

Development of an Accreditation
Program

The Foundation for Higher Education
Accreditation

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DEVELOPMENT OF AN ACCREDITATION PROGRAM

THE FOUNDATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION (FFHEA)

Until recently, university- and college-level emergency management programs, either degree or certificate, did not have a set of standards or an official accrediting organization to recognize academic excellence. There existed no organization or process for evaluating the multitude of emergency management programs being offered. The Foundation for Higher Education Accreditation (FFHEA) was formed with help from emergency management academics, researchers and practitioners as that official organization to accredit emergency management programs worldwide. The foundation is the only organization accrediting post-secondary emergency management programs in the world. It does not accredit universities and colleges. They have their own accrediting organizations. It only accredits emergency management programs – degree and certificate. What follows is a discussion of why the Foundation was formed and how the Foundation developed their accreditation standards.

Birth of an Idea

The first presentation on accreditation was during FEMA's 4th Annual Higher Education Conference (June 2000) held at the Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, Maryland, participants voiced much pleasure at the increasing number of emergency management degree and certificate programs universities and colleges in the United States were offering, as well as those being developed in other countries. The numbers started out very small, but were growing each year. As the participants discussed these programs, we wondered about standards. To our dismay, we discovered universities and colleges could establish a program any way they wanted to; there weren't any standards applicable to implementing an emergency management degree program! For many participants, this was not acceptable and as a group we voiced frustration with the status quo. But what to do about it and who would actually take action to correct it? Indeed, what could we, as highly regarded members of the emergency management educational community, do to develop and enforce a set of standards for emergency management degree and

certificate programs? This became of subject of much reflection and discussion, but no action.

The next few years saw more emergency management programs come into being and still no resolution made to the standards issue. It was reported during one breakout session that there was a master's level degree program in existence using associate level curriculum. This announcement set off further discussions regarding standards. University professors and administrators were asking someone to put an accreditation program together because it was desperately wanted/needed; even overseas universities expressed interest in standards development and accreditation. Standards would make it much easier to develop new programs because course developers would have something to guide them. Standards would also help students decide on a program's value just like accreditation does for a university or college.

The need for a set of standards was not in dispute. Collectively, we knew the difference between an associate, a bachelor, and a master's degree. FEMA, and the Higher Education program managed by Dr. Wayne Blanchard, PhD., CEM, developed a recommended curriculum for each degree level that was available for downloading from FEMA's Higher Education website. We also had the four phases of emergency management, various presidential directives, the National Response Plan (and later the National Response Framework), the National Incident Management System, the Incident Command System, etc. as well as a body of research and knowledge specific to emergency management. What was in dispute was who would establish and enforce a standard for emergency management programs.

The first task was to determine who should establish a set of standards and manage the accreditation process? The most likely candidate suggested was FEMA itself. Unfortunately, as a federal agency, FEMA was not chartered to do this now, but maybe in the future? After much lively debate and discussion among ourselves and with some FEMA representatives, we decided it was probably not a good idea to have a federal agency in charge of accreditation and telling universities and colleges what they could or could not teach. FEMA agreed with that conclusion and we decided to look elsewhere.

The International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) was approached to gauge their interest in accrediting emergency management degree and certificate programs. IAEM is the premiere professional association for emergency managers worldwide. Their membership includes some of the best emergency managers around as well as emergency management teachers, adjuncts and full professors. IAEM also administers the Certified Emergency Manager (CEM[®]) and Associate Emergency Manager (AEM) credentials. The board was briefed and much discussion ensued. The idea was intriguing, but not enough to overcome some strong reservations. The board said they did not want the association to be viewed as telling universities and colleges what they should or should not offer in their programs, much like FEMA said. IAEM did not want to be viewed as a ‘black hat’ by those who could not or chose not to get accredited. IAEM regretfully turned down the offer and wished us much luck in creating an organization to accomplish the vision and mission described to them.

Next, we considered asking a number of existing university accrediting agencies whom might be able to do it, but since none had the expertise or desire to establish a new program for emergency managers they were scratched from the list too. Eventually a consensus was built among the academics, researchers and practitioners alike during various meetings and presentations at the Higher Education conferences. If we wanted a set of emergency management program standards and a means of enforcing them through the accreditation process, we would have to establish our own organization charged with this mission. But could we and what would we have to do to make this vision a reality?

Accreditation Process Research

Research showed that accreditation is official recognition that a school or program meets a set of requirements of academic excellence. It is accrediting organizations who establish the set of operating standards or requirements for educational institutions and programs. The U.S. Department of Education defines these accrediting organizations as “private educational associations of regional or national scope” and state that these organizations “have no legal

control or authority over educational institutions or programs. They merely promulgate standards of quality or criteria of institutional excellence and approve or renew membership of those institutions that apply for and meet their accreditation standards or criteria”

(<http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>). Through a rigorous evaluation process, accrediting organizations determine the extent to which the established standards or criteria are met. Once the evaluation process is completed, the accrediting organizations announce their findings publically so others will be able to use the information to make appropriate decisions.

