

Higher Ed Emergency Management

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Key Moment for Higher Education Emergency Managers.

Consider the role of the college or university emergency manager: it's an emergency management position that may involve leading a full-scale exercise one day, managing a Business Impact Assessment (BIA) the next, planning a Family Assistance Center or Emergency Dispensing Site and then staffing the EOC monitoring civil unrest— here in the States or abroad. What other Emergency Management role can offer so much variety and potential for innovation?

Emergency managers in higher education are also co-located with faculty experts in relevant areas such as homeland security, public health, emergency management, business continuity, international security, cyber security, meteorology, fire science, and other related fields. We have the benefit of proximity to knowledge makers and access to gifted interns who offer appreciated support while building their resumes.

Challenging Times

It has never been a more challenging—or rewarding— time to be a Higher Ed emergency manager. Threats and hazards continue to pose disruptions to university communities. Campuses must prepare for a whole host of calamities, including severe weather, power outages, flooding, fire, cyber threats, public health outbreaks, hazardous materials dangers, civil unrest, active threats, bomb threats, other crimes and more. What's different now is the range of threats and hazards as well as the potential for complex and cascading impacts.

We are now seeing an increasing frequency and complexity of disasters. Climate change has led to more frequent and severe weather events, while technological advancements have introduced new types of risks. This means emergency managers are constantly adapting and innovating to respond to these evolving challenges.

Community Engagement

Higher Ed emergency managers must engage with their communities. Getting the attention of busy university students is not easy and requires some creativity. Meeting students where they are involves devising social media contests, throwing movie nights, pizza parties and – a big favorite in New York City– providing free Boba Tea. Following the Emergency Management Accreditation Program Standard, we strive to prepare them for all named threats and hazards in the University Threat and Hazard Identification Risk Assessment.

Incident Command Goes to University

Higher Ed institutions are similar to small cities with their array of departments engaged in response activities to all hazards disruptions and populations of residential students in need of resources. Like businesses, universities must maintain business continuity planning. IHE's typically borrow from both public and private-sector guidance. The Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) Standard is useful for practitioners developing programs. Business Continuity practices reflective of ISO 22301 are useful for maintaining campus resilience. National Incident Management System (NIMS) guidance and apply Incident Command System structure in ways that make sense of the institutions.

Does an incident management system meant for fighting wildfires apply to university settings? It won't without some adapting. And that customization will necessarily vary institution to institution. NYU, for example, incorporated project management workstreams on a level between the Policy Group and Incident Command Structure. For this enterprise with 15 global sites and well over 200 buildings and leased spaces in New York City alone worked well. Other universities may tweak ICS in different ways. University emergency managers work with campus partners to determine the best path forward, keeping in mind NIMS principles.

Future Growth

The field is growing steadily. The International Association of Emergency Managers' Universities and Colleges Caucus boasts a membership of 450 and that number is climbing. At the last UCC Symposium, roughly 2/3rds of the over 100 higher ed emergency managers gathered reported that they were new to Higher Ed emergency management. At this year's Annual Symposium, the UCC is offering a Boot Camp for those new to the field of higher ed emergency management to meet the demand of new entrants into the field.

With new challenges on the horizon, higher ed emergency managers are poised to help connect the rich resources of universities—scholars, students, and spaces—with the larger emergency management field. We are able to link our faculty scholarship with real-world projects in the community. We employ students and can help refer students seeking internships in public and private sector settings. We are also a go-to for any requests public sector emergency managers may have regarding campus spaces or other resources. We are very happy to work with FEMA and our city and state public sector counterparts.

Anyone interested in knowing more about the IAEM Universities and Colleges Caucus or anything mentioned in this article may email me at AMcLaughlin@NYU.EDU or UCC@IAEM.Com.