Bring practitioners into the fold: practical suggestions for successfully bridging the divide between students and practitioners

Carol Cwiak
North Dakota State University

The age-old comparison of book smarts versus street smarts is one that is well-noted in emergency management. As the field attempts to migrate more cogently toward a balance between these two seemingly battling values, often termed education versus experience, what is being caught in the chasm between development and true evolution are the “new generation” of emergency managers (Blanchard 2005:14) and indeed professionalization of the field itself. This paper seeks to address some of the factors involved that have become problematic issues for those seeking to advance the professionalization of the field and offer a series of practical suggestions designed to successfully integrate emergency management practitioners into higher education programs and to bridge the current divide between students and practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

For the past decade, FEMA’s Higher Education Project has been working to enhance the “profession” of emergency management by increasing the collegiate study of hazards, disasters and emergency management; and, by supporting college and university efforts to develop and foster strong emergency management programs (Blanchard 2005). Dr. Wayne Blanchard, the Project Manager of FEMA’s Higher Education Project, has been purposeful in his analysis and delineation of characteristics and skill sets attributed to the “stereotypical” emergency manager as opposed to the “new generation” of emergency managers. Blanchard’s (2005) candid comparison (see Table 1A below) of those presently in the field, with those who have been college-educated and who represent the trend toward professionalization, portrays some of the theoretical shifts the field is undergoing, as well as the challenges that “professionalization” as a process entails.

Given Blanchard’s comparison of the two, it is difficult, at face value on paper, to see utility in the “stereotypical” emergency manager. The “new generation” of emergency managers appear so much more well-rounded, intelligent, educated, effective and worthy of respect. Blanchard’s assessment of the characteristics and skills of the “stereotypical” emergency manager are representative of what the face of emergency management has been and are helpful in the process of delineating the road to professionalization, but they are one-dimensional in that they do not recognize the value of prior life experience in other positions, on-the-job experience, commitment and the difficulties in advancing independent thought in the “stereotypical” emergency management environment that existed prior to the push for higher education. The comparison is most meaningfully utilized as a framework for evolution from “stereotypical” to “new generation”, but it does imply a “change of guard” that is unsettling to those that have spent ten, twenty, thirty or more years being the “stereotypical” emergency manager. The perceived message, “out with old and in with the new” is unsettlingly to those that feel that they have done good and meaningful work over the years. The enduring message for the “stereotypical” emergency manager, albeit unintended and perhaps even misconstrued, is one of devaluation. That message frames the posture of many practitioners toward collegiate emergency management programs. In the process of evolution, the utility and importance of higher education in professionalization are being diminished by those who see it as a statement of their own individual lack of utility and importance. More objectively assessed, the “stereotypical” emergency managers are the forefathers of the “new generation” emergency managers and that needs to be meaningfully conveyed to those who feel devalued. Indeed, the spectrum is far wider than these two generalized categories portray and the field will continue to experience change as it moves toward becoming a recognized profession.
Table 1A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergency Manager “Stereotype”</th>
<th>The “New Generation” Emergency Manager</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Not college educated (4-year degree)</td>
<td>1 College educated—many with EM degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Middle to late middle-aged</td>
<td>2 More professional and knowledgeable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Emergency management is second or third career</td>
<td>3 Knowledge base: science and research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Job obtained other than with EM Competencies</td>
<td>4 Technologically more proficient/adept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Spend EM career in one jurisdiction</td>
<td>5 Younger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Disaster response planning-oriented</td>
<td>6 More diverse and culturally sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Works primarily with emergency services</td>
<td>7 Emergency management is career of first choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Bureaucratic</td>
<td>8 Building disaster-resistant communities focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Plans for jurisdiction (primarily disaster response-oriented)</td>
<td>9 Proactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Has not done a risk assessment</td>
<td>10 Lifelong learner; reads disaster literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Has not done a mitigation plan</td>
<td>11 Joins professional associations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Has not done a strategic plan</td>
<td>12 Plans with jurisdiction stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Has not joined an EM professional association</td>
<td>13 Better paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Doesn’t read disaster research literature</td>
<td>14 Better funding for EM programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Knowledge base is experiential</td>
<td>15 Upwardly and geographically mobile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Frequently wears other hats</td>
<td>16 Broader range of working contacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Not well-paid or funded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Many part-time and volunteer positions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Sylves (2004:28) defines a profession as “an occupation that is esoteric, complex and discretionary. It requires theoretical knowledge, skill and judgment that others either do not possess or cannot easily comprehend”. Clearly, this definition of a profession does not comfortably fit the current face of the field of emergency management, but there can be no doubt that the field is moving in that direction. Wilson (2000) suggests that as society has become more complex and disasters have affected greater populations, an emergency management system has emerged as a consequence, and as the need for new skills and specialized labor has presented itself, the occupation of emergency management has evolved and created an infrastructure that has become the foundation for the formal advancement toward an emergency management profession.

