Creating an Emergency Management Honor Society

Epsilon Pi Phi Honor Society

9/22/2011

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Epsilon Pi Phi Honor Society

The field of emergency management has grown tremendously over the past decade as both a necessary profession and a discipline within college and university programs. Disasters such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11, hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the shooting at Virginia Tech have paved the way for much needed educational programs to focus on all hazards and proactive vs. reactive measures to keep our communities safer and more resilient.

Birth of an Idea

The Foundation for Higher Education Accreditation (FFHEA) was created by a group of dedicated emergency management professionals who recognized the need for structure, consistency and inclusion of real world knowledge in the programs that were being taught. An accreditation process was developed as a self-assessment tool for program directors and instructors to ensure students were given the education necessary to be successful in emergency management positions after graduation.

Epsilon Pi Phi (EPP) was established in 2006, as an enhancement to the FFHEA program. It was the result of a vision, by the late Craig Marks, to recognize, through an award, the dedication and successes of emergency management students and professionals in the programs that were being created, and hopefully, accredited. Our initial assessment of the idea was met with enthusiasm but also the realization that much research would be necessary in order to bring the idea to fruition.

Research and Unique Identity

Research concluded there was no active national honor society in Emergency Management/Homeland Security/Business Continuity for universities and college programs. There had only been one society established years prior as a collaborative effort between two universities, but it had not remained active and there was no interest
in further collaboration. This encouraged forward movement in creating our own honor society as an extension of the foundation. Additional research queried the structure of other honor societies, membership fees, names and logos in an effort to create our own identity, mission, purpose and goals.

Our identity needed to revolve around the idea of the new generation of emergency managers and education, and as such, the name needed to reflect that idea. We processed through several names and came to consensus on Epsilon Pi Phi as the acronym, EPP, would reflect “emergency preparedness professional”. Our vision was that EPP would be a foundation for excellence in the development of exceptional professional and academic leaders. Through several board meetings it was decided that the mission of Epsilon Pi Phi was to strive for the reward, advancement and recognition of emergency/continuity management and homeland security as a discipline and profession and to encourage a high standard of excellence in these related fields of practice and study.

We initially used the FFHEA logo, which is the Jefferson Memorial Building, and a reflection of President Thomas Jefferson, who founded the University of Virginia and was a proponent of life-long learning. We more recently moved towards a separate logo that represents the outline of Washington, D.C., the headquarters of the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA. We kept a link to the Foundation through keeping the Jefferson Memorial Building within the D.C. outline, but at an upward angle promoting future growth and the Greek letters for Epsilon Pi Phi on the right side of the building. The next step was developing by laws and a membership structure.

Students become members by applying through their local EPP Chapter, or absent one, through applying online to the National EPP Chapter at [http://www.ffhea.org](http://www.ffhea.org). The Chapters are operated by the faculty advisors and elected Chapter President. The national honor society has an honor society director/chair and assistant director with a treasurer that handles both FFHEA and EPP financial responsibilities. The EPP Honor Society
Executive Board guides the affairs of the organization, reviews honor society applications and determines policy.

**Membership and Achievement Levels**

Membership eligibility includes three classes: Student, Alumni and Honorary.

- Student members are further divided into two categories: undergraduate and graduate. Each category has specific academic requirements based on enrollment into a degree/certificate program within emergency management; number of semester hours completed within that program and a 3.5/Undergraduate or 3.75/Graduate GPA minimum. A letter of reference from an academic advisor or professor is also required when applying to the national honor society chapter. We accept applications three times during the year and provide a certificate to those who are invited into the honor society.

- Alumni members may apply through the same process as current students. There is a special category that recognizes those individuals who have contributed to the EM profession through employment, professional contributions, and/or as an active professional at the local, state or federal level.

- Finally there are Honorary members who have made significant contributions to the profession at any level of government, the private sector or educational institution. Honorary members can apply themselves or they can be nominated for invitation into the national chapter.

In order to assist members in pursuing the Certified Emergency Manager (CEM) certification in tandem with academic pursuits, the Silver and Gold level achievements were developed. The levels would recognize those students who were willing to go beyond the basic requirements, committing extra time and effort to their chosen field.

- The Silver Level has a minimum of disaster/emergency management training, general management training, volunteer time, participation in a significant community service project, and a contribution to the field of emergency management.
In order to achieve the Gold Level, the honor society member must have completed the silver level and then accomplished training in disaster/emergency and general management; completed 20 hours of volunteer time; accomplished an additional significant community project; complete a 1000-word essay, and contribute to the profession with two contributions as outlined in the EPP By-Laws. The training courses for both levels are FEMA Independent Study courses provided by the Emergency Management Institute (EMI). There is a 30 day waiting period between receiving recognition of the silver level and applying for the gold level.

**Chapter Membership**

Our long-term goal is to have chapters established at the majority of the colleges and universities that house emergency management programs. Chapters may be established within an accredited emergency management, homeland security or business continuity program meeting minimum requirements as outlined in the EPP By Laws. The Chapter Advisor will be responsible for verifying eligibility of students applying for membership. We will be pursuing recognition of an official honor society within the next year. We have most recently become an international honor society with the addition of the Canadian Chapter in the spring of 2011.

**Goals, Accomplishments and the Future**

Our initial goal was to recognize at least 100 students in the first few years and four chapters and to work towards becoming an official honor society after five years. We currently have more than 325 active members and eight chapters.

We have created a website, t-shirts, a challenge coin and provide graduation pins for members. The website was created to streamline the application process and to provide forms and information for the honor society. The t-shirts were made available to show pride in belonging to the honor society and a way to spread the word about EPP. Challenge coins, which started in World War I, with a military pilot, have become extremely popular with first responders. The coins are collected, traded and in some cases the coin can be earned meritoriously for a job well done. This was recognized as a fun way to prove a student’s commitment and excellence in academics. Most recently a
Facebook page was created to keep members in touch with each other and as a networking tool. Future goals are to become an officially recognized honor society, increase the executive board capabilities, increase both individual and chapter membership, provide a valuable website and provide additional opportunities to members.

The Epsilon Pi Phi honor society elevates emergency managers to a level of recognition in a profession that continues to evolve exponentially. Emergency management professionals are facing new challenges today, especially with the heightened vulnerability of various threats (cyber, agro, financial, etc.), which require not just experience but knowledge through education.