

Firefighting and degrees: Does higher education matter?

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The Butcher's Bill
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There's been a great deal of debate as of late regarding higher education in the fire service, its value and its impact both positive and negative.

A [recent article](#) decried the hiring of a chief officer who didn't have a "higher" education. I put the higher in quotes because I'm not always sure what the education is higher than.

My father and grandfather (and many cousins and uncles) were career firefighters and I was one of the first in my family to go to a four-year college for a Bachelor of Arts degree.

My father would often ask me (because he was paying a lot of money for me to go to school), "So, what are you going to do again with this degree?"

I had to constantly remind him that my degree was not a vocational degree, not a trade school, but that his money wasn't being wasted.

He will now tell you he was very glad I went to school as that's where I met my wife. But I can see how it is difficult to determine the value of something like a bachelor's degree.

In the end what I learned was how to learn. That is, I learned how to pick up a book on just about any subject, listen to some lectures and then do it.

That ability, the ability to learn, does have great value to me and my employers, both past and present, when I've used it.

It has been very helpful for me to pick up apparatus manuals and learn the inner workings to develop pump operations and aerial operations programs for my fire department.

But; at the same time, I doubt anyone in my fire department cares two hoots if I have a higher education degree.

At the same time there are many who place much too much emphasis on the diplomas of colleges and national, state or local classes without understanding their role in the education of a fire officer or firefighter.

Learning is almost always a worthwhile endeavor for the individual, but it doesn't mean that all learning brings value to the organization.

Too often, because members don't understand the mission or goals of their organization, they quickly embrace or dismiss higher education.

I was told once that running laps is a lazy coach's way of filling in practice time. In the same way, I think adoption of some classroom training is chosen by fire service administrators as an easy way out.

Instead of looking at the needs of your organization, you just require the following classes and move on.

Many would say that there's no need for higher education in our industry. That fire suppression is a trade, pure science and as such can be taught in trade schools and fire academies, or institutions of higher learning.

Others will claim that fire suppression is art, that cannot be taught in school but only on the "back step" or by the saltier senior members of the squad. I like to think it's a mixture of both.

I met a great group of training officers a few weeks ago. We discussed the mixture of art and science in the fire service.

And I mentioned that if you had the chance of having two different plumbers work on your house; one was very capable, had come out of a training academy and knew how to perform the steps necessary to perform the job, the other had the same training, but had received a degree in engineering, understood the chemical reactions in the work he did, understood both how the plumbing worked and why it worked; which would you want to work on your house?

All indicated they wanted the second.

I believe, at the end of the day, that that is the value of higher education for our industry. Learning the strategy, tactics and tasks cannot come solely from a book.

You have to jump in the seat (as we're not allowed on the back step any longer) and get your hands dirty. But having a degree allows you to learn even more, at a faster pace.

For some of us higher education and additional training allows you to get more out of the experience. Some of us simply had to learn how to learn.

Source: <http://www.firerecruit.com/articles/1169465-Firefighting-and-degrees-Does-higher-education-matter>