

COLLEGE EDUCATED POLICE?

SHAPING THE FUTURE

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This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future, but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.

Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing the future--creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College project are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

Introduction

Since the early part of the twentieth century, academicians and criminal justice practitioners have debated whether police officers should be required to have a college education as a minimum qualification to be hired. Today, there is general agreement that a college education will not necessarily make a person a good police officer, but a good police officer can be made better by having one. Many police executives believe formal college education can improve critical thinking skills of officers and that is becoming a more important factor as the complexity of police work continues to increase.¹

According to a recent article in Police Chief Magazine “We expect (police officers) to understand and apply the law evenly. We expect them to grasp the nature of social problems and the psychology of people with different attitudes toward the law. We expect officers to professionally and effectively handle disputes involving people from varying cultural, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.”²

The importance of possessing a college degree by police officers seems to have substantial support in the literature. If the need or desire is established for the possession of a college degree by police officers, then how do they get one? Traditionally, a college program involved students attending classes at a “brick and mortar” campus. This was difficult for many officers that already had substantial work and family commitments. With the advent of online (internet delivered) college programs, it is possible for officers to enter or return to college and pursue a degree where previously it may not have been practical for them to do so. With that being said, does an online program sufficiently address the desirable attributes for police officers that the possession of a college degree represents?

Historical Perspective for College Educated Police

In 1916, August Vollmer, the former Chief of Police of Berkeley, California, was the first to emphasize the need for police officers to have college degrees. At about the same time, the University of California at Berkeley began to offer law enforcement related courses.³ In 1931, The National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement (the Wickersham Commission) gave “national recognition for higher educational standards and more professional police officers.”⁴ Although the issue of college education for police officers was not specifically addressed, it laid the foundation for subsequent calls to increase educational levels for police. Largely due to Vollmer’s influence, the University of California at Berkeley created a School of Police Administration in 1933, followed shortly thereafter by a similar school at Michigan State University.⁵ In 1936, Vollmer wrote in his book, The Police in Modern Society, that police officers should be required to have a college education.⁶

In 1967, the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice made specific recommendations regarding increasing the level of police education.⁷ This report was followed by the passage of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, which established the Law Enforcement Education Program (LEEP). LEEP, in part, provided grants and loans to officers to enroll in college and earn their degrees. This infusion of money created a large incentive for institutions to develop academic programs geared toward law enforcement.

As police officers began to return to or enter college, some institutions created accelerated or nontraditional programs in criminal justice. Officers could receive credit for experience in related courses and some courses were configured so officers did not

have to meet as often as traditional courses. These types of programs were usually administered through the college's extension program. Today, many public and private institutions offer nontraditional programs that are delivered in the online or e-learning format. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in the 2000-2001 academic year, forty-eight percent of all four-year Title IV⁸ degree granting public institutions and thirty-three percent of four-year Title IV degree granting private institutions had degree programs for undergraduates that were to be completed totally through distance learning.⁹ Today there are an abundance of distance learning programs being marketed to police officers, especially online programs. The flexibility of the course schedule makes it attractive to busy students. Police officers can do their course work when it is convenient for them and some courses are designed to be completed at the student's own pace.

Many departments have made strides in requiring some college education as a prerequisite for hiring but most have not. The high school diploma still exists as the most common minimum educational requirement. Even where departments have not required a college degree for hiring, many require or make it desirable to possess a degree for promotion. As early as 1989, the benefits to having educated officers were noted to include:¹⁰

- Greater knowledge of procedures, functions, and principles
- Better appreciation of their professional role and it's importance in the criminal justice system as well as in society
- More desirable psychological make-up, which includes such qualities as alertness, empathy, flexibility, initiative, and intelligence

- Greater range of interpersonal skills centered in their ability to communicate, to be responsive to others, and to exercise benevolent leadership
- Greater ability to analyze situations, to exercise discretion independently, and to make judicious decisions
- Strong moral character, which reflects a sense of conscience and the qualities of honesty, reliability, and tolerance
- More desirable system of personal values consistent with the police function in a democratic society

Even back in 1978, though, researchers expressed reservations about the quality of criminal justice programs. The rapid increase in program offerings seemed to make some institutions gear their courses more vocationally than academically. Some recommendations were made to overcome what was perceived as major quality problems in college programs developed for police officers.

In addition to perceived quality problems in criminal justice programs, there was a concern that police officers would take college courses just to get the degree. In 1979, Goldstein stated, “The factor that makes the whole movement toward college education for police personnel most vulnerable to attack is the emphasis which has been put on the acquisition of college credentials without sufficient concern for what is to be learned. Given the multitude of colleges and the number of people who attend them, the degree itself reflects little about the values or relevance of the educational experience.”¹¹

Clearly, the need to ensure that a college program is delivering the appropriate academic curriculum is critical. In the past, an officer attended a local school and it was more than likely regionally accredited. Today, online colleges can market themselves across the

United States or even internationally, claiming accreditation from some official sounding group.