In the United States the accreditation process is usually applied by private educational organizations that have been accredited by the US Department of Education, though it is not a legal requirement. The US Department of Education only accredits organizations, associations and institutions that have applied for accreditation and meet the department’s criteria. Further, the department has no legal authority to exercise oversight of accrediting agencies who evaluate and accredit programs outside of the United States.

According to the U.S. Department of Education FAC, “Specialized accreditation normally applies to the evaluation of programs, departments, or schools which usually are parts of a total collegiate or other post-secondary institution. The unit accredited may be as large as a college or school within a university or as small as a curriculum within a discipline. Most of the specialized accrediting agencies review units within a post-secondary institution which is accredited by one of the regional accrediting commissions. However, certain of the specialized accrediting agencies accredit professional schools and other specialized or vocational or other postsecondary institutions which are free-standing in their operations. Thus, a "specialized" or "programmatic" accrediting agency may also function in the capacity of an "institutional" accrediting agency. In addition, a number of specialized accrediting agencies accredit educational programs within non-educational settings, such as hospitals” (<http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/FAQAccr.aspx>).

So, at the conclusion of FEMA’s 8th Annual Higher Education Conference (June 2005), Craig Marks CEM®, CERP, adjunct with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, formed a

committee “to develop a set of standards and a methodology to accredit post-secondary emergency management and homeland security programs.” Over time, this committee became the Foundation for Higher Education Accreditation (FFHEA <http://www.ffhea.org/1401.html>).

Standards Research

Establishing standards requires a careful, deliberative process built on a strong foundation of broad collaboration. To be effective, we knew these ‘new’ standards must have broad acceptance by the audience to which they apply; in this case, to the emergency management community consisting of academic institutions offering degrees and certificates in emergency management, professors and adjuncts teaching emergency management courses, students taking emergency management courses, and emergency management practitioners who will hire these students.

We wanted as many stakeholders as possible to have a hand in shaping the standards and that the process is visible, accessible and inclusive. This was ensured by inviting a wide variety of stakeholders to join the committee. We ensured even more stakeholders had an opportunity to be heard and to influence the standards through progress reports and presentations made at the Higher Education conferences.

To ensure the standards would be acceptable to universities, colleges and practitioners alike, the committee used existing emergency management standards applicable to emergency management programs. The core competencies follow NFPA 1600 and Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP), forming the basis of the standards for the various degree levels. Included in the standards were the core competencies and common body of knowledge which came out of the 2005 Higher Ed Conference, as well as ASTM Committee 54-02 standards, DRII (Disaster Research Institute International), the CEM[®], and BCP (Business Continuity Professional). The committee’s thinking was that these comprehensive emergency management standards would be tailored to the type of program being taught — EM, business continuity, etc. — rather than having a single standard for all programs. Basic standards of education and administration should be consistent across the board. The committee also reviewed Bloom's

Taxonomy as well as standard items such as POI, lesson plans, course objectives, internships, student participation, research and library materials, written and oral communications, etc.

In early 2006, the committee evolved into the Foundation on Higher Education Accreditation. Shortly thereafter, in May 2006, the first draft standards were completed. The Foundation tested those standards with its first accreditation visit at Arkansas Tech University in Russellville. Administrators and professors alike said the committee's choice of standards was good; they mirrored the standards established by NFPA 1600 and EMAP. The standards and assessment process were very thorough. They also appreciated the fact that the peer evaluators reviewed course curriculums, student internship/externship binders, other student work products, the university self-assessment, etc. as part of the total assessment process rather than simply following a detailed checklist.

The committee took the university's comments and the lessons learned by the assessment team to improve the standards. Foundation staff then briefed the revised standards at the FEMA Higher Education conference in June 2006 to gain additional insights, explain the purpose of 'our' accreditation program and to further review/improve the standards in preparation for the next accreditation visit.

Accreditation Standards

The committee went through a continuous improvement process the next few years and refined the twenty-three original standards. The current version of the standards is dated May 2011 and reflects all the lessons learned the last five years. According to the Foundation's Draft May 2011 standards, "1-4 relate to the general educational program, 5-19 relate to the emergency management program, and 20-23 relate to resources impacting educational quality." Similar to the standards set forth in NFPA 1600 and EMAP for emergency management programs, "Each standard sets forth a general expectation without stipulating a means for achievement. Indicators provide an instrument, or performance criteria, for determining whether a program complies with the standard" (2011, pg 3). Following is a summary of the standards. Download a copy of the complete standards, with indicators and guidance for each one from

General Education Program Standards (1-4).

- 1. Curriculum Structure** - The curriculum is structured to facilitate and advance student learning.
- 2. Professional Values** - The program leads students to develop the attitudes, traits, and values of professional responsibility, accountability, and effectiveness in accordance with the principles of Emergency Management as developed by the FEMA Higher Education Project in October 2008.
- 3. Professional Business Practices** - Students have a foundation in professional business practices.
- 4. Written and Oral Communications** - Students communicate effectively.

