Ethical issues in the provision of fire, rescue, and emergency medical services (EMS) are complex and challenging. No other government services are granted the same degree of public trust. Fire and EMS personnel are routinely allowed to enter private homes, business, and public assemblies without the slightest bit of hesitation. These personnel are allowed to search through homes and businesses. They are allowed to open purses, wallets, and briefcases to search for identification and other vital information. Emergency medical treatment routinely requires the removal of clothing and the exposure of children, adolescents and adults. Fire and EMS professionals are expected to perform these duties with a high degree of honesty and integrity. According to Lewis and Gilman (1997), public service is marked by a higher standard; not as a differentiation of morality but that the public’s expectation is that general ethical standards will be fulfilled meticulously by public servants exhibiting unassailable integrity.

The provision of fire, rescue, and emergency medical services also presents some unique challenges to the administrators in this field. Fire and EMS administrators must hold their personnel to a high level of accountability. They must be good stewards of public funds. They must be mindful of protecting their customer’s right to privacy and confidentiality. And, they must do this all with the degree of transparency and openness that the public demands from their government.

Fire and EMS professionals are often in dire need of guidance and direction with regard to ethics. Professional literature routinely acknowledges the controversies surrounding fire, rescue, and emergency medical services. Most of this literature is directed at the legal aspects and very little addresses the area of ethics. Professional literature also acknowledges that there is seldom a single, correct course of action. In
response to this Arizona State University has created two courses that address this issue.

The first course, Applied Ethics in Fire & EMS, is an upper division undergraduate course. The overall purpose of this course is to increase the student’s proficiency in making ethical decisions in the provision of emergency services. Students discover how to consider problems in terms of their ethical implications. They also learn a model for making ethical decisions.

The course begins with an introduction to ethics. This gives students grounding in the field of ethics and provides them with a lexicon to discuss issues in ethical terms. Students are introduced to the concepts of ethics, morals and values, applied ethics, and normative ethics. Time is spent exploring the Six Pillars of Character (Josephson, 2002). The six pillars of character are based on the philosophy that there are basic values that define ethical behavior. These values are not political, religious, or culturally biased; making them very applicable to government service. Students learn that actions are an expression of character and that everyone who makes a decision relies on their own ethical code. Individual thoughtfulness is the key to ethical behavior.

Students are then taught the five principles of public service ethics (Josephson, 2005). These principles are 1) safeguarding the public interest, 2) using independent, objective judgment, 3) being publicly accountable, 4) leading with citizenship, and 5) showing respectability and fitness for duty.

A key component of this course is helping students to further their ability to make ethical decisions. They learn five ethical principles that should guide ethical decisions: autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, fidelity, and justice (Jue & Eversole, 2000). It is within this component that students learn the role of professional codes of conduct. Most fire departments and EMS agencies have a professional code of conduct. In addition there are professional codes of conduct for firefighters, fire chiefs, and emergency medical technicians. These codes of conduct define acceptable behavior, promote high standards of practice, and create the framework for professional behavior and responsibilities (McDonald, 2000).

Students are taught a method for framing ethical issues. They learn that the law is the minimum standard for professional behavior. The next level of guidance is provided by their agency’s policies and procedures. Codes of conduct set a higher standard for behavior; they also reflect the values of their profession. If professional ethical responsibilities and the
law are in conflict, using an ethical decision making model is the best way to resolve the situation. An ethical decision making model is also useful when our own beliefs, professional judgment, duty to the public, agency policies, and or the law are in conflict. It is also helpful when we have conflicting values within ourselves (Jue & Eversole, 2000).

Once students have gained a foundation they are challenged to apply their skills to a variety of ethical situations. In the area of public administration, students wrestle with the issues of public trust, stewardship of public funds, accountability, gifts and gratuities, and transparency in government. Perhaps one of the more challenging areas that students are asked to apply these skills is that of fire suppression. Firefighters are all taught to risk their lives in a highly calculated and controlled manner to save a human life. They will risk their lives a little, in a highly calculated and controlled manner, to protect savable property. They will not risk their lives at all to save a life or property that is already lost (Brunacini, 1985). Although this thinking with regard to risk is common in the fire service, it is not often analyzed with regard to ethics. Students struggle with the question of whether we sometimes risk more than we should to save a life.

The ethics of emergency medical services represents an interesting convergence of medical ethics and public service ethics. Students must learn medical ethics and frame them within the confines of what is expected of public safety professionals. Students are asked to consider the triage of patients in terms of its ethical implications. Standard protocols exist for making decisions about who receives treatment first, who must wait, and whose injuries are so severe that they are left to die. Firefighters and EMS professionals are asked to make these types of decisions on a daily basis. Yet they rarely give pause to contemplate the utilitarianism that is inherent in these protocols.

Students must also confront the issues of patient modesty and patient confidentiality. The public has the expectation that they will be treated with dignity and respect when receiving emergency medical treatments. Standard practice sometimes requires the removal of clothing to do a thorough medical assessment. Are there any ethical implications when this has to be done in a public location? Have we made an ethical lapse if we do not take steps to maintain the privacy and dignity of patients?

