

Career Series Articles

Climbing the career ladder in fire science ... by degrees

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It takes a special person to pursue a career in fire fighting and emergency rescue services. It requires a person with physical and emotional resilience, technical training and skill, and the willingness and ability to live with the threat of exposure to dangerous conditions and hazardous situations — all to help others in need.

James Misora has nearly seven years with Jacksonville Fire and Rescue Department (JFRD) as a firefighter and emergency medical technician (EMT). Part of the week he resides at his home, the rest of the time he resides, day and night, at Station 22 on Jacksonville's Westside.

Prior to joining JFRD, Misora was a self-employed carpenter. He considered switching careers when he was working alongside another carpenter, who happened to be a chief with JFRD. He started spending time at the station as a volunteer, in part because he enjoyed the camaraderie, but more importantly it fulfilled a need he discovered in himself.

"I like to help people who really need help," Misora simply explained.

In the search for people who really need help, a good place to be is on the receiving end of a 911 call, of which JFRD receives plenty.

By Misora's estimate, the majority, possibly more than 85 percent, of calls he responds to on his shifts are for emergency medical services. He says those run the gamut from auto accidents, falls, heart attacks and diabetic reactions to severely stubbed toes and everything in between. Other times, the calls are for fires. He is interested in a career step up into a position as an arson investigator, usually considered a management position.

To apply for employment with JFRD, Misora not only had to be trained, but was also required to be state certified in Florida as a firefighter and EMT or paramedic. Misora received his training at the Northeast Regional Fire Science Academy at Florida Community College at Jacksonville, one of nearly 30 certified training centers throughout the state.

The academy at FCCJ South Campus offers a certificate program, Fire Fighter I and II Certification that prepares students for entry-level employment as firefighters in the state of Florida. FCCJ also offers an associate in applied science degree in Fire Science that includes firefighter training, but steps the training up a degree to prepare students for fire officer training equivalent to Fire Officer I.

With few exceptions, JFRD does not require academic degrees for promotion (according to its Web site). However, there are several reasons one might consider pursuing an associate or even a bachelor's degree.

"The state of Florida and the city of Jacksonville offer financial incentives for pursuing further education. More importantly, since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 a national trend in fire fighting and emergency preparedness has emerged," said Fire Science Program Manager Debra Mertz, Ph. D.

"Knowledge in new areas such as hazardous materials and chemical preparedness could be critical in the event of catastrophic events," she said. "Fire science technologies have become so complex that traditional fire service skills may not be adequate. The growing seaport and airport require emergency preparedness unique to their functions. Additionally, the management of such expanded responsibilities thrust upon first responders, including interagency coordination, is pushing the trend toward advanced degrees for those in leadership roles."

Recognizing the complexities of managing a disaster such as 9/11, the U.S. Fire Administration and National Fire Academy recommend that those in management positions have a bachelor's degree.

FCCJ has instituted a new degree program to address the need for those technical and management skills. The Bachelor of Applied Science in Fire Science Technology is FCCJ's first bachelor degree to be approved by the State Board of Education and regional accrediting agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. It is one of the few community college programs in the nation and the only one in Florida that provides traditional classroom instruction within this degree field, according to South Campus Workforce Dean Richard Nelson.

Students in this limited-access program complete an associate degree in the first two years, then proceed to upper level courses that prepare them with the skills needed to manage fire and rescue services that present and future needs dictate. The curriculum is based on the model of the National Fire Academy, ensuring not only relevant, quality instruction, but a degree that is portable. Classes are scheduled to accommodate the demanding schedule of those in fire and rescue careers, such as Misora.

For more information about Fire Science degrees at FCCJ, including the bachelor of applied science, call Debra Mertz at 904.646.2180.

*Tuition and fees are subject to change by action of the College's District Board of Trustees. Current tuition and fees will be posted at the time of registration.