Introduction and Background

On January 9 – 10, 2015, the Utah Fire and Rescue Academy (UFRA) conducted a fire training school in St. George, Utah. Winter Fire School (WFS) is an annual event that has evolved in scope and size. It is considered to be one of the largest of its type in the nation. Beginning 16 years ago with just three formal classes and less than 100 students and instructors combined; WFS has grown to more than 79 classes and over 1000 students, instructors, and support staff. WFS also boasts a large vendor show which includes demonstrations with state of the art firefighting, rescue, and emergency medical response equipment. The vendor show has grown from just a few local fire equipment dealers to more than 45 vendors representing many major fire, rescue, safety, and EMS equipment sales and service companies from throughout the United States.

Purpose and Goal

The Director of UFRA recognizes the value of WFS as a critical mission needed to support the firefighters of Utah. The majority (49.2%) of the students attending this year’s fire school were comprised of volunteer firefighters with 3.8% serving part-time, 0.1% non-affiliated, and 15.09% was made up of career/full time firefighters. Of special note was that 31.9% of those completing surveys chose not to fill in their affiliation. WFS is designed to reach a diverse audience and has become a staple in providing critical hands-on skills training at the basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of firefighting. WFS planners must balance the appropriate level of firefighting training in developing objectives and the type of classes offered. Each year experts from throughout the entire U.S. are invited to conduct courses at Winter Fire School to provide Utah firefighters with the newest techniques, trends, tools and equipment to increase their overall capabilities. The ancillary benefit of inviting nationally recognized leaders in the Fire Service has led to new relationships at the professional and personal levels. Based upon formal surveys, WFS is a proven method to exchange vital information regarding the new trends in fire/rescue, safety procedures, proper use of equipment, and “best practice” application of incident management.

It is expected that UFRA will strive to meet the growing demands and needs of all firefighters by providing the most cost effective and state-of-the-art training available. In an effort to anticipate and meet future demands, UFRA is constantly seeking ways to improve WFS. To accomplish this, UFRA measures the effectiveness of WFS by conducting formal evaluations. A baseline scoring threshold for all
courses combined has been set at 95%. This scoring threshold was determined by evaluating the overall quality of WFS as documented by students and instructors. Scoring values are used to measure the quality of classes, type of classes offered and the quality of the instructors. WFS survey forms also include an evaluation of facilities used for training and the overall support provided by UFRA personnel and staff. In identifying goals and objectives for next year, various factors exist to help steer the planning team. The following is a short list of discussion points for the planning phase of WFS.

1) Logistical support

• Moving equipment and props.
  o Rearrangement of live fire props into a central, off site location appears to be a success and it is anticipated that this will be the operational choice for 2016 and beyond.
• If larger classes that require logistical support (vent tactics, extrication) are conducted, then logistical support will need to be increased.
  o Additional staffing would be required to build modular areas or “pits” for these types of classes.
• Storage of WFS items
  o Can the Dixie Applied Technology Center be utilized to store some of the logistical items?
• Maintaining support during fire school
  o May need to continue with temporary staffing at the administrative and logistical functional areas of fire school.

2) Venue location and class size

• If some classes are changed in order to allow more students, will there be enough local hotels to support an increase? Is that a concern of the planning team?
• Convention Center will continue to support some of the hands-on classes but need to rearrange in order to accommodate larger classes and yet not disrupt those nearby.
• Keeping operational venues in close proximity was recommended by many of the students and instructors.

3) Cost of supporting expanded venues and increasing number of students

• This year’s fire school remained within the proposed budget and if we need to increase class sizes in 2016, will the cost be manageable?
• Students continue to place the highest demand on hands-on training and venues that are in close proximity. Considering the budget, are we able to grow the logistical, venue support?
4) Training event at 2.5 or 3 days / Increase Modular Unit Delivery

- Fire school objectives have to be written and match the time allotted however, should some classes be extended in length?
- Approximately 14.6% or 144 of those surveyed this year indicated that the classes were too short.
- Should a selection of 4 hour classes be limited to lesson plans that can be accomplished completely within 4 hours?
- Can we increase the number of classes, reduce the standby list, and maintain a 95% success rate with 4 or 8 hour blocks of training?
- Application of modular training may increase the number of students in a particular class but logistical support requirements increase significantly to apply this type of training.

Summary

WFS 2015 proved to be another very successful event. Overall student numbers continue to increase, as well as vendor participation. Student enrollment was approximately 800 and was supported by an excellent cadre of instructors from throughout Utah and the United States. We are honored and humbled by the high attendance and recognize the commitment by both attendees and exhibitors. We continue to develop new strategies to address the growing numbers while still maintaining the delivery of high quality training classes, which are heavily geared at “hands-on” training events. Statistical reports are used to assist in the planning of future fire schools. The answers to the questions in the surveys along with written comments from the students paint a very clear picture of what students expect and would like to see at future fire schools. They continue to push as many hands-on classes as possible along with advanced training in high risk, low frequency incidents. Program managers and other subject matter experts define WFS as the place to get specialized firefighter training that is not easily acquired in remote areas of the state. To continue conducting a high quality WFS, UFRA will apply lessons learned and best practices to all future planning and delivery.
The graph below illustrates the results from Winter Fire School Quality Report 2014 & 2015. It is based on a total scoring value of 100%. The total percentage scores were collected from students, instructors, and vendors ranging from poor to excellent.