In detailing criteria that constitutes a profession of emergency management, Blanchard (2005) suggests inclusion of: a systematic body of knowledge, a system for advancement and dissemination of knowledge, college degrees in the subject area, identification of minimum standards, standards of conduct or ethics, professional societies, and public recognition. Arguably, the field of emergency management has a way to go to meaningfully meet the criteria set forth by Blanchard. FEMA’s Higher Education Project has been purposeful in funding projects and promoting activities that have advanced the field toward the ideals of these criteria, but even as collegiate programs grow exponentially, there is still much work to be done particularly in regard to the body of knowledge and its dissemination.

As the focus of emergency management continues its shift toward a more advanced concept of mitigation rooted in long-term solutions to sustainability issues, researchers will find themselves addressing increasingly more complex subjects, working more with interdisciplinary teams and practitioners, and producing research that offers solutions to “complex macro-level social problems” (Mileti 2003:255). There is still much work to
be done on emergency management theory by researchers. “Just as the profession of emergency management is undergoing a massive transformation, so too is scholarship in this area” (McEntire 2004:14). Researchers have recognized that vulnerability should be considered of “paramount importance for the discipline of emergency management, and could be regarded as a central feature of future theory in this area” (McEntire 2004:14).

To date, the dissemination of information from researcher to practitioner has been spotty and problematic. In interviews with practitioners and researchers both groups noted that personal relationships played a big part in dissemination of information, with the most effective mechanisms for dissemination being conferences, meetings and workshops; not surprisingly, academic journals, historically one of the key avenues utilized for dissemination of information by academics and professions, have not been shown to be effective in disseminating information to practitioners (Mileti 2003).

Effective dissemination of information is not only crucial to the professionalization of the field, but also to bridging the divide between the “stereotypical” emergency manager and the “new generation” emergency manager. Yet, information, once disseminated is only valuable and useful if it is utilizable. In that vein, its power is enhanced or limited by the ability of the receiver to think critically. Darlington’s (2000:12) viewpoint regarding the constructivist view of knowledge is meaningful in a discussion of critical thinking:

“…knowledge is a state of understanding and can exist only in the mind of the individual knower. As such, knowledge must be constructed by each individual through the process of trying to make sense of new information in terms of what the individual already knows. Thus in the constructionist view of teaching and learning, learners think about new information in such a way that they transform that material in some manner, thereby constructing new knowledge. The practical implication of this perspective is that emergency managers need to be taught how to engage effectively in this knowledge construction process—that is, they need to be taught how to think critically.”

The need for critical thinking skills is becoming more urgent as the field of emergency management continues its extraordinary trajectory of professionalization. The march toward professionalization has been hastened by the events of September 11, 2001 and the shift in agency focus toward mitigation. This steep learning curve has dramatically emphasized the importance of the characteristics and skill sets of the “new generation” emergency manger.