Emergency Management Program Standards (5-19).

- 5. Laws and Authorities** - Students apply the laws, codes, regulations, standards, and practices that protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public.
- 6. Risk Assessment** - Students identify hazards; monitor those hazards; determine the likelihood of their occurrence to a specific locality; and determine the vulnerability of people, property, the environment, and the entity itself to those hazards.
- 7. Impact Analysis** - Students evaluate impacts resulting from interruption or disruption of individual functions, processes and applications.
- 8. Prevention** - Students have a foundation in incident prevention. Students know how to develop strategies to prevent an incident that threatens people, property, and the environment. Students also know how to monitor the threat level for identified hazards and adjust the level of preventive measures commensurate with the threat.
- 9. Mitigation** - Students have a foundation in mitigation principles. Students know how to develop strategies that include measures to limit, control or mitigate the effects

of hazards that cannot be prevented.

10. Planning - Students have a foundation in planning principles. Students are able to use all the basic elements of the planning process as a basis for working together with emergency managers, department heads, policy makers, planners, and other stakeholders, to shape the entity's emergency plans.

11. Resource Management - Students have a foundation in resource management principles. Students know how to identify, develop, and manage a resource management system.

12. Mutual Aid - Students have a foundation in principles of mutual aid. Students know how to develop strategies to mitigate the effects of hazards that cannot be prevented. Strategies will include both interim and long-term actions to reduce vulnerability.

13. Communications and Warning - Students have a foundation in communication systems and procedures to support the emergency management program. Students know how to develop and maintain the capability to alert stakeholders potentially impacted by an actual or impending incident. Students know how to integrate and disseminate advisory and warning systems within the emergency management program.

14. Operational Procedures - Students have a foundation in developing, coordinating, and implementing operational procedures to support the entity's emergency management program and execute its plans.

15. Emergency Response/Emergency Operations Center - Students have a foundation in incident management principles, actions taken to protect people (including those with special needs), property, operations, the environment and provide incident stabilization.

16. Training - Students have a foundation in adult training principles to develop and implement a training/educational curriculum to support the entity's emergency management program while complying with applicable regulatory requirements.

17. Testing and Exercises - Students have an understanding of the need for exercises

and exercise evaluations, and the available methodologies for evaluation in the field of emergency management. Students know how to develop and implement a systematic approach to exercise development, evaluation, and post-exercise evaluation activities.

18. Crisis Communication and Public Information - Students have a foundation in crisis communication principles. Students know how to develop procedures to disseminate and respond to requests for pre-disaster, disaster, and post-disaster information, including procedures to provide information to internal and external audiences, including the media, and deal with their inquiries.

19. Incident Management - Students have a foundation in incident management systems designed to direct, control and coordinate response and recovery operations.

Program Resources (20-23).

20. Faculty - Faculty members, graduate teaching assistants and other instructional personnel are qualified and adequate in number to implement program objectives.

21. Facilities - Program facilities and resources provide an environment to stimulate thought, motivate students, and promote the exchange of ideas.

22. Administration - The administration of the program is clearly defined, it provides appropriate program leadership, and it supports the program. The program demonstrates accountability to the public through its published documents.

23. Assessment - Systematic and comprehensive assessment methods contribute to the program's ongoing development and improvement.

Evaluation of these standards is based on student performance throughout the educational program. Peer reviewers judge student learning outcomes to determine if the emergency management education program meets the standards. Peer reviewers know that not every student will demonstrate excellent work and take that fact into account during their site visit evaluations. Peer reviewers do expect students to show progress in knowledge, skills, and competencies. They also expect student performance will “demonstrate that the subject matter addressed in

each standard has been covered in the overall curriculum” (2011, pg 3) without defining how the program should address it.

Next Steps.

NFPA 1600 and EMAP are being revised for 2013. Once the revised standard is published, a committee will compare the Foundation’s standards against the new NFPA 1600 and EMAP, incorporating any applicable modifications. IAEM published the Principles of Emergency Management. Those principles will be incorporated into the indicators and guidance for the applicable standards. All changes will be briefed at the next FEMA Higher Education conference and published on the Foundation’s website (<http://www.ffhea.org>) for peer review. The Foundation’s officers expect this will be an ongoing process for continuous improvement.

The Foundation has evaluated a few university emergency management degree programs and will evaluate at least two more by the end of 2011. A couple more are scheduled for evaluation in 2012. Once these university programs are evaluated, and the standards finalized, a more formal process will be implemented. Then the Foundation plans to undergo its own specialized accreditation evaluation by the US Department of Education.

Conclusion

Developing these standards took a lot of work by a large number of academics, researchers and practitioners involved in emergency management. It has taken them six years to get to where we are today. It will take a few more years of testing and revision to finalize the standards and for the Foundation for Higher Education Accreditation itself to be accredited by the U.S. Department of Education. Then our vision of having an official organization to accredit university and college emergency management degree programs worldwide that had such humble beginnings way back in 2005 will be finally realized.

WORKS CITED

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