

What's new at the National Fire Academy?

Where do I begin? Let's start with Fire Prevention. We're in the process of developing 25 new courses in all curriculum areas, and 11 of those are fire prevention related — from the management of fire prevention programs, to public education and technical skills. That's 44% of our resources and efforts! Prevention is the heart of the Fire Administration and the Fire Academy. We have three staff dedicated to prevention efforts and only one for each of the other subject areas.

We know that prevention works, but we also realize that under the current economic stresses that fire departments are cutting to the bone. In many cases, fire prevention and training suffer the most in tough budget times. These new training programs are designed to help those local departments — from model programs in community risk reduction to dealing with juvenile fire setters, from developing policy and legislation to engaging community support, from campus fire safety to working with people of different cultures. Some pretty exciting stuff.

The Congress authorized us to expand into EMS curriculum. For years we nibbled at the edges of EMS simply because we were never authorized to deliver the training. Now we are. Much like our fire curriculum, we're doing the advanced kinds of courses you can't get anywhere else, from "hot topics" to quality assurance. We're updating our management and leadership courses in EMS, and including EMS modules in other relevant courses.

Of course, our traditional courses continue — we've completely revised every course in the fire investigation, incident management and hazardous materials curriculums. We've reduced the technology requirements in our simulation training so that we can begin offering simulations off campus just like we do on campus. The Incident Command curriculum is entirely revised; we're not only fires — we're all hazards. Our Executive Fire Officer program has been completely updated over the past few years. So, there's a lot. I guess the short answer is, "We are constantly changing and adapting; it's not your father's National Fire Academy anymore."

Perhaps one of the things we're most proud of is our relationship with the National Fire Academy Alumni Association (NFAAA) and its Board of Directors. We meet once a year at FDIC, but I'm in constant contact with them. Through them, we announce NFA and USFA job openings, last-minute vacancies in classes, the opening and closing of application periods, and together we "quell" a lot of rumors — some factual, some not. From time to time, there's a complaint about something, and the NFAAA Administrator or Board Member gets in touch with me directly. It's been a terrific relationship over the years.

We recently had to change the admissions application from using Social Security numbers to using a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Identification Number. You can

imagine what an administrative headache that could have been, but surprisingly, the NFAAA and a few other organizations really went to bat for us and got the word out. It went fairly smoothly.

There are tremendous changes going on in education and training – how is the National Fire Academy keeping up?

We offer courses from ten minutes to ten days; in classrooms and on-line, in residence in Emmitsburg and off-campus through our State Fire Training system partners. In 2012, we trained about 105,000 students, mostly off-campus and on-line.

Like most schools, we struggle with those kinds of changes; we're always seeking to get the right mix. Everything can't be taught on-line, and not every subject requires a ten day classroom based course. The process begins with a few classic questions, "What is it we want the student to know, or to be able to do?" Then the question, "How will we measure that knowledge and performance?" Finally, we ask ourselves about the best method of delivery, "In classroom or on-line, in residence or off-campus?" Most educational research today will tell you that if you begin with the premise that you're going to develop a classroom based course or an on-line course (method before outcome) you're going to fail.

What improvements are you making to the campus?

Thanks to our parent agency FEMA, we've just completed some major renovations to the campus. For those who've never been here, our buildings are pretty old; from 1839 all the way through the 1870's, 1920's, 50's and 60's. While the buildings are beautiful, they're old and they're historic — which creates a pretty significant maintenance challenge.

Our facility folks, headed by Ron Face, have upgraded all the dorm rooms — new carpeting, mattresses, pillows, beds, paint, new thermal windows, darkened curtains, Wi-Fi and flat-screen TVs, and new geo-thermal HVAC with individual temperature control in each room. We're pretty green. They've installed elevators in D, F and L dorms, repaired sidewalks, and did a lot of expensive maintenance that no one ever sees — roof tiles, downspouts and gutters, backup generators — a lot of facility improvements. They've just finished upgrading the classroom HVAC, and some renovations in the cafeteria (automated tray collection). We begin phase 2 of cafeteria renovations later this year — moving from cafeteria to food-station style.