Accreditation, curriculum, and instructor competence are all of critical importance in a college program. More than a decade ago, researchers articulated considerations that would be relevant as one considers the potential quality of an educational program. The recommendations included:¹²

- No college credit should be given for police academy and similar training
- Technical and professional police subjects should be limited to a maximum of twenty-five percent of any curriculum
- A four-year baccalaureate degree should be the minimum educational qualification for entry into police service
- No one should be considered qualified to be a faculty member on the basis of experience alone
- Police education faculty should be held to the same standards as other college professors (i.e. Ph.D., master's degree minimum; involvement in research and publication)

These issues among others were discussed by a group of criminal justice related experts who were brought together in a nominal group setting to discuss online education and its potential effect on the future of law enforcement.

The Nominal Group Panel

As part of a California Peace Officer Standards and Training Command College project, a panel of interested professionals was formed to discuss future trends and events that may have an effect on law enforcement online educational programs in the next five

years. It consisted of a Chief of Police of a medium sized police department, a professor who teaches online courses for a major public university and at a local community college, a deputy district attorney, a police officer who is a former high school teacher, a police officer who is a member of the executive board for a police officers association, the criminal justice program coordinator for the local community college, the editor of the local weekly newspaper, and a counselor for a youth diversion program.

There was consensus among the panel members that it is important for police officers to have a college education, and to possess the appropriate degree. The panel felt that a college education earned the traditional way (attending classes at a brick and mortar institution) was the best preparation for a person to be a police officer. The discussion included many of the issues published by researchers and criminal justice practitioners since the 1930's. The panel felt it was critical for police officers to be socialized with diversified groups of people and exposed to differing viewpoints. The requisite skills of tact and diplomacy learned in a physically social environment, effective public speaking, and command presence are attributes that are learned and reinforced in a traditional educational setting. The panel recognized it may be difficult for a police officer to pursue a traditional degree due to family and work obligations. So what is this officer to do?

Many of the officers returning to college or entering college for the first time have turned to online college programs. The panel concluded the flexibility of online educational programs was a tremendous opportunity for current police officers due to the demands of their course schedule. They also understood there was a proliferation of programs being marketed to police officers through police websites or law enforcement

related magazines. Legitimate accreditation was a key concern about such programs. The panel members expressed that testing-retained knowledge could be problematic since testing is done in the same delivery format as coursework, and all tests were essentially open book.

With regard to the value of such programs, panel members believed that a college degree earned through online programs was different than a college degree earned traditionally. The panel believed that criminal justice practitioners were overused in criminal justice programs especially in online programs. Their concern was the overall value of the college degree since true academic professors were not doing the teaching. They felt that for some disciplines, such as engineering, mathematics or history, an online program was sufficient. But when it came to being a police officer, class attendance and contact with other students face-to-face was preferred. The panel agreed, however, that much of what is done in a traditional setting could be done online, such as submittal of written reports or studies and coursework assignments. The panel also felt that too much academic credit was given for experience in police work through online programs. The panel felt that rather than rely on a purely online program for an officer to obtain a four-year undergraduate degree, a cross or hybrid approach, with a traditional program could bring the desired benefits of both delivery methods.

The Educational Hybrid

Amy Fanter, a researcher in the field of hybrid education, noted that “Hybrid instruction, or hybrid courses refer to classes where there is a carefully planned blend of both traditional classroom instruction and online learning activities.”¹³ According to criminal justice researchers and practitioners (and supported by the expert panel) the most

effective collegiate preparation for police officers are settings inclusive of a social environment. They should be exposed to other racial, ethnic, and diverse groups in an arena where ideas are broached, concepts discussed, and conflict is resolved through dialogue, research, and consensus. Many components of any particular course can be done using the online system (such as writing book reports, completing written requirements and posting of thoughts on issues).

If a class was required to meet for a certain amount of time every week or every two weeks, or even once a month to be tested on retained knowledge, to be challenged by other students on stances taken on issues, to participate by speaking about issues, and so on, then the socializing of the officer can be effectively satisfied. No matter how effective, a distance learning program not offering this option will impact skills that might only be gained in this type of setting. Using a hybrid approach for coursework would allow for the flexibility of online educational programs and meet the some of the critical benefits of traditional programs. Those that may advocate for pure e-learning should remain mindful of the “soft skills” necessary for the modern law enforcement officer, and the best opportunities to acquire them.

Conclusion

The desire for a police officer to have a college education appears settled. National commissions, criminal justice professional associations, academicians, attorneys, and courts have all expressed this view. The question remains; how does the individual peace officer best do it? Attending the traditional college program at a brick and mortar campus seems to be the preferred way. This method may not be practical for some officers, so the alternative of the hybrid approach should be considered. It blends

many of the positives from both traditional and online programs. Certainly, there may be situations where even a hybrid approach is not practical. It seems Vollmer and many others would support an online program to gain at least the concepts and critical thinking skills a collegiate education offers.

Progressive police agencies may take the lead to shape their future by entering into a partnership with a local public or private institution to develop a hybrid program to be implemented for their staff. In any case, police management should encourage officers and employees to return to college to earn their four-year degree. The result will be better staff and officers, and a better chance to meet the needs of today and tomorrow.

ENDNOTES

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