

HOW WOULD THE PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF A MID-SIZED URBAN
LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCY BE IMPACTED IF POST WERE AN
ACCREDITED EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION BY 2010?

Article

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“INCREASE PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS THROUGH POST ACCREDITATION”

Expectations of law enforcement officers continue to grow in complexity and scope as the world we live in accelerates faster than ever in diversity and technological advances. The law enforcement profession continues to expand its traditional roles and responsibilities, taking on new and innovative programs to address community needs while employing the latest technologies. The rate and degree of change coupled with these increased complexities requires the law enforcement professional to be more highly trained and educated to handle the everyday tasks of the job.

The technical training provided to law enforcement professionals has been provided primarily through POST and has been increasing in complexity over time to meet new demands. For example, POST has provided training programs to meet new mandates such as hazardous materials, domestic violence, elder abuse, and the latest additions: perishable skills training that includes driving, arrest control, firearms, and verbal communication skills.

Law enforcement has been provided the technical training required to manage specific tasks and skills, but has not been as progressive in addressing educational requirements for the job. Education is different from technical training in that it focuses more on analytical, problem solving, creativity, maturity, and communications skills. A simplistic comparison may be that technical training provides specific training on how to accomplish various tasks, while formal education focuses more on the person as a whole and how they interact with the environment around them.

Formal education in law enforcement was first introduced in 1916 by August Vollmer, Chief of Police for Berkeley. Vollmer spent his professional life working to

advance the educational opportunities for police officers, including working with Earl Warren, District Attorney of Alameda County, and Dr. T.W. MacQuarrie, President of San Jose State University to provide a college curriculum in police science.¹ In 1939, Dr. Read Bain advocated the hiring of college men as a means of upgrading the quality of department services and personnel.² In 1967, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice recommended that every police agency should, no later than 1982, require as a condition of employment the completion of at least four years of education at an accredited college or university.³ In 1973, the National Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals also supported the 4-year degree as a prerequisite for employment in law enforcement.⁴ Despite support for higher education for the past 87 years, no such standard has been implemented beyond a few individual departments acting of their own accord.

There has been much debate over the pros and cons of higher education in law enforcement with numerous studies having conflicting results. Proponents claim the research shows positive relationships between higher education and fewer citizen complaints, fewer disciplinary actions, and fewer allegations of excessive force. They also claim college-educated officers take fewer leave days, receive fewer injuries, and

¹E. Farris, "The role of the junior college in police education in California." (M.A. thesis University of California, Berkely, 1965)

² R. Bain, "The policeman on the beat." *Scientific monthly*, 48 (1939), 454.

³John K. Hudzik, "College education for police: Problems in measuring component and extraneous variables." *Journal of Criminal Justice*. (Vol. 6, 1978), 70.

⁴ Michael G. Brecci, "Higher education for law enforcement the Minnesota model." *FBI Law Enforcement Bulliten*, (January, 1994), 1

have lower rates of absenteeism just to name a few. Those on the other side of the issue claim college-educated officers become bored with police work, expect special treatment, cause animosity within the ranks, and question authority.⁵

Many of the studies proclaiming good and/or evil resulting from college education have inadequate research design, and data collection efforts have not provided a firm picture of which effects are attributable to formal college education and which are caused by other factors.⁶

David W. Hayeslip, Jr. conducted a meta-analysis of the various studies for the National Institute of Justice. He found significant issues with a number of the studies, which resulted in his being able to include only five studies in his analysis. The remainders of the studies were excluded because correlation statistics were not provided in their published reports. Through this process, all of the studies that reported negative or mixed findings on the effects of college-educated police officers were excluded from this meta-analysis. Hayeslip concluded that much of the apparent discrepancy in the studies of the relationship of education to police performance might be a result of distortions due to artifactual errors.⁷ He cautions that his findings are tentative, due to the low number of valid studies involved in the analysis, and suggests more research is required. His analysis of existing studies showed a slight to moderate positive correlation between college education and police performance.

⁵ Alan T. Vodicka, "Educational requirements for police recruits." *Law and Order*, (March 1994), 92.

⁶ Hudzik, 69.

⁷ David W. Hayeslip Jr., "Higher education and police performance revisited: The evidence examined through meta-analysis." *American Journal of Police*, (Vol. 8 No. 2 1989), 53.

One of the negative implications of higher education requirements that has proven itself in some circumstances concerns the impact on minority candidates for positions in law enforcement. There is some concern that higher requirements will essentially prevent good minority candidates from entering the profession. There is also risk to disqualifying other potentially well-suited candidates based on economic considerations.⁸ Many large, urban police agencies have not been able to increase the number of minority officer to a level representative of the communities they serve under the current standards. The addition of educational standards could reduce the pool of applicants even further and incur the risk of the standards being viewed as a subtle way of excluding minorities from the police service.⁹ The primary issue for both minorities, and those economically disadvantaged is the cost of obtaining higher education before entering the job market.

If POST were to become an accredited institution capable of conferring college level degrees, opportunities could provide for the positive effects of college level education and address the potential negative impacts on minorities and those socio-economically challenged candidates. Both entry-level standards, and standards for promotion to higher-level positions need to be addressed.

Although the goal is to enhance standards globally, resources among the various agencies in the state vary widely. Departments who do not have the resources to support higher education will fight to prevent such a standard from becoming a state mandate. This influence could derail attempts to institute such a program.

⁸ Brecci, 3.

⁹ Vodicka, 92.