The events of September 11, 2001, brought new recognition and responsibility to emergency managers. “With the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the incorporation of FEMA into a mega-organization tasked with protecting the United States, emergency management professionals went from a level of relative anonymity to acknowledged key players in the war against terrorism” (Cwiak, Cline & Karlgaard 2004:2). A plethora of additional responsibilities and mandates quickly flowed from the DHS, leaving many seasoned emergency managers struggling to keep up. “Emergency managers are now faced with problems they have seldom before confronted. They are expected to understand complex physical and social systems, conduct sophisticated outcomes analyses, and offer long-term solutions to recurring problems” (Darlington 2000:11).

Mitigation is a relatively new focus for seasoned practitioners. Even newer is the concept of sustainable communities based on a premise of resilience tied to policy maker’s commitment to sustainable development (Godschalk, Beatley, Berke, Brower & Kaiser 1999). The mitigation focus has moved from the structural to the non-structural with a repeated emphasis on “sustained action that reduces or eliminates long-term risk to people and property from hazards and their effects” (FEMA- Disaster Resistant Jobs 2003: 4).

FEMA’s Higher Education Project is representative of the highest order of mitigation – education. Only with education can meaningful change occur. Indeed, the movement toward mitigation as a tool to be utilized for long-term sustainability, has reinforced and reiterated the importance of higher education for those tasked with the difficult paradigm shift that adopts a posture of resilience above patchwork attempts at resistance. This
paradigm shift requires the proverbial “village” of practitioners, researchers, city planners, community organizers, businesses, etc. to buy-in to a new ideology of vulnerability and sustainability. Such buy-in requires at least an acceptance of the value of higher education programs and an ability on the part of practitioners to think critically; yet, it has not come easy and the absence of buy-in is problematic. In recent years, emergency management students without pre-existing practitioner status (it is this type of student this discussion references) have experienced the reality of what a lack of practitioner buy-in can mean to both intern and job prospects for graduates.

The gap between what is valued, education versus experience, has appeared much wider in the working world of practitioners. This gap, albeit inevitable to some degree, is based in part upon the short time frame under which dramatic professionalization changes have been imposed. This appears to have been exacerbated by practitioners’ feeling of being marginalized by an academic community that has charged forward to save the day based on case studies and theories, but very little real-life experience. Adding to the distance between students and practitioners is the diversity in what they “know”.

While students may be exposed to a wide range of materials that provide at least minimal coverage in many topic areas in emergency management, practitioners are more likely to be extremely well-versed in practical applications in a particular area or two. This is particularly true of practitioners at the state and federal level whose entire orientation in emergency management may be in operations, planning, mitigation, etc. Knowledge also is diverse between the two groups at the level of acquisition and usage. While students’ knowledge is obtained through formal education channels, practitioners’ knowledge is obtained through training and actual application. Students may “know” the same thing as the practitioners by virtue of theory and case studies, but this type of knowing without experiencing is not perceived as equally credible by practitioners. Practitioners’ additional usage of what they “know” allows for continuing modifications of their knowledge base.

Additional issues arise out of the immediacy of knowledge that is required in the field. Emergency management, by its very nature, requires the ability to jump in and get the job done. The luxury of in-house orientation is not always an option. Students who have not had the benefit of practical experiences or internships may be hard-pressed to quickly translate their education to application.

Students’ degrees may also be perceived in a less than positive light, by non-degreed, or lesser-degreed emergency managers who have acquired their knowledge on-the-job or via training seminars offered by federal, state, local or private agencies. There is a stigma attached to higher education that tends to function as a class distinction in a field where many of the current members are non-degreed and the message they are receiving about higher education is that it is producing the “new generation”. The message being promulgated by higher education programs is a need for change and advancement and makes sense in the march toward professionalization; however, the message being received by too many current emergency managers is that they have a diminishing value based primarily on their lack of education. This sets up an artificial spectrum with the college-educated on one end and the non-degreed or lesser-degreed emergency managers on the other end. The degree ends up equating with validation, or conversely, lack thereof.

