

**“I Want to Be a Police Officer!”
Classroom to Cop :
Is High School Law Enforcement Vocational
Education an Effective Recruiting Strategy?**

by

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

“I Want to Be a Police Officer!”
Classroom to Cop :
Is High School Law Enforcement Vocational Education an Effective
Recruiting Strategy?

The officer enters the classroom in his Class “A” uniform. Shoes and brass polished, leather shined, and his uniform freshly pressed, the officer exudes confidence. He introduces himself to the teacher then prepares to address the students. All nervousness left behind, the officer clears his throat and takes a seat at the front of the class. The students watch his every move with eagerness and anticipation. He promptly introduces himself as a police officer with the local department. He tells the students he will answer questions later as one kid blurts out, “I know a police officer.” A bevy of activity ensues as the students begin talking about memorable experiences they have had with the police. The teacher restores order to the classroom and the officer resumes.

The officer begins with his best rendition of “Green Eggs and Ham” as the second graders listen intently. He makes his way through the Dr. Seuss classic with little interruption. First a restroom request, then a tissue for a case of the sniffles. The officer finishes the book and thanks the students for their attention. He readies himself for the throng of questions he is about to receive. “Have you ever shot anyone?” “Do you have a police dog?” and “Did you arrest my uncle?” are all one he’s heard before as he opens the question and answer session. The first child to raise his hand states, “I want to be a police officer!” The officer stops to talk about his chosen profession and gives the kids a snapshot of his day to day activities. He asks for more questions. The children continue

to ask. By the time he is done, 13 of the 20 kids in the class have proclaimed they wanted to be police officers. The officer leaves telling the kids the importance of learning to read and staying in school. He thanks the teacher, and the students then exits the classroom. The officer walks to his patrol car. All the while thinking of the students who told him they wanted to be police officers. He wondered, “What happens to this enthusiasm as they grow older?” and “Why do most of these kids change their minds?”

Although the scenario above is fictitious, it may become standard given the complexity of modern law enforcement recruitment efforts. Police officers continue to serve as role models and mentors on primary school campuses across California. Guest appearances, school resource officers, DARE and GREAT instructors are all designed for prevention in elementary and middle schools. According to some experts, elementary and middle school is the optimal time to address students in regards to gang and drug prevention. During the last several decades, police departments have spent a great deal of time, money and resources to address these concerns. What about the high schools? When the kids move to high school they should be familiar with the dangers of drugs and gangs. What happens to them then?

The students move to high school leaving their law enforcement role models behind then thrust into an entirely different arena of peer pressure. The adolescents are maturing into young adults; possibly the most formidable period of their lives. Their opinions are now solidified by the thoughts of their teachers, friends and the media. For the first time in many of their lives, they hear unethical stories of corrupt police behavior. Many will

receive traffic tickets or see their friends arrested. The police profession begins to look different to them. They feel the lessons learned in primary school were a smoke screen. Police officers on high school campuses are there for enforcement purposes only. The role model is absent. The blue suit is empty. It's us against them.

Positive police role models are needed on high school campuses. High school law enforcement vocational education may provide an avenue for this transition. These courses are beginning to emerge on high school campuses throughout the state. As a result, students are showing a strong interest in the law enforcement profession.

California offers 290 state funded career/partnership academies and an equal number of academies offered absent state funding.¹ Twenty seven of these academies are public service academies. There are 74 Regional Occupation Center Programs within the state offering 100 career pathways and programs.² These programs in addition to magnet schools, charter schools and comprehensive schools offering some vocational courses account for 775,769 enrolments or about thirty nine percent of the states total enrollments grades nine through twelve in 2005-2006.³ Are these students the future of law enforcement? Are the vocational programs comprehensive enough to move these students from the classroom to the patrol car? A more in depth analysis of current and past recruitment efforts throughout California, and the emergence of vocational education may ultimately change the future of law enforcement recruiting.

¹ David Stern, "Building Blocks for Reconstructing American High Schools," Career Academy Support Network, (October 2000): 2, <http://casn.berkeley.edu/resources/bldgblocks.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2008)

² Carl D Perkins, Career Technical Education Improvement Act of 2006, "2008-2012 California State Plan for Career Technical Education": (November 2007): 14, http://cos.edu/ImageUpload_Links/StateCTEplan.pdf (accessed November 16, 2007)

³ Ibid pg., 25.