Search and rescue operations is another area that is full of ethical questions. Although there are standard procedures for conducting search and rescue, students are once again challenged to examine these
procedures in terms of ethics. How are decisions made regarding the type and scope of search and rescue operations? Are they determined by the needs of the family, by the public good, or by budgetary considerations? A particularly demanding question for students is trying to determine the duration of search and rescue operations. At what point should a search be discontinued? At what point does the operation change from search and rescue to body recovery? There are also strong ethical implications for the handling of deceased patients and for conducting body recovery operations. Students must balance public safety and public health concerns with the needs of the family and the needs of the professionals conducting the recovery. Cultural diversity issues are a major component of this unit. Different cultures have vastly different expectations with regard to the care of the deceased. How do fire and EMS professionals meet those needs and still provide service that meets the needs of the public and provides for the safety of those professionals involved in the operation?

The second course, Fire Service Ethics & Professionalism, is taught at the graduate level. This course focuses on the ethical challenges of fire and emergency medical service leadership and refining command presence. The course assists students in developing ethical decision making and behavior, creating an ethical climate within a fire department or EMS agency, and portraying the image of a fair and ethical leader.

Creating an ethical climate within a fire department or EMS agency is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks for fire and EMS administrators. At the same time it is also one of the most imperative; for the success of any public safety agency rests with its ability to conduct itself in an ethical and responsible manner. Sadly, headlines announcing scandal and corruption remind us that this task is often overlooked.

Craig Johnson (2009) tells us that the leader of any organization should also be its chief ethics officer. Leaders are largely responsible for creating the ethical climate of their department. Followers look to leaders as role models for ethical behavior. Social learning theory states that via observational learning of the social actors in their environment, employees will emulate the values, attitudes, and behaviors of their leaders. As fire departments and EMS agencies face ethical problems, how they are resolved affects the overall culture of the organization. These resolutions determine what members believe is right or wrong and it shapes their ethical decision making.

Students in this course learn how to take their agency through a process to discover its core ideology. The core ideology reflects the main
identity for a fire department or EMS agency. The core ideology consists of an agency’s core values and its mission statement. Everyone in the department should be involved in the identification of core values and mission statement. The mission statement should seek to inspire employees to adopt the core values (Johnson, 2009).

One of the most common ethics tools that a fire department or EMS agency can use is a code of conduct. A code of conduct describes an agency’s ethical stance to its members and to the public. It also provides a frame of reference and gives guidance to new employees. The code of conduct should also encourage members to engage in ethical behavior. The code can also be used as an important public relations tool (Johnson, 2009).

An ethical EMS agency or fire department should also undertake a process of continuous ethical improvement. Every department or agency can improve in the area of ethics and agencies should engage in the practice of risk management where ethics are concerned. Members should receive training and continuing education in ethics. Leaders should be mindful of the fact that change creates new opportunities for unethical behavior to begin (Kuczmarski & Kuczmarski, 1996).

Just as in the undergraduate course, graduate students learn the foundations of ethical decision making and ethical behavior. In addition to the six pillars of character (Josephson, 2002), students also learn the components of moral action (Rest, 1994). They learn that ethical behavior is the product of moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral motivation, and moral character. Ethical sensitivity can be increased through looking at multiple perspectives, using ethical terminology, and increasing the intensity of ethical issues. Moral judgement can be improved by creating an environment that creates ethical role models and provides continuing education in ethics. Moral motivation is provided by rewarding ethical behavior (Johnson, 2009).

Students learn the importance of using models and guidelines for making ethical decisions. They are exposed to a number of models including Kidder’s Ethical Checkpoints (Kidder, 1995), Nash’s Twelve Questions (Nash, 1981), The SAD Formula (Day, 2003), and the case study method. Students learn that the model they choose is not as important as taking a systematic approach. They learn that it is important to have correct information and to get the facts straight, that creativity is vital to making ethical decisions, and that action is the ultimate test of ethical leadership (Johnson, 2009). They are encouraged to use their gut
feelings as a final check to determine if the course of action they have selected is the best one.

One of the most important components of the graduate course is the focus on the leader’s character. Character is integral to effective leadership. It often makes the difference between success and failure as a leader. Students are encouraged to explore their own values and examine them in the light of effective leadership. They are taught to strive for consistency, but also taught to expect contradictions and inconsistencies in their own character and in the character of others. Hardships and adversities are to be expected, they should be viewed as opportunities to develop one’s character and to further leadership abilities. Students are taught that a clear vision will help them to stay on track, to adopt habits that will aid in the development of character, and to never underestimate the power of a good example (Johnson, 2009). Perhaps Thomas Paine (1776) said it best when he stated, “Character is much easier kept than recovered.”

Student reaction to these two courses has been overwhelmingly positive. The undergraduate course has filled each time it has been offered. During course evaluations, one student made the comment that the most valuable part of the course was that it had real life applications that extended beyond the workplace. The graduate course has proved to be equally popular. One student commented that it was the most important course taken during the graduate program. Another student shared that in the twenty years he had been taking college courses on fire and EMS, this was the first time he had ever studied ethics.

Fire departments and EMS agencies are institutions with a long history and tremendous lore. Arizona State University hopes that by creating these two courses, we are able to have a positive impact on the fire and EMS services. It is our hope that by teaching ethics to the current and future leaders of these services that the stories and lore of these services can continue to bring honor and distinction to the professions.
REFERENCES