To further entrench this artificial spectrum is the matter of age. As Blanchard points out in his analysis and delineation of characteristics and skill sets attributed to the “stereotypical” emergency manager as opposed to the “new generation” of emergency managers, there is an age distinction (see Table 1A above). Blanchard predicts the “new generation” of emergency managers will be younger than the middle to late-middle-aged “stereotypical” emergency manager. In recent research of two groups, members of the International Association of Emergency Managers and North Dakota County Emergency Managers, the mean ages of those surveyed were reflected as age 46 and age 51 respectively (Cwiak, Cline & Karlgaard 2004). Equating “new” and theoretically “improved” with “younger” is the age old process of change that is not always embraced by the “old”.

The process of evolution is rarely without challenge, however, the evolution of emergency management and the march toward professionalization is being inhibited unnecessarily by the issue of valuation. Practitioners need to feel that their experience and expertise are credible and valued. Collegiate programs are in
a unique position to embrace and benefit from that experience and expertise by bringing practitioners into the fold.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The most significant issue that emerges in the education vs. experience debate is one of valuation. There appears to be a perception on many practitioners’ parts that the comparison of the “stereotypical” emergency manager with the “new generation” emergency manager is analogous with “bad” and “good”. The noble intent of identifying strengths and weaknesses to better prepare collegiate programs to educate in an area that is experiencing rapid professionalization, is lost on the practitioner that perceives the message to be that without a college degree he or she is without value.

Understanding that the resistance is less about the way we “know”, than the valuation of the individual, is the first step in bridging the divide between practitioners and students. The message that college-educated is better is destined to be received combatively by those who are not college-educated, but know their job. College graduates are not the issue in-and-of themselves; the degree that is being perceived as validation of superiority and the face of the future is the issue.

This is not to say that there are not distinct ideological differences between those that indicate preferences between the values of education versus experience. Indeed, even one of the most seasoned of disaster researchers, Dr. Thomas Drabek (2005), has acknowledged from his research into what strategies make professional emergency managers most effective that it is “not what is taught, but what is learned by doing.” Yet, there is likely more middle ground, than not, in this debate. It is difficult to argue with a blending of the two. “Up-and-coming emergency managers need real world experience and exposure to the theories and research of the learned” (Marks 2005).

The issue of collegiate program legitimacy amongst practitioners has been addressed before. Most notably, University of North Texas (UNT) professor, David Neal (2000:5), presented a series of recommendations for program legitimacy that were utilized at UNT and met with great success such as hiring faculty with a “strong practitioner background”, faculty involvement in practitioner organizations, practitioner advisory board members, using practitioners as guest speakers and initiating internships. It is logical to assert that collegiate program legitimacy is inextricably tied to the legitimacy of the degreed students it produces.

The suggestions offered herein are not epiphanies from on-high, but instead commonsense steps to building strong and meaningful relationships between practitioners, programs and students that will ultimately produce benefit beyond the individuals, to the field and indeed the “profession” of emergency management. Many of these suggestions have likely received at least lip service at colleges and universities offering emergency management degrees; unfortunately, the difficulty in beginning a new program that faces numerous other issues (lack of academic materials, lack of funding, lack of teaching staff, etc.) coupled with student populations that are growing, allows very little time for program chairs and faculty to work on their practitioner linkages. Ideally, this linkage would be established pre-program creation, but it is never too late to build these critical linkages. The intent of these suggestions is to create a seamless bridge over the divide to insure that the strengths we have collectively all inure to the benefit of the people and communities we seek to assist with our work.

- Create either a formal or informal advisory board that includes a number of key local, regional, state and federal practitioners from your area.

Involving practitioners creates the buy-in and ownership and will accomplish three things: first, it will provide the board with a practitioner prospective, which can be decidedly different from that of an academic; second, it will remove the practitioner as a possible naysayer in the community, and finally, it will enlist them as a supporter by giving them some ownership over decisions made in the program. Supporters of a program will say good things about it to their colleagues and will more highly value the product of the program (the
students). The end result will be a practitioner ambassador that will encourage hiring of the new generation and promote your program to possible practitioner students.