On the health and fitness front, they've expanded the gym area, added new equipment, added a few large-screen TVs for viewing and a scouting group just built a campus-wide perimeter exercise path. They've also worked with the food service contractor to make a lot of improvements — a lot more heart-healthy food choices, fruits and veggies for classroom breaks and reduced some of the dessert choices. And before I get ten-thousand emails, we still have cookies...



INSTRUCTOR MEMORIAL

The NFAAA has placed a Memorial Plaque in J (classroom) Building to honor those NFA instructors who have made a significant contribution. There's a nomination process to follow. Please contact the NFAAA directly.

What are some of the challenges the NFA faces?

Recently, I had an interesting experience. My granddaughter is 10 years old. She has a Nintendo DS game, her own cell phone (grandfathers can buy those things), and her own laptop computer. I asked her if she can do on-line school work, and she showed me her grammar school's web page with supplementary exercises / learning games that the students can do from home. Each teacher and class has their own web page, and it's updated according to what the students are doing that week.

Just to see the reaction, I handed her a 3 ¼ data diskette and asked her what it was. She looked at it, turned it around, and shook her head. She didn't know; she never saw one. Now I loved those 3 ¼" diskettes because you could stick them in your shirt pocket. You can't do that with a CD. I always lose thumb drives; that 3 ¼" diskette was large enough not to lose it.

So, I guess our biggest challenge is making sure that— unlike the diskette — that we continue to adapt to change at the NFA, because my granddaughter can become a firefighter in about 8 years. We've got to be working with our current learners while preparing for our next generation of learners. That means bringing in new courses, new delivery methods.

Does that mean you'll be going completely on-line?

No, I don't think so; it's not in any plan we have. We will be adding to our on-line curriculum while we continue to update, improve and add to our classroom based learning on and off-campus.

There's been a lot of controversy about the bachelor degree requirements from regionally accredited schools for admission into the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program. What is the status?

One of the first things Fire Administrator (FA) Ernie Mitchell asked us to look at was the regional versus national accreditation. FA Mitchell met several times with leaders in the

Department of Education; the accreditation issue is complex and confusing to most. I think we all understand that there are a lot of charlatans out there posing as Charlemagnes.

We expect our incoming EFO students to be prepared to do graduate level work; EFO is academically challenging. Beginning this application period (closes June 15, 2013) we will accept a degree awarded by any college or university accredited by an accrediting body recognized by the US Department of Education. Beginning next year (application period closing June 15, 2014) we will be instituting a transcript-based evaluation. All of that information can be found on our EFO website:

<http://www.usfa.fema.gov/nfa/efop/selection.shtm>

There are always rumors and hearsay comments about the participation of women and people of color in the EFO program. What are the facts?

The truth is we're doing pretty well. Over the past 7 years, our overall admissions rate for EFO for everyone is about 68.5%. When you separate those 7 years of data, you find that 83.8% of the women; 80% of the Native Americans; 76% of African Americans; 68.1% of the Asians; and 67.5% of Hispanics who applied were admitted. In comparison, 68% of White candidates who applied were admitted.

Why is EFO so popular? Every job announcement for fire chief states that EFO is required or preferred. Why are EFO graduates so sought after?

The principal reason is that we make EFO students researchers and problem solvers. The four Applied Research Projects are an integral part of the EFO experience. EFO students are required to identify a local problem, do the research, collect and analyze the data and propose workable solutions. Between the four-year course work and the research, EFO students become more critical thinkers, enabling them to deal with the issues and problems they will face as leaders. That's the real-world environment for today's successful fire chief. Now, there may have been a time, long ago, when the gold braid and collar rank influenced mayors and city councils; but not today. It's all about data, it's all about research; and it's about solutions and tough decisions, not emotions.

