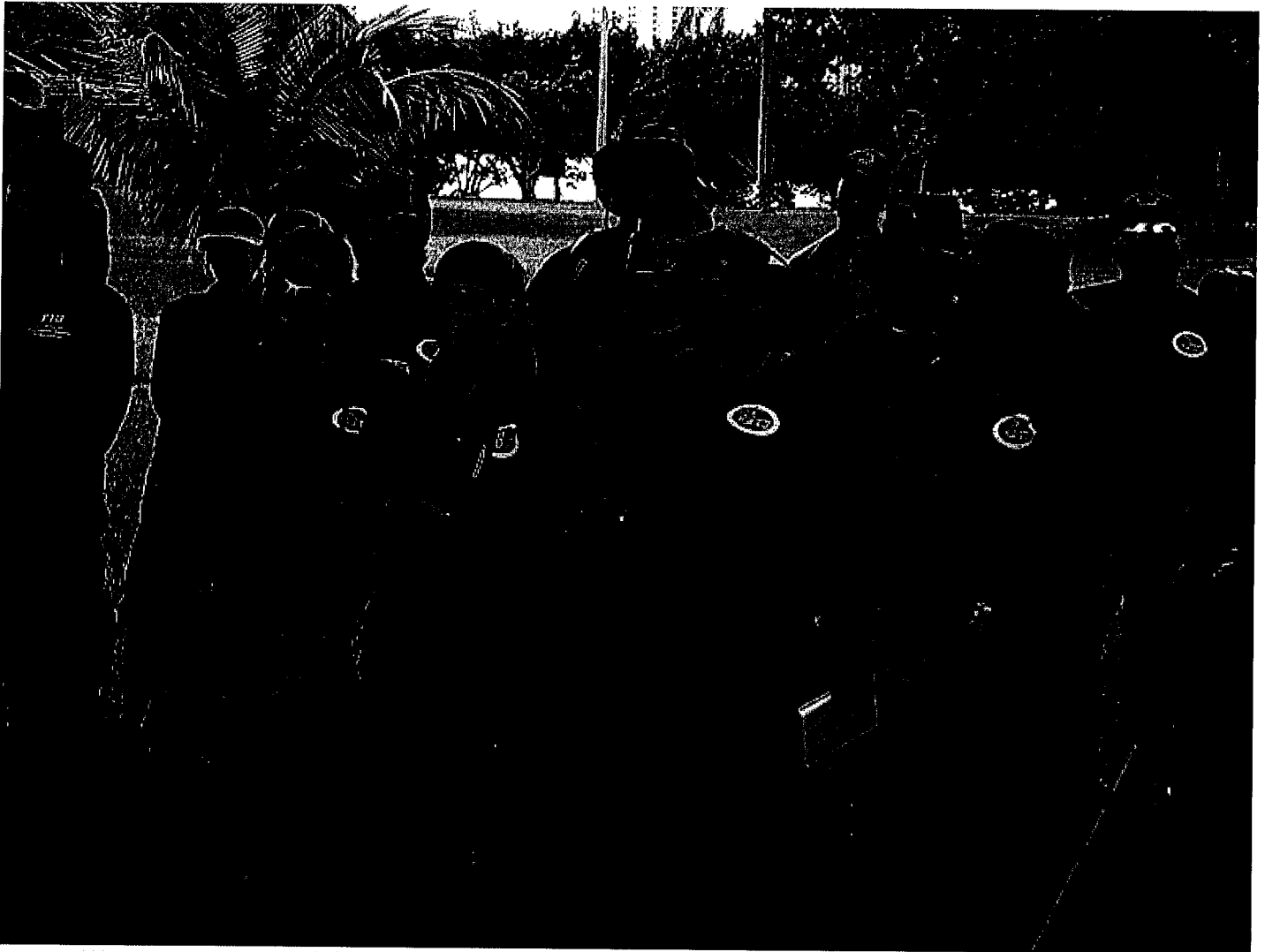


Florida International University Marks First Disaster Management Class With a Field Exercise

Students will be evaluated and graded on their ability to apply lessons in emergency response, management and communications.

David Silverberg | July 18, 2016



Students at Florida International University receive a safety briefing during their field exercise. David Silverberg

A unique experiment in emergency management education began Friday, July 15, at Florida International University (FIU) as 42 postgraduate students began a grueling, three-day final examination.

Rather than a written test or final thesis, the students, ranging in age from their 20s to late 50s and many of them already-serving first responders, began the rigors of an international disaster scenario that had them going through simulated border checks, collecting disaster information from local officials and erecting shelters as thunderstorms threatened.

"It's an experiment to evaluate learning from the nine previous courses that they already took and apply that knowledge in a disaster setting in an austere environment to demonstrate the challenges that responders and survivors deal with in the worst of times," said Ruben Almaguer, FIU's assistant vice president of Disaster Management and Emergency Operations, and executive director of its Academy for International Disaster Preparedness.

The students will be evaluated and graded on their ability to apply lessons in emergency response, management and communications. The exercise is the culmination of a yearlong course that had them attending Saturday classes, allowing them to earn a master's degree on an accelerated schedule.

The exercise was conceived by Almaguer to "create a venue for future leaders in disaster management," he said. According to the veteran disaster responder, it is unique in the United States, and while other programs teach principles of disaster management, this is the only one to conclude with a field exercise.

Students were notified of the details of the disaster scenario two days prior to "deployment." Upon arriving at FIU's Biscayne campus they were put into eight-person teams and went through activation procedures, including an actual medical examination, gear bag checks and weigh-ins. They were issued satellite phones, global positioning satellite terminals, radios and computers. They went through simulated customs and border security procedures and had to negotiate purchases of sufficient supplies in a foreign currency to last them through the weekend.

The exercise required them to operate the equipment and establish communications, despite such obstacles as balky phones and deficient batteries. They drafted situation assessments after talking to people playing local officials and United Nations officials, all of whom had real experience as international disaster responders and are still on active service. When one team failed to follow procedures, the monitor — an active official with U.S. Southern Command — declared them persona non-grata and they had to regain entry to the fictional country, dubbed Bokistan.

Upcoming activities include helicopter and maritime operations using Miami municipal equipment. Participating agencies include Miami-Dade Fire Rescue's Florida Task Force 1 Urban Search and Rescue, the FIU-Florida Advanced Surgical Transport Team and the U.S. Coast Guard. Local officials will also be attending the exercise.

"No other program is able to utilize the breadth of local first-responder resources available to the university," Almaguer said.

Founded in 1965, FIU is a public university with bachelor, master and doctoral degree programs. It emphasizes research and is Miami's only such institution. The Academy for International Disaster Preparedness is a new school within FIU. The current class is its first cohort of students. Almaguer hopes to incorporate lessons learned from both the classroom and the graduating exercise into future curricula.

David Silverberg was founding editor of Homeland Security Today and had a long career as a Washington-based journalist.