A Blueprint for Change
An Emerging Initiative Paves the Way for Increased Diversity in Hazards Mitigation

By Benika Dixon and Hans M. Louis-Charles

THINK ABOUT THE LAST TIME you attended a conference connected to Disaster Mitigation or Emergency Management. Now think about the number of minorities in attendance. Chances are you could count them on one hand. The William Averette Anderson Fund for Hazard Mitigation Education and Research (also known as the Bill Anderson Fund, or BAF) was created to address this disparity. The fund was created in honor of Bill Anderson, whom many in the hazards community will remember for a career spent working to understand and address the extent to which marginalized groups suffer disproportionately when disasters strike. He also fought vehemently to ensure that women and people of color were recruited into all hazards professions—from the frontlines of hazards management to critical hazards research. These two interests are not unconnected.

For decades research findings have highlighted the phenomena of racial and ethnic minorities having increased difficulty evacuating before a crisis and being more likely to experience disproportionate physical and financial loss during times of disaster (Taylor, 2005). These differences in response and recovery occur for a myriad of reasons, including socioeconomic status, cultural and language barriers, lack of representation within local institutions, and other factors. Catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina and recent disasters such as Hurricane Sandy demonstrate what can happen when the unique needs of communities are not included in disaster planning or when emergency responders cannot effectively communicate with community members (Andrulis, 2014). More diversity in the hazard and disaster field has been widely acknowledged as necessary for better understanding of and more inclusive planning for marginalized populations.

While both academics and practitioners might agree on the need to address this dynamic, substantial efforts to solve this problem rarely move beyond mere discussion. After Anderson passed away in 2013, his wife Norma dedicated herself to taking action to address this disparity through the Bill Anderson Fund.

"Bill would raise two fingers, sometimes three or four, to represent the number of African Americans and minorities in an audience of hundreds with himself being one,” she recalled. “Bill was never shy at raising these concerns at conferences.” By supporting students of color as they pursue careers in the hazard and disaster field, the BAF seeks to ensure that future professionals do not have similar experiences.

Ellis Stanley, the former Director of Emergency Management for Brunswick County, North Carolina, agreed that the BAF is a great way to address this lack of representation. As an African American Emergency Manager with more than 35 years of experience in the field, Stanley recognizes the historical lack of parity between the emergency management workforce and the diversity of communities it serves.

"Bill understood how extremely powerful it is when a community or individual sees themselves represented,” he said, speaking about the Fund. “The BAF has the potential and can transform the field by becoming the visible force that inspires future generations to become interested in the field.”

Emergency management is among the fastest-growing job sectors in the United States and sustained growth is projected in the coming years (Webster 2010). Yet the representation of women and minorities in this field continues to be low. The Federal Emergency Management Agency acknowledges the need for increased diversity within its ranks.

“This is part of the ‘whole community’ approach we have at FEMA, which means we need to be inclusive in everything that we do,” stated Elizabeth Zimmerman, of the FEMA Office of Response and Recovery. “The make-up of emergency management agencies should reflect the makeup of the communities they are likely to serve” (Lindesmith, 2014). As the hazard and disaster field has expanded, the underrepresentation of diverse populations has also become increasingly recognized as problematic in emergency management and related professions.

To address the demographic deficit in the hazards field, the BAF focuses both on recruitment of minorities at the undergraduate level and the retention of those pursuing graduate degrees. Both tasks are daunting, especially the
latter." A study by the Council of Graduate Schools and the Educational Testing Service found that attrition in U.S. doctoral programs is as high as 40 to 50 percent (de Vise, 2010). Even more alarming is the low number of minorities that join the ranks of tenured faculty—as of 2011, only four percent were African American, three percent Hispanic, eight percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and less than one percent American Indian/Alaska Native (U.S. Department of Education 2014).

But as challenging as the work might be, the focus on outreach to students is just as essential, because careers in policy, practice, research, and other disaster-related professions increasingly require advanced degrees and specialized training. Having a mentor that understands the challenges of minorities can ease some of the difficulties graduate students face in today’s market. John Cooper, Jr., a Texas A&M associate professor affiliated with the Hazard Reduction & Recovery Center, knows that firsthand.

"I got my PhD ten years ago and many people would say I turned out fine," he said. "However, looking back on it, I believe that if I had something like the BAF, it would have been a tremendous asset. I would not have stumbled as much... completing the coursework is the easy part; it does not get hard until you start preparing for exams and actually writing the dissertation. I was fortunate to have an advisor, Phil Berke, who is still my advisor, who stressed the need for my perspective in the field. Bill Anderson was one of the few lone voices at the time."

This type of encouragement and support, provided systematically to students from underrepresented groups at various stages in their academic career, can help to better prepare them to contribute their perspectives as hazard and disaster professionals of color.

The BAF’s unique organizational structure of four advisory councils allows practitioners, academics, and students to work cohesively to actively recruit new students and provide mentoring and growth opportunities for current graduate students. The councils include the Fundraising Council, which is made up of individuals who help generate funding, the Distinguished Leaders Council, who are members of the hazard and disaster mitigation field vested in the BAF mission, the Program Council, which is a two-part group that focuses on identifying undergraduate students interested in the hazards profession and on identifying graduate level programs and professional organizations to receive these students, and the Student Advisory Council, which consists of students in the fields of hazard and disaster research.

In its inaugural year, the BAF Student Advisory Council held the three-part Hazard & Disaster Mitigation Professional Development webinar series which benefited more than two hundred students and emerging professionals with firsthand interaction with professionals in diverse disaster-related careers. The first annual Bill Anderson Fund Student Council Workshop will be held in advance of the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Workshop in Broomfield, Colorado. This event will include workshops, training, and networking opportunities that support members of the Student Advisory Council in attaining professional goals and enabling them to pass along knowledge and lessons learned to subsequent cohorts.

Cam Home, current BAF Student Advisory Council member and a new Public Assistance Specialist for South Carolina Emergency Management Division, is a great example of the BAF’s success.

"The Fund is fostering an amazing social community and cultural environment for someone like me who is passionate about the hazard/disaster field," he said. "Whether it's networking opportunities, learning from others and now being able to mentor new students, [it] has helped me grow tremendously in this profession."

In 2014, Norma Anderson set out to found the fund in memory of Bill Anderson. One year later, the results are already evident. Its continued success, however, will depend on how truly dedicated the hazard mitigation field is to increasing diversity. It is time for us as a community to move beyond talking about change. The Bill Anderson Fund and other organizations focused on diversity provide unique opportunities to alter the ways in which hazard mitigation and response are approached. It is important that we support and learn from their model so that our entire society benefits from the exceptional talent that will result from its dynamic approach.

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REFERENCES


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