POST could provide a program whereby the entry-level officer can enroll in an academy program enhanced with general education requirements, and successfully graduate with an associate of arts degree. This would be accomplished by adding general education requirements necessary for the degree to the existing police academy programs. The academy process would then be offered in two distinctive parts. The first part would cover all of the general education requirements for an associate degree; the second part would be the basic police academy as it is currently offered. The decision to mandate enrollment in these programs should be left to the individual departments. Departments that support the program would enroll their officer trainees in both segments of the training. Those departments not wishing to require the higher education would enroll their trainees in only the basic police academy segment.

By providing the education as part of the police academy program, departments could prevent the problem of further reducing minority and socio-economically challenged candidates, since they would be providing the education to these candidates as part of the academy process. POST would cover the cost of providing the additional education while the department would be responsible for covering the salary and benefits of the officer during this additional training time. Ultimately, the goal would be an associate degree as the minimum educational requirement to work as a police officer in the state.

Another source of potential conflict would come from implementing a mandate for existing police officers to obtain associate degrees. Unless the departments agreed to pay for the expense of the education and allow officers to obtain their education while on-duty, labor unions would likely fight any such mandate for existing employees. The

cost to the department to provide education for all existing employees while on-duty would not only be a logistical nightmare, but also cost-prohibitive. To keep the process moving in a positive direction, consideration should be given to provide a grandfather clause for existing peace officers, exempting them from the new requirements.

Applicants with higher education completed prior to employment as police officers can challenge the general educational requirements, and enroll directly into the basic police academy program. Non-affiliated students may still enroll in the program and obtain the degree at their own expense in an effort to make themselves more attractive as candidates for employment, or they could choose to simply put themselves through the basic academy program.

Keeping in mind the goal is to enhance the professional standards in law enforcement, this program would allow for the adoption of higher education that will lead to the higher standards. By systematically implementing this plan over a period of time, and providing exceptions for existing police officers, roadblocks can be reduced or eliminated. Once implemented, each subsequent year larger percentages of officers would have degrees, until eventually it would become a universal standard.

As part of the higher education process, POST could develop and offer programs for both baccalaureate and master's degrees. These programs could be tailored to the working police officer, and could include distance learning technologies and/or regional centers. Individual departments would be responsible for determining the level of support they wish to provide for their existing employees seeking this education. Departments may choose to offer no assistance, requiring their employees to seek the education from POST directly. Other departments may choose to support such programs.

The most beneficial position for realizing higher-level degrees within departments is to first mandate the higher levels of education for promotion, and to support the educational endeavors of their employees. Departments can create a number of systems to assist their officers in this process. For example, a library can be established where resources and books necessary for specific courses are available. Office space could be provided for study with computers available for distance-learning programs and research. Modern technology can be provided that individuals may not be able to afford on their own. This technology could be maintained and used by everyone participating in the program. Training staff would provide logistical support with enrollment, technical support and maintenance of training records.

Although higher education would be required for advancement within the organization, the individual officers would be required to obtain this education on their own time. Officers from departments that did not directly support their higher education would still benefit from a POST educational program.

With flexible schedules, relevant education, and reduced overall cost, the education would be more readily available and affordable compared to current educational opportunities. With a program tailored for police officers schedules, the resource and technical support necessary, and encouragement from the department, higher professional standards can be achieved.

Departments endeavoring to institute higher educational standards have an opportunity to study the true effects of this education on job performance. Perhaps we can settle the debate that has raged throughout the twentieth century about just how beneficial education is to the law enforcement professional.

Prior to implementation of a new plan, statistics should be gathered on a variety of variables, such as: number of citizen complaints, sick leave usage, use of force incidents, worker compensation claims, job satisfaction surveys, customer surveys, self-initiated activity, grievances, and number of disciplinary actions taken. Once the plan is implemented, these statistics can be tracked to determine if there is a statistically relevant positive correlation between the educational level of employees, and the measured variables. This process would provide the information necessary for the department to determine whether the new standard provided an enhancement to their professional standards.

Analysis may also provide information in support of the monetary costs involved with the educational programs. This support could be realized through a reduction in costs associated with several of the measured variables, such as: workers compensation claims, citizen complaints and grievances.

Although POST accreditation may provide a means to provide higher education to peace officers across the state, it does not come without some potential negative consequences as well. If POST controlled the curriculum for the degree programs, there might be a danger of reducing the number of academic courses in favor of meeting the increasing technical requirements for the job. A reduction in academics could negatively affect the positive attributes being sought by having a more highly educated work force. Additionally, those officers who currently have higher-level education have done so through a variety of different programs offering a multitude of different perspectives which would be lost if officers all obtained the same degree through the same program. Interaction with people from different professions and backgrounds in existing programs

provide experiential learning that would not be possible if all participants in the class were law enforcement officers.

Despite the potential negative effects of a POST-accredited education, the outcomes of the educational experience would be overwhelmingly positive when compared to the current standard of little or no college education.

In summary, the complexities involved in modern day policing require higher levels of training and education. One way to address an increase in educational requirements would be for POST to be an accredited educational institution. POST could then offer programs providing an associate of arts degree as part of the existing police academy process. POST could also offer baccalaureate, and master's degree programs using distance-learning and regional training centers. Existing POST courses could be incorporated into these degree programs. This would assist those officers seeking higher-level degrees, since these courses would be completed while on-duty as part of the individual officer's training requirements. The remaining courses required for advanced degrees would be obtained on the officers' own time, but the availability and cost would be favorable to those seeking the degrees. Ultimately, all officers in the state could have college level degrees, thereby increasing the professional standards in law enforcement.

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