

By YOUNES MOURCHID, Ph.D.

# Where Public Safety Policy Meets Higher Education

American higher education has been recently in the midst of one of the most exciting and yet challenging periods in its history. Earning a college degree is climbing toward a universal expectation. At the same time, post-secondary education faces serious fiscal constraints and the urgency to reform its curricula and approach to learning and teaching. All of this is happening at a time of unprecedented international competition in knowledge-based economies increasingly focused on intellectual capital.

According to data recently released by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United States has slipped from first to seventh among industrialized nations in postsecondary attainment among 25 to 34 year olds. If there was ever a time for elected officials, educators, and the public to be focused on education beyond high school, it is now.

The history of the United States provides for ample evidence that the federal and state governments recognized they have a stake in public higher education. The government recognized that learning how to do things in engineering, in agriculture and in other areas in public institutions of higher education and the passing of this knowledge along to the public deserved federal financial and policy support. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 and other subsequent legislation such as the Smith-Lever Act and the Land-grant Act are convincing evidence of more than one hundred years of federal interest in cooperative efforts with the individual states in public higher education. Sometimes these have been combined efforts, sometimes unilateral. The idea that the benefits of education do not accrue solely to the individual recipient but to society as well is generally accepted, certainly by institutions of public higher education. The idea that democracy thrives in the environment of an enlightened electorate has been part of our heritage.

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With that as a background we can now proceed from the philosophical discussion of the symbiotic relationship between higher education and public policy to the discussion of a concrete case where such relationship plays out. It might be profitable to ask ourselves two elemental questions as a starting point of discussion:

1. Can higher education institutions influence public policy?
2. How does public policy in-kind influence higher education?

The Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education Consortium (FESHE) is a nascent body in the field of higher education; a field deemed the catalyst for moving the fire service from an occupation to a profession by operating on the basis of an elaborate National Professional Development Model which combines parallel and balanced tracks of training and higher

education to live up to the primary mission of the fire and emergency services.

The FESHE National Professional Development Model has been borrowed and even copied by many state fire marshal offices and institutions of higher education around the country for the purpose of reforming and revamping their training and education plans. As a case in point, the California State Fire Marshal Office recently completed its Strategic Plan known as Blue Print 2020, California State Fire Training and Education Plan 2008. The FESHE National Professional Development Model is incorporated in the plan as an elemental strategic goal and action item.

The plan Blue Print 2020 is a major shift in planning, as retired State Fire Marshal and chair of the State Training and Education Advisory Committee (STEAC) Ronny

Coleman comments, "The plan is a stop to master planning and the start of strategic planning." Chief Coleman continues, "The first attempt to create a plan for the training and education for fire protection in California was during the 1930s and various individuals and groups created plans in the intervening years. The current State Fire Training model dates back to 1971."

The circumstances that have instigated the need for reform and change in the California State Fire Training and Education resemble the variables which compel similar public safety organization to reform. Chief Mike Richwine, division chief of State Fire Training (SFT), elaborates further on these circumstances: "Blue Print 2020 arose from a need to update antiquated curricula and delivery methods as major shifts have taken place in fire and emergency services that changed the paradigm for training and education."

Chief Coleman affirms: "The 1971 model became obsolete and eventually led to system-wide failure. Many other states' fire service training programs moved forward while California's languished. Powerful shifts are occurring in our society and we must move quickly to take advantage of them. Now individuals have communications tools and information readily available, which open up enormous possibilities."

The second novelty of Blue Print 2020 is that its inception process involved various stakeholders and its lessons and guidelines were not limited to one or two specific organizations: "...the plan is for the whole fire service community and a collaboration of stakeholders has been involved in its development from the very foundation. The stakeholders come from the local, state, and federal fire service in California as well as career and volunteer fire fighters, fire chiefs, organized labor, training officers, and community college" (Blue Print 2020, page 4). In the words of Chief Coleman, "the plan seeks to build relationships and alliances with stakeholders in the public and private sectors."

On a collaboration platform, various stakeholders with the mediation of a professional consultant firm conducted an internal needs analysis and identified eight specific areas where improvement is imminent. These areas include, as outlined in Blue Print 2020 p.5, the following themes:

- **Quality Control** – There is a lack of accountability in the field and SFT does not have the staff to monitor instructors and training programs statewide.

- **Data Management** – Student, instructor and class information is stored in software that was not designed to hold the volume of data that SFT collects.

- **Outdated Curriculum** – The volume of courses offered through SFT is difficult to update and maintain as the information in each program changes.

- **Certification** – Security of certification exams is consistently breached. Many current certification standards are not competency based.

- **Continuing Education** – There is no requirement for firefighters, fire officers, chief officers or instructors to maintain their skill and knowledge through a comprehensive continuing education program.