- **Collegiate programs offering associate and bachelor degrees should offer practical/life experience credit hours for practitioners.**

  This credit should not exceed more than thirty percent of the study-area focused material (as opposed to general requirements). This credit will give practitioners a gentle push toward their degree while recognizing and validating their experience and expertise. Credit for expertise gained from years of practical experience should be considered to be the equivalent of transferred field experience or internship credits.

- **Bring in practitioners to speak to your classes.**

  Giving deference to practitioner’s expertise validates that they are valued by your program. It is a good first step in building a relationship with the practitioner and requires the simple relinquishment of one class period. It allows the faculty to also stay abreast of changes in the field across a multitude of topic areas that they might never get exposure to through typical academic channels.

- **Once a relationship is developed with local, regional and state practitioners, set up internships for students with practitioners.**

  Service learning should be considered a mandatory part of every collegiate emergency management program. “Service learning marries educational objectives with practice environments in such a way that the student, the university, and the community all benefit” (FEMA-Service Learning 2005:1). Service learning via internships with practitioners is an excellent way for students to experience different aspects of emergency management and can help the student build pre-graduation experience. Practitioners should be asked to fill out a detailed intern evaluation form after the internship is complete to help in the assessment of a grade, validate the importance of the internship experience, and to reaffirm the importance of the practitioner’s input. Additionally, this evaluation will be valuable to the intern and will allow your program to better gauge how the educational framework being utilized fits with the position and the practitioner’s expectations. A formal letter from the head of the program or department should be sent to the practitioner both upon the initial agreement to accept an intern and upon the completion of the internship. Even though the relationship you are building with the practitioner should be a down-to-earth and personable one, the gratitude should be substantive and in writing.

- **Contact local practitioners and extend the offer of utilizing students from their program for training and full-scale exercises.**

  This is a valuable experience for the students and a tremendous resource for the practitioner as getting "victims" is one of the hardest parts of any training or exercise. Training exercises are closed to the public, so by virtue of volunteering, students can gain a level of access only responders typically experience. In a full-scale exercise, students will be exposed to real-time response and interagency collaboration at a level they could only otherwise experience in a true response scenario. If an after-action assessment is being done on the exercise, participating students can ask to attend that as well.

- **Sponsor a community preparedness day on campus.**

  A community preparedness day that incorporates local, state and regional practitioners and agencies and is open to the public is an excellent opportunity to accomplish four things: 1) help educate the public about preparedness; 2) gain greater recognition of your program; 3) create a linkage for the community between your program and practitioners; and 4) create a forum for relationship building between the program and the practitioners. Students can be assigned as facilitators to assist each agency or practitioner with set-up or any other accommodations they need. This allows for interaction between students and practitioners while they are
both geared toward the same goal – educating the public - and creates an opportunity on both the practitioners’ and students’ parts to appreciate their common directives.

- **Develop an award or series of awards to be awarded annually from your program that recognizes local, regional or state emergency management personnel excellence.**

  Many practitioners are nothing short of community compatriots, in that are not in emergency management for the money or the prestige (both of which have been historically lacking), but for the good of the community. Not only are they deserving of recognition, they are unlikely to receive it from many forums. Collegiate programs are an ideal forum from which to recognize practitioner excellence. It is a small token for the collegiate program to extend, but will generate appreciation across all practitioners as a measure of respect for their commitment to the field.

- **Have a practitioner be a co-advisor to an on-campus student emergency management organization.**

  Many college campuses have strict rules on college organizations and require a faculty member as a club advisor to insure accountability. This should not hamper any collegiate program from asking a local practitioner to be a co-advisor or to hold a similar role in the organization. Having a practitioner as a co-advisor will give the club greater access to speakers and facility tours than might be accomplished absent the practitioner’s participation. The collegiate program must be cognizant that time is an issue for practitioners and limit the responsibility they hold to attending to a couple of meetings a month at most.

