Higher Education and the Profession of Disaster Management:  
A Brief Commentary on Past, Current and Future Directions

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The editor of the International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters (IJMED) asked me to introduce the three papers by Oyola-Yemaie and Wilson, Phillips, and Falkiner. Having been involved for years with the issues of higher education and professionalization in disaster management, I happily agreed to her request. In this introduction, I first briefly describe these articles. Next, I provide some social context for these papers by briefly commenting on the profession and higher education about 15 years ago. Finally, I make a few remarks on the future.

All three papers relate to the intertwined efforts of the academy and the field of disaster management to create a profession. Oyola-Yemaie and Wilson’s paper outlines the three characteristics (i.e., structural formation, accreditation and certification) that must be present for any field to be considered a profession. They demonstrate that disaster management is heading toward becoming a profession, but has not fully reached that status. Both Phillips’ and Falkiner’s papers address a key component of professionalization: education. Phillips’ tackles two general questions. First, what do we call degree programs and second, what do we teach? Educators teaching disaster management have not reached consensus on either point. Whereas the first two papers focus on the United States, by contrast Falkiner’s paper provides a nice catalogue of recent higher education developments in Canada. Falkiner’s list of colleges and courses indicates that Canada seems close to creating a critical mass of higher education opportunities.

In my view, these papers reflect the continuing struggles of disaster management education and professionalization since the late 1980s. At that time, only one degree program in emergency management existed in the world. Having been faculty member with this program, I observed first hand the internal and external problems of legitimacy and program growth (Neal 2000).
Other similar undergraduate and graduate programs did not develop until the mid and late 1990s, and they continue to wrestle with these and other issues. During the late 1980s, The National Coordinating Council on Emergency Management (now know as the International Association of Emergency Managers or IAEMS) also initiated debate on developing the Certified Emergency Manager (CEM). As a member of the CEM committee, I can attest that the requirement of a college degree for a CEM became the hot issue during these meetings. This debate continues even today.

In a larger context, disaster management is not the first field to face these issues. Academic programs and professions such as criminology, public administration, human ecology, and women’s studies have certainly experienced similar problems related to legitimacy, curriculum development, appropriate name, and academic accreditation. Simply, disaster management will continue to search for an identity and niche. For example, Phillips’ paper highlights the many different names academic programs may have. Elsewhere, I have documented the conundrum that universities face regarding where to locate organizational undergraduate or graduate programs (Neal 2000).

These three papers focus on two countries in North America. However, events continue to highlight the need for professional and educated disaster managers throughout the world. We are fully aware of the growing impacts of disasters worldwide (Mileti 1999). A recent Swiss study documents that in 2004, 330 disasters worldwide resulted in over 300,000 lives lost, $50 billion (US) of insured losses, and total losses over $123 billion (US) (SwissRE 2005). Since its conception, IJMED has published special issues focusing on comparative issues on disaster research and disaster management (i.e., Aguirre, Coghlan and Scanlon 2002; Britton 1992a,b; Okabe and Hirose 1985; Trost and Hultäker1983). I recommend that within five years, this journal should have a special issue with a focus on international educational initiatives and professionalization.

In short, all three papers reflect the struggle we face both in the academy and in the profession. We are certainly much further along than we were fifteen to twenty years ago. Today we have multiple degree programs and a wide range of courses being taught in the United States, Canada and other countries. Professionally, IAEMs continues to credential new CEMs every year. Yet, we still are not sure what to call our academic field or even our profession, and we have little consensus on what we should teach. As other countries begin to develop their own academic programs, curricula and professions, they may see a confusing landscape from which to borrow ideas. Ultimately, they will have to develop their own specific criteria to meet their own societal and cultural needs.
References