What the “Big Dogs” Think

The California Police Chief’s Association (CPCA) conducted a survey in 2005 which identified police recruiting as a major issue of concern.⁴ A California Sheriff’s Association 2007 survey stated “Over 90% of California law enforcement agencies felt recruitment/retention was a major problem for them.”⁵ As a result of these findings a committee of law enforcement officials from across the state was formed to explore the root causes of the recruiting challenge. According to their research, “The recruiting and retention problem for law enforcement is caused by California’s large population growth, growing diversity of the workforce, declining size of the ‘post baby-boomer’ workforce, aging of the workforce that equates to increasing retirements, and high demand for sworn police officers.”⁶ If these identified issues are the causes for the recruiting challenge, they just add to an already troubling situation.

California’s Current Situation: The Numbers Are In

The California Peace Officers Standards and Training (POST) Symposium on Recruitment and Retention divulged 8,300 law enforcement vacancies in 2005. This number continues to grow. According to Bob Stresak, California POST Public Information Legislative Liaison, there are currently 10,000 vacant positions in the state; a seventeen percent increase over the past three years. Many theories have been discussed as the reason for the increase in open positions. The California Public Employment Retirement System (PERS) 3@50 safety retirement has been identified as a primary

⁴ Cal Chief’s Membership Survey conducted by RGNconsulting www.cailiforniapolicchiefs.org.
[http://www.surveymonkey.com/Text Breakdown.asp?U=144368846157&SID](http://www.surveymonkey.com/Text%20Breakdown.asp?U=144368846157&SID) (accessed March 21,2006)

⁵ Steve Szalay “Recruitment and Retention of Law enforcement Personnel: The Number One problem for a California Sheriff,” California Sheriff (April 2007) 6.

⁶ Ibid.

cause. The 3 @50 retirement system is a great recruiting tool but is also responsible for the departure of thousands of experienced officers over the past five years. Fourteen percent of California police officers are currently fifty years or older and eligible to retire. Retiring veteran officers will continue to contribute to existing shortages. At the same time candidates waiting to replace them are becoming more difficult to find.

The law enforcement profession is experiencing far fewer applicants than a decade ago. This is perhaps attributed to the decline in birthrates in the 60's and 70's, which has led to a reduction in the overall workforce. Baby Boomers, those born between 1943 and 1960 have provided a workforce of about 76 million. The population of Generation "X", those born between 1960 and 1980, sharply declined accounting for about 51 million people.⁷ This is a reduction of approximately 30% of the eligible workforce.

The Big Picture: A Look into the Future

There will be 86,300 law enforcement jobs in California by the year 2014. According to the U.S. Department and Labor, growth and retirements will leave 31,700 police and sheriff patrol jobs vacant between 2004 and 2014.⁸ This coupled with 10,000 existing open law enforcement positions indicate a need to recruit and hire 41,700 new police officers over the next several years. According to Stresak, only ten percent of all police applicants are actually hired as peace officers. A much lower success rate, some suggest closer to five percent, has been experienced by training managers from throughout the

⁷Claire Raines and Ron Zemke, *Generations at Work* (New York: Performance Research Associates, 2000), 129

⁸ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "California Occupational Employment Projections 2004-2014, Bulletin 2600"; available from <http://stats.bls.gov/oco/print/oco2003.htm>; accessed June 1, 2007.

state. This data suggests the state would need somewhere between 417,000 and 834,000 peace officer applicants to fill these open positions.

What the Experts Think

In 2001, the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) convened a group of over 300 law enforcement professionals at a symposium on recruitment.⁹ The group shared strategies to identify, attract and retain the law enforcement candidate of the future. A publication entitled Peace Officer Recruitment and Retention: Best Practices was distributed to the symposium participants. This material is an accumulation of work produced by a number of California law enforcement professionals. Numerous subject matter experts contributed their views on the challenges of recruitment to the law enforcement profession. This document refers to six law enforcement programs aimed at the interest of high school students. They include Police Cadets, Explorer Scout Programs, Interns/Student Workers, Police Corps Programs, Magnet Schools and Junior Academies.

