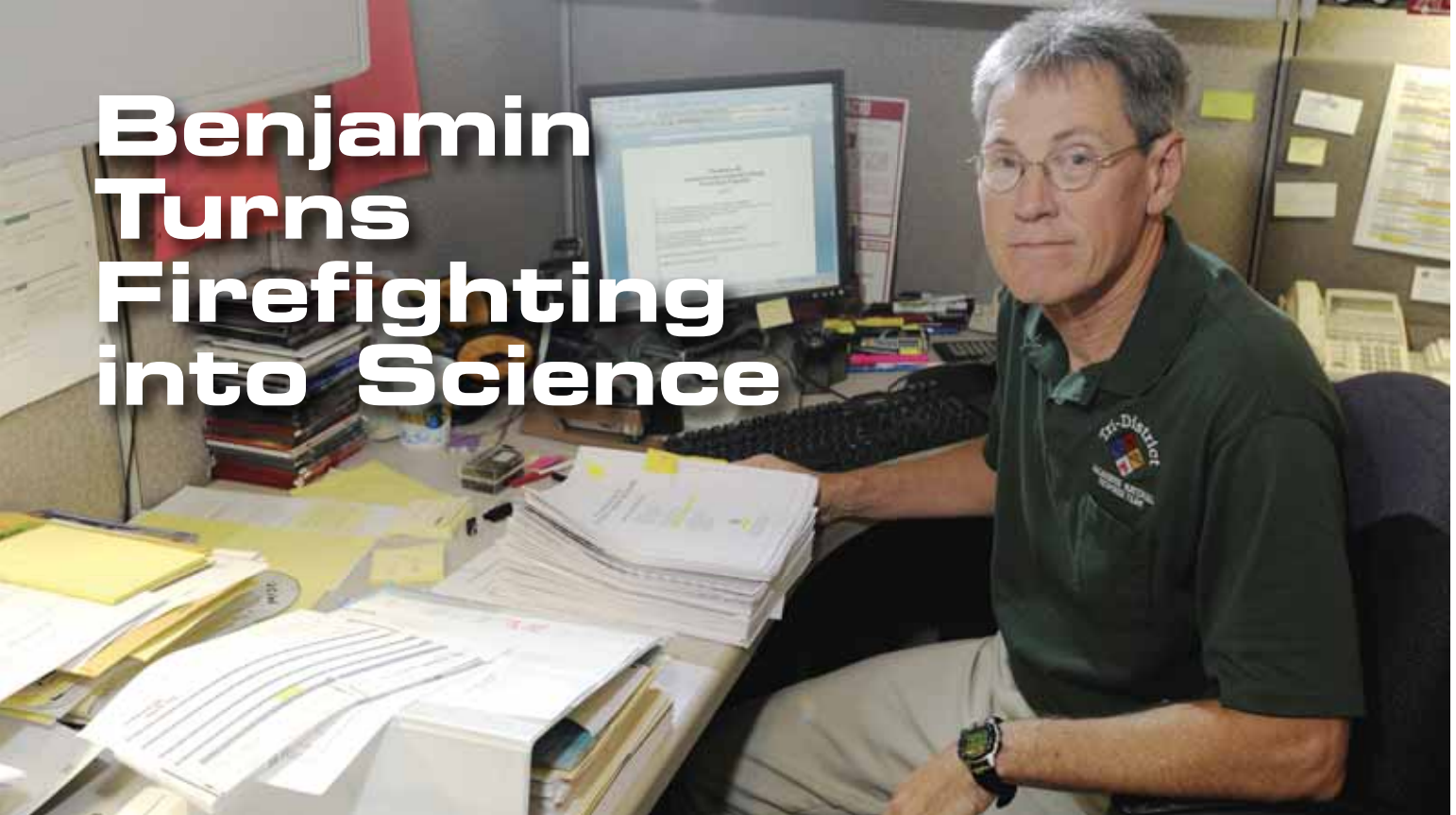


Benjamin Turns Firefighting into Science



Bill Benjamin, who has led the fire science program since 1979, will retire in December.

Cover: Bill Benjamin watches cadets direct a water stream on a living room burn scenario.