- **Host quarterly practitioner and academic panels.**

  It is important in these types of panels to keep a balance of practitioners and academics. Such a panel offers the opportunity for attendees to learn of recent innovations and projects in the practitioner arena, as well as the recent research findings that are meaningful to practitioners and community members. This type of panel should not be utilized to address high-level theory concepts that have no practical application guidelines. The focus by all panel participants should be the functionality of the information to the audience and to their fellow participants. These panels should be well-advertised on the campus, in practitioner and academic circles, and in the community. Faculty, should, as much as possible, integrate student attendance at these panels into emergency management coursework.

- **Create a practitioner mentoring program.**

  Once students have a general idea of the areas they are interested in, they should be paired with a practitioner mentor who can answer their questions about current practice in the field. Mentoring is meaningful for all level students, but is ideal for undergraduates that are at least halfway through their program. The issue with mentoring will always be more logistically difficult in the pairing process. It is critical that the person creating the pairings understands the practitioner’s duties and personality and the student’s goals and personality. This is no easy task to a collegiate program with a large number of juniors and seniors, yet is incredibly valuable to the mentor, student and the program.

  The mentor will have an opportunity to get to know one or more students quite well and perhaps be able to offer that student a recommendation and assistance when they are seeking an emergency management position. The student will have the benefit of having a go-to person that is presently working in the field who has agreed to help guide the student. The collegiate program will benefit by virtue of offering a linkage to students (outside individual professor’s busy advising schedules) that will strengthen their ties to the practitioner community in the first generation, and that will increase the odds of alumni becoming future mentors.
 Publish a monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly bulletin that features local practitioner profiles, articles, etc.

A number of collegiate programs and professional organizations have newsletters or bulletins geared toward academics, practitioners or both. The creation of a local bulletin allows collegiate programs a vehicle for building and nurturing relationships with practitioners, disseminating information and advertising open emergency management positions, to name a few. Sections that feature a rotating practitioner’s corner, a practitioner profile, and best practices in the field will insure that practitioners are not left with the impression that the bulletin only applies to the collegiate program.

 Establish a meaningful relationship with your state division of emergency management and homeland security.

The state has access to all the county personnel and has the power to set a tone and even promote educational incentives, within their state, to its state and county level personnel. A relationship with the state opens up more opportunities for internships as well as opening more doors for students and faculty to present at state-sponsored workshops. It builds the perception that the collegiate team is a part of the state team, instead of outside and perhaps, above it.

CONCLUSION

There is an opportunity and challenge before collegiate emergency management programs to create a more seamless transition from the “stereotypical” emergency manager to the “new generation” emergency manager and to facilitate the professionalization of the field. To meet this opportunity and challenge the focus must be on relationship building. There can no longer be an excuse for programs that unknowingly or unwittingly alienate practitioners. Integration of practitioners into collegiate programs is a must for not only program success, but for the ultimate success of the “profession”.

Building a cadre of younger, higher-degreed professionals that have had the benefit of the vision of the future is critical, but we are remiss if we neglect to nurture an understanding of where applied experience and theory can best cohabitate. “We do the profession a great injustice if we only look to the future without extending a hand to the past. The depth and breadth of knowledge in practitioners must be acknowledged, embraced and built upon, to do so is to have the best of both worlds – the open-mind and the learned-soul” (Cwiak, Cline & Karlgaard, 2004b, p.17).

REFERENCES

Blanchard, B. Wayne

Cwiak, Carol, Kathy Cline & Tammy Karlgaard

Cwiak, Carol, Kathy Cline & Tammy Karlgaard
Darlington, JoAnne  

Drabek, Thomas  
2005  Presentation at North Dakota State University, April 27.

FEMA  

FEMA  

Godschalk, David R., Timothy Beatley, Phillip Berke, David J. Brower and Edward J. Kaiser  

Marks, Craig  

McEntire, David A.  

Mileti, Dennis S.  

Neal, David  

Sylves, Richard T.  

Wilson, Jennifer L.  