

# PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES

A space for colleagues to contribute expert insights and perspectives on key industry trends.



## IMPORTANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



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The fire service has long been regarded as a profession rooted in skill, courage, and community trust. Yet, as society's expectations evolve, so too must the professional development of those working in Fire and Emergency Services. Modern challenges—ranging from increasingly complex fire behavior, hazardous materials, terrorism threats, climate change, and wildland-urban interface fires—require a workforce that not only excels in tactical operations but also demonstrates leadership, critical thinking,

and evidence-based decision making. Higher education is central to meeting these demands, and the partnership between State Fire Training and the California Community College (CCC) system provides an ideal pathway for firefighters to advance their education while honoring the value of their professional experience.

The CCC system, the largest higher education network in the nation, is uniquely positioned to support fire and emergency services professionals. Its accessibility, affordability, and statewide reach allow firefighters in every region to pursue coursework that enhances their technical expertise while strengthening administrative and leadership competencies. Established fire

technology programs offer foundational instruction in fire behavior, prevention, incident command, and public administration. However, the system's true strength lies in its ability to create clear career ladders, linking associate degrees with transfer pathways to the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems. This academic continuum promotes long-term professional growth from firefighter to fire officer, chief officer, and ultimately, executive leadership roles.

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Several institutions already demonstrate how this model advances the profession. Cal Poly Humboldt proudly welcomes firefighting professionals each semester into its Leadership Studies Bachelor's Degree Completion Program. At the graduate level, UC San Diego is developing a Master's Degree modeled after State Fire Training's Executive Chief Officer Program, bridging advanced leadership skills with academic recognition. Additionally, the California Community Colleges Baccalaureate Degree Program (BDP) has expanded opportunities by offering applied bachelor's degrees at the community college level. For example, San Diego Miramar College

recently launched the state's first Bachelor of Science in Public Safety Management, with emphasis areas in Emergency Management, Emergency Medical Services, and Modern Policing—designed for students who have already completed associate degrees in related fields.

A key innovation supporting firefighter advancement is **Credit for Prior Learning (CPL)**. Firefighters acquire extensive knowledge and skill through California State Fire Marshal certifications, National Fire Academy coursework, agency-based academies, and CAL-JAC apprenticeship programs. Historically, this training did not translate directly into college credit, often leading to discouragement and unnecessary duplication of effort. CPL addresses this challenge by formally recognizing certifications, training records, and documented skills as equivalent to college-level coursework. For instance, completion of the Fire Officer certification sequence may yield articulated credit toward fire technology or public safety management degrees. This not only accelerates academic progress but also reduces costs and validates the professionalism of fire service training.