At the end of the interview in September, Benjamin went to the chalkboard in the front of his class and updated the number of U.S. firefighter fatalities for 2008. He erased 84 and silently penned in 88.

On the first day of *Essentials of Firefighting*, Bill Benjamin, professor/career program facilitator, fire science, gives students a reality check.

“You see everything from the best of life to the worst of life. We deliver babies and deal with death – victims who never make it to the hospital but go straight to the morgue,” Benjamin said. “This profession is not for the weak of mind nor for the weak of heart. It takes a unique individual.”

Benjamin has been that unique individual at JCCC. Since 1979, he has been the one and only career program facilitator of the fire science program, an associate’s degree program that takes a select class of 24 students each fall. And, except for brief periods, he has been the program’s only faculty member.

While Benjamin has seen teaching techniques and the scope of the profession change in the last 30 years, principles of firefighting have remained constant.

“By and large, we teach the same basics of fire behavior, hoses and nozzles, ropes and knots, and rescue techniques as when I attended school in 1968,” Benjamin said.

Benjamin earned a bachelor’s degree in fire science and a master’s degree in industrial safety, both from the University of Central Missouri, Warrensburg, and worked at the Lee’s Summit

fire department before being hired full time at JCCC.

What has changed is an emphasis on safety with better personal protective equipment. Buildings and their contents have changed from natural materials like wood to man-made materials like plastics that are highly flammable as liquids. The job description has greatly expanded. Benjamin summarizes the job this way, “We fix problems.”

“I am highly prejudiced about my career, but I’d say firefighters have the greatest range of diversity as far as helping people,” he said. “We answer calls about a dropped thermometer containing mercury, a window washer stuck on the side of a building, a wedding ring cutting off circulation to a finger, flooded basements, a frozen horse fallen through a pond, an arm caught in a trash truck, a baby locked in a vehicle in 100-degree heat, an elevator stuck between floors, a head wedged between metal bars, construction workers trapped in trenches, toes jammed in faucets and cats in trees. No two calls are the same; no two fires are the same.

“When the fire science program began, I taught how to fight fires and how to extract people from vehicles. Now the public calls on firefighters for everything.”

Student makeup has done a complete 360-turn since 1979, when virtually 100 percent of students were firefighters seeking a post-secondary degree. Now, one has to have a firefighter certification before applying at a Johnson County fire department.


JCCC offers course work that prepares student to take the Kansas firefighter I and II certification class. JCCC isn't a monopoly in the metro area. Kansas City Kansas Community College and Metropolitan Community College-Blue River also have programs, but JCCC has a good reputation, in part, because of its location at the Overland Park Fire Training Center, 12401 Hemlock, with state-of-the-art educational technology and realistic burn facilities where students obtain practical skills in extinguishing fires. JCCC started leasing the burn facilities when the training center opened 13 years ago, traveling from the main campus two days a week. In 1997, all fire science classes, which meet nights and weekends, moved to the training center, facilitating the use of professional resources and the center's newly instituted firefighting computer simulation. Benjamin's office moved to the center in 2002.

"There are only a handful of training centers of this quality in the country," Benjamin said.

During his years as fire science faculty, Benjamin has continued to volunteer with various fire departments, including Shawnee and Central Jackson County Fire Protection District in Blue Springs. Currently, he is a member of Overland Park, in keeping with the tradition of firefighting, which started with volunteers. Eighty percent of U.S. fire protection is still provided by volunteers.

"As a volunteer firefighter for Overland Park, Bill exhibits his spirit of volunteerism and his craft," said Bryan Dehner, fire chief, Overland Park. "And through the program at JCCC, he has improved the professionalism of the fire service. Bill has been a champion of fire science education. A fire science associate's degree is now a requirement to be an Overland Park fire captain, which shows you the importance we place on that degree."

Benjamin plans to retire from JCCC on Dec. 17. He says he has enjoyed his teaching career. He speaks with reverence about his fallen comrades.

"Firefighters are the nation's true first responders. Firefighters were the first to respond to the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, and on Sept. 11, 2001, 343 firefighters were killed in the World Trade Center," Benjamin said. "I've been to way too many firefighters' funerals, even one for a former student." 



Benjamin teaches JCCC fire science classes at the Overland Park Fire Training Center.