

# Is Higher Education and a College Degree Achievable? Yes!

By Fire Marshal Matthew Donnelly

**T**houghts of achieving a college degree probably have crossed the minds of many adults. Like many others, I pondered this very same notion. Parts of the issue—as with so many others—are self-imposed, pre-conceived barriers, such as time, expense, work and family commitments. Another obstacle could be someone of influence—through no fault of his/her own—mistakenly drawing conclusions based on false information and offering no encouragement because a benefit was not evident to him/her. Do not be discouraged. I was always looking for educational opportunities and even ventured a time or two into taking the first steps of inquiry and further evaluation, but to no avail.

Colleges, like schools of thought, are plentiful. The search for the right school is a struggle, much like the strenuous task of enlightenment; out of the darkness and into the light, as the philosopher Plato put it. Mistakes and missteps were made along the way, but in retrospect, they served as learning opportunities to better position myself to recognize the right opportunity best suited for me. The constant awareness of this pursuit served my inquiring mind well when the right program seemed to jump off the page at me while browsing the FDNY Internet page—*Educational Opportunity, Empire State College Emergency Management Residency Program*. This notification seemed to be the opportunity for which I was searching.

What seemed to be the educational opportunity I was looking for evolved into a great experience. The process began simply by getting involved, making phone calls, visiting the location and registering. I soon learned how important higher education is to the FDNY. So important, in fact, that tuition reimbursement is afforded to members, thus emphasizing and encouraging participation. The FDNY provided guidance and counsel to initiate and complete degree aspirations. I'm extremely grateful to the FDNY college advisor/registrar for guidance and commitment to embark and continue to follow through on earning a college degree.

After enrollment, I encountered great professors. They served as catalysts for my enthusiasm in the Emergency Management

Residency Program. All the professors possessed unique skills and the classes were interesting, thought-provoking and challenging and, upon completion, very gratifying. There is even a writing coach, who assists with writing papers. The location, setting and my fellow students created an environment for growth and learning.

After matriculation, I was assigned a mentor/professor—also a New York City Fire Department Battalion Chief—who provided me with advice and mapped out a doable degree completion program. He explained in detail, by referencing my transcripts, the road to degree completion. The transcripts provided information on college credits earned at various academic institutions, as well as college credit recommendations earned from courses completed through FDNY. The process consisted of core curriculum classes, foundational lower graduate classwork and advanced work.



Finally, there was the area of concentration classes. Every student is different, which is why it is so important to sit down and closely look at credits earned and how they can be applied to a personal path to degree completion. I was pleased to learn that my language requirement had been fulfilled



and I would not have to take French again. *Je ne parle pas Francais*, which means, I do not speak French. This plan was individualized for me and I'm sure if you undertake this journey, you will find what's singular to you at the college of your choice.

It wasn't until I participated in the FDNY 15-week Fire Criminal Investigator Course, evaluated by National College Credit Recommendation Service (NCCRS), that I understood the whole process. This and many other FDNY courses have been evaluated for college-level credit recommendations and may be used as transfer credit at approximately 1,500 colleges in the United States. (See [www.nationalccrs.org](http://www.nationalccrs.org))

If you are considering going back to school and pursuing a college degree, I hope you seriously consider this worthy goal. It is achievable. There are programs and people in place that/who can help you along the way. I can assure you that as you work toward attaining a degree at an institution of higher education, the people you meet along the way toward degree completion will help you meet that goal. ■

## References

1. "The Path to Advancement: A Look at the FDNY and John Jay College Education Program," by then-Deputy Assistant Chief Ronald R. Spadafora, in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/2007 issue of *WNYF*.
2. "Scholarships Aplenty Funded by the FDNY Foundation," in the 1<sup>st</sup>/2011 issue of *WNYF*.
3. "Educational Opportunities Supported by CTDP," *DiamondPlate*, elevated January 25, 2018.



## About the Author

Fire Marshal Matthew Donnelly has served the FDNY since 1999. He is assigned to the Bureau of Fire Investigation (BFI)/Special Operations Command (SOC) Training Unit as an Instructor/mentor to new Fire Marshals. Prior assignments include Ladder 26 and Engine 46. He holds a BS degree in Public Affairs/Emergency Management from SUNY Empire State College and is a qualified Fire Instructor, Levels I and II. This is his first article for *WNYF*.