning, building internship and job opportunities, and growing the body of knowledge through publication, the program will only be a shell. The system is interdependent and requires co-creation to ensure success. This is an invitation to join in this exciting co-creation of ensuring we have the workforce to provide the help our communities need before, during, and after a disaster.

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REFERENCES