Secondly, after four years, EFO participants have had the opportunity to network with fire service leaders from all over the country. They have a long list of friends that they can call for counsel, to ask about similar experiences or to act as a sounding board. Our EFO graduates are walking advertisements for the success of the program — we graduate top fire service leaders.

Why is the National Fire Academy important and why should local fire chiefs consider sending their people there when so much of your training is available locally?

There are several reasons. First of all, our locally delivered courses are very good. We have top-notch instructors, they're experienced and street-smart; they've been there and done that. The challenge is the audience. The students are generally from the same area, they do things in similar ways and they're comfortable working together. We design those off-campus courses for that kind of audience. An instructor isn't going to arrive, teach for two days and change a whole lot of minds. Those instructors are going to make things better and improve technique, but they aren't going to change a lot of hearts and minds.

Our on-campus courses are more adventurous; they challenge students about the way they do things and encourage them to look at problems in different ways. Our on-campus courses are more in-depth and transformative in nature — they're designed to change students' thinking. In order to do that, we put people in classrooms with people they've never met. They don't wear uniforms and they don't have rank. They're all equal and they're all equally challenged. In those classrooms everyone does things differently back home — they're from different places. That's the value of the resident program.

Finally, while it shouldn't be the deciding factor, a consideration during these tough budget times is that our training is inexpensive; less expensive than most. We cover the cost of round-trip airfare; give students a dorm room and the training at no cost. All students pay for meals, about \$125 per week. Of course there are back-fill and salary / benefit costs for the local department, but they would have those costs for ANY training — even in-house training. So the NFA is a pretty good deal.

How are you preparing for the next generation of the fire service?

There's a line in the Bob Dylan song "Subterranean Homesick Blues" that says, "...you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." You don't need an assembly of fire service experts to know which way the fire and emergency services is moving — just read the headlines. The shootings in Aurora, outside Milwaukee, Tucson and Newtown; the tornadoes and flooding in the southeast; the wildfires in the northwest and the increased demand for emergency medical services by the baby boomers are all influencing our future. The fire and emergency services are every community's all-hazards response agency of first and last resort. As a result, we're undergoing tremendous changes. In some cases, progressive leaders are influencing that change. In other cases, the political forces are imposing the change, but we're changing nonetheless.

So, we're doing a couple of things at the NFA. We're preparing students for those changes by challenging them to think differently in our classrooms — making them a little uncomfortable with the status-quo and challenging them to examine problems and seek solutions in different ways. We're preparing them for technology changes by introducing GIS in our classes when and where relevant. We're preparing them to respond to and deal with the very difficult challenges they face in management, planning and budgeting. We're exposing them to the demographic changes in their communities and the political realities of modern day government. Students are learning to research, write, present and defend their ideas — not a typical fire academy.

On top of the changes in the curriculum, we're looking at new ways to deliver our courses. Of course we'll still maintain our 2, 6 and 10 day classroom formats on and off campus. We have our very popular "Coffee Break Training" — short, 10 minute text-based on-line lessons, and longer, several hour on-line courses. We're looking at the Khan Academy model of short, 12-15 minute, one lesson videos to expand that, perhaps stringing together 5 or 6 or 10 videos to make up a course. We just completed beta-testing an on-line mediated (with an instructor) course, Advanced Principles of Fire and Emergency Services Safety and Survival. We received very positive feedback, but the dropout rate is always high on longer on-line courses. We knew that before we started; about a third dropped out and we're following up to find out why. There's a model out there being used by Harvard, Stanford, Princeton and a number of top universities in the nation called a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). It's a traditional college level course but the enrollments are expansive, upwards of 50,000 - 100,000 students.

The short answer is we're maintaining and experimenting while at the same time keeping our eye on the fire and emergency services needs in both curriculum and delivery — for today and five or ten years from now.

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