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Alum, UAPI collaborate on degree program at FIU

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Center for Homeland Defense and Security master's degree graduate Ruben D. Almaguer has played a key role in spreading the Center's educational multiplier effect with a newly established graduate degree program in disaster management at Florida International University (FIU).

The FIU master's degree program began classes August 15 with 42 students. Almaguer utilized the resources of the Center's [University and Agency Partnership Initiative \(UAPI\)](#) in establishing the program and crafting its curriculum.

"I wanted to make this program and curriculum a little different from other existing programs," Almaguer said during a recent interview. "With the assistance of UAPI and FIU's Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs, we created a program that partners with local, state and federal agencies as well as international disaster organizations, to educate the next generation of disaster practitioners. We designed this program in many ways like CHDS."

The course will be taught within the school's Academy for International Disaster Preparedness.

"When I first visited FIU and met with the various constituents, their enthusiasm for supporting the community and getting this program established was very clear," Supinski said. "That coupled with Ruben's drive, leaves no doubt this program will thrive and be of the highest quality. I'm glad CHDS/UAPI has been able to play a strong role in this effort."

FIU uses the cohort model that requires disaster management students to complete 10 specific courses, nine of which were developed in collaboration with UAPI. One significant difference from other programs is that rather than writing a final thesis, students will be expected to participate in a multi-day full scale disaster field exercise to utilize the concepts and skills taught throughout the year.

"In the final course, the field operations course, students will examine the broad spectrum of complex issues that arise during an international disaster," Almaguer noted. "Throughout the program students will learn how international humanitarian disaster assistance works. They will then be deployed and evaluated during a multiple day simulated international disaster scenario in the middle of the Florida Everglades and coastal islands. This course emphasizes critical decision making and practical hands-on skills needed during real disasters. The environment will be austere and include day and night operations. The students will interface with local and federal agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and elected officials. We believe this will be an excellent opportunity to test what they've learned from the past year's curriculum."

The multidisciplinary degree also allows Almaguer to draw faculty from other FIU units, including the College of Public Health and Social Work and College of Medicine to teach coursework in environmental and public health. In selecting faculty, Almaguer sought to address the practitioner-academic debate that ripples throughout homeland security/emergency management education community.

"As an academically rigorous graduate program, the Academy will facilitate students' learning by balancing educated and experienced domestic and international disaster practitioners with the appropriate complement of FIU faculty with doctorate degrees. We've taken this approach because some courses simply cannot be taught by faculties who have never responded to a disaster," Almaguer explained. "I didn't want to have a program with only professors who



may never have operated in a disaster environment, but may have published extensively on the subject. We also did not want the program taught solely by practitioners with no formal higher education.”

The launch of the program caps a nearly three-year process of obtaining various approvals and support from the local first responder community, university officials and committees, state education officials and the Florida Board of Trustees and Florida Board Governors.

In addition to building a quality program there was an eye on keeping the program affordable to those interested in pursuing a graduate education. Tuition is priced at \$24,995, on the low end of most advanced graduate offerings at FIU and other universities. As one of the most affordable graduate programs at FIU, tuition includes university administrative fees, parking fees and textbooks. The program affordability was one of the top five reasons why students applied for the program.

As for the inaugural cohort, 95 percent of the students are currently employed, largely working in the ranks of law enforcement, fire service, private sector and the armed forces. For an occupation notably dominated by white males, almost half – 46 percent – of the students are Hispanic, 27 percent are African American and 38 percent of the cohort is female.

“The lack of diversity in the disaster management profession is something we’re trying to address at FIU,” Almaguer said. “We put forth a strong effort to recruit a diverse group of students for the first cohort in terms of experience as well as gender and ethnicity. We will continue to do so in future cohorts.”

Almaguer’s unexpected path to academia took root during his more than 20 year career with Miami-Dade Fire Rescue. “I’m a firm believer in higher education,” Almaguer said. I believe it’s important to grow intellectually and develop the skills and knowledge to be successful. Education is also a great way to connect with some of the best and brightest people in the country. That’s why I jumped at the opportunity to attend CHDS. Almaguer graduated CHDS in 2006. His thesis was “Miami-Dade County’s Response Capabilities to a ‘Dirty Bomb’ Attack at the Port of Miami.”

A year after graduating CHDS, Almaguer was appointed deputy director to the Florida Division of Emergency Management. He led response and recovery operations during 17 federally declared disasters in Florida over the past 32 years. At present, he serves as the Assistant Vice President of Disaster Management and Emergency Operation and Executive Director of the Academy for International Disaster Preparedness at FIU.

He credits the CHDS experience with enhancing his analytical, research and writing skills. He strongly believes that there is a role for higher education in the disaster management field.

“My primary objective is to ensure that the next generations of disaster practitioners have the knowledge and practical skills needed for employment, promotions and overall success. I will continue to rely on CHDS to help me navigate this program and position it as one of the top international disaster management programs in the country,” Almaguer said.

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