- **Professional Development** – There is an increased demand and expectation for professional development training to meet the challenges of today.

- **Lack of Innovation** – The SFT system is unresponsive to change and does not utilize technology to its fullest advantage. Many SFT business processes can and should be automated.

- **Understaffing** – At a time when there are more people than ever relying on the system, SFT's inability to maintain a responsive level of staffing limits its ability for curriculum development, field review, and research and development of new programs.

These contingencies are not limited to the context of California, but are nationwide areas of concern and drivers for change and reform. However, the plan underlines the specificity and uniqueness of California situation: "...California is a large state both geographically and demographically. This fact makes it very difficult to develop consensus about the direction SFT should be taking. At the same time, there are national initiatives that threaten the California program but also show the way to take advantage of what others have done..." (Blue Print 2020, page 5).

As a response to the aforementioned challenges, Blue Print 2020 devised five strategic goals and actions plans in page 8 of the plan as follows:

1. **Quality Improvement** – Ensure the highest levels of service and quality by im-

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plementing an oversight program that ensures the qualifications, currency and accountability of all instructors and curriculum.

**2. National Professional Development Model** – Participate in the FESHE National Model of fire service training and education that includes an integrated, competency-based system of fire and emergency services professional development and an integrated system of higher education from a two-year associate degree to doctoral degrees.

**3. Capstone Testing** – Administer a comprehensive evaluation tool after a candidate completes all the requirements and applies for a position certificate. Capstone testing would replace the current system of administering a written certification exam at the end of each course in the certification track.

**4. State Fire Training Business Processes and Training Delivery** – Utilize a computer-aided training and education delivery system that includes appropriate distance learning and educational material, and the ability for participants to track and access completed training and certification records.

**5. California Public Safety Institute** – Create a unified system that integrates all public safety training and education toward a common mission. The crown jewel of this initiative is the envisioned all-risk California Public Safety Institute (a California equivalent of the federal National Emergency Training Center).

Of preponderant relevance to this discussion is goal and action item two: the National Professional Development Model shown on page 92. The model was developed by the National Fire

Academy and Fire and Emergency Higher Education Consortium to serve as a national model of fire service training and education around the country. The model is credited for helping move the fire and emergency services from an occupation to a profession and standardize higher education curricula.

The application of the model is expected to result in well-trained and academically educated fire and emergency services. The SFT intends to enter into partnerships with other states to ensure national recognition of educational achievement and training certification. In this regard, the SFT intends to form a partnership with like-minded national programs and create a common platform whereby accreditation follows national standards and national recognition and equivalency is attained. Plan Blue Print 2020 asserts, however, that “SFT will continue to be a leader in the innovation and development of standards, curricula, and new techniques particularly in those aspects of training unique to California” (page 11).

Chief Richwine elaborates further on the significance of following the National Professional Development Model: “The model will help us meet our strategic plan to professionalize the fire service in California, create a paradigm shift and a generational turn-over, and produce more educated personnel with more mechanical aptitudes and analytical competencies.”

The FESHE National Professional Development Model of fire service training and education can then be seen as a nexus linking and cementing efforts between public safety policy and operators of higher education in California. Both Chiefs Coleman and Richwine see the State Training and Education Advisory Committee as “a policy maker...” The National Fire Academy also sees its charge as a training and education policy maker. The institutions of higher education: community colleges and baccalaureate Degree at a Distance universities and colleges around the country which offer the FESHE curriculum are willing and committed participants in the FESHE National Professional Development Model of fire service training and education and thus have stake in such public safety policy. These higher education institutions participate at the level of providing valuable feedback and the services of subject matter experts back to policy makers as to how the model plays out in practice and reality.

The workings and the expected dynamics of this partnership are then evidence that higher education institutions have a streak of influence in the direction of public safety policy. Reciprocally, public policy making symbiotically has implications for higher education policy recommendation and implementation. To implement Blue Print 2020’s certain goals, especially goal and action two “FESHE National Professional Development Model of fire service training and education”, the California State Training & Education Advisory Committee (STEAC) will have to enroll and work closely with the 20-plus community colleges in California which offer an associate FESHE degrees and the one provider of the upper-division baccalaureate FESHE degree, Cogswell College. In kind, these colleges are behooved to align their strategic short and long term planning and processes with the recommendations made by Blue Print 2020. It is in this fashion that the vision Chief Coleman contemplates of “building and sustaining strategic alliances” will come to fruition and the fire and emergency services in California will thrive and be prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century and thus globalization.

A full copy of Blue Print 2020 is available at the website <http://osfm.fire.ca.gov/training/pdf/BP2020finaldraft0108>.





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