POST hosted a similar recruitment symposium in 2005. A result of the symposium was the development of the POST Recruitment and Retention Best Practices Update distributed in April 2006.¹⁰ An on-line survey completed by the participants revealed only thirty three percent actively recruit high school interns, while a survey of 850

⁹ California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training , Peace Officer Recruitment and Retention: Best Practices (California POST Media Distribution Center, July 2001), <http://libcat.post.ca.gov/dbtw-wpd/documents/post/53936324.pdf>

¹⁰ California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training , Recruitment and Retention : Best Practices Update (California POST Media Distribution Center, April 2006), <http://libcat.post.ca.gov/dbtw-wpd/documents/POST/70111372.pdf>

academy recruits discovered over fifty percent were interested in a law enforcement career prior to their high school graduation. The development of partnerships between high schools and law enforcement and the programs listed above were once again discussed. High school law enforcement vocational programs were not included, with the exception of a brief mention of law enforcement magnet programs.

Thousands of high school students across the state are involved in the law enforcement sponsored programs discussed at the symposiums. How comprehensive are they? Do they afford law enforcement the same partnership opportunities high school law enforcement vocational courses do? A historical review of high school vocational education programs, their resurgence and a recent campaign for high school education reform may assist in providing the answers to these questions.

Vocational Education: A Historical Perspective

Vocational education is related to the age-old apprenticeship system of learning. As the labor market becomes more specialized and economies demand higher levels of skill, governments and businesses are increasingly investing in the future of vocational education through publicly funded training organizations and subsidized apprenticeship or traineeship initiatives for businesses.¹¹ Historically, high schools offered vocational classes such as wood shop, metal shop, home economics and construction classes. Many of these programs were eliminated in the 1980's and 90's in favor of the traditional high school classes. Vocational education programs have since reemerged. The courses offered have been updated. They are timely and relevant to the needs of the current

¹¹ Wikipedia, www.Wikipedia.org: accessed February 23, 2008

workforce. These programs are expanding. Many students are better engaged by vocational opportunities and now have numerous options including law enforcement courses.

A Commitment to Education: Funding is Available

Many education funding initiatives have been adopted since the early eighties. The federal School-to-Work Opportunities Act was passed in 1994. Shortly thereafter, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998 passed. This federal grant program provides \$130 million annually and is aimed towards strengthening and improving career technical education programs in California.¹² Legislation was signed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2005 to increase the education budget by three billion dollars. Twenty million dollars was specifically allocated for vocational education. In a speech delivered by the Governor, he states, “Career tech is an investment in the unlimited potential of our next generation of leaders, builders and creators.”¹³ The Governor has continued to support vocational education proposing an additional \$100 million in his last two budget proposals.

High School Vocational Education Provides Alternatives to Students

The emphasis on vocational education from California’s political arena has provided the much needed funding to provide opportunities to those students not engaged in the comprehensive high school curriculum. The Department of Education and local school

¹²California Department of Education, “Preparing Students for the Workforce, Fact Book 2004 – Handbook of Education Information” (2004) <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/fb/yr04workforce.asp>; accessed November 27, 2007.

¹³ Office of the Governor, “Governor Makes Major Investment in Vocational Education with New Law Tuesday” (2005) <http://gov.ca.gov/index.php?/print-version/speech/1395/>; accessed November 11, 2007.

districts have developed numerous strategies to address these students. The focus of these programs are to engage the students in the high school experience by offering them coursework specific to their interests.

The term “Career Technical Education” has more recently taken the place of what was once called vocational education. Career Technical Education courses focus on preparing young students for college while engaging them in various career programs. Career Technical Education programs include Career Academies, Partnership Academies and Regional Occupation Centers.

Career Academies

Career academies are small supportive learning environments which are personalized and inclusive of all students. Career academies offer paths in 12 different areas including health, business finance, arts and communications, engineering, law and government.¹⁴

“A career academy is basically a school-within-a school that provides a college-preparatory curriculum with a career-related theme.”¹⁵ They provide challenging and rigorous college preparatory courses and relevant curriculum to prepare students for college, careers and productive citizenship. Career academies include partnerships among parents, businesses and other community resources.

¹⁴ David Stern, “Is There Solid Evidence of Positive Effects for High School Students?” Career Academy Support Network, (January 2004): 16, http://casn.berkeley.edu/resources/solid_evidence.html; accessed March 21, 2008.

¹⁵David Stern, “Building Blocks for Reconstructing American High Schools,” Career Academy Support Network, (October 2000): 3, <http://casn.berkeley.edu/resources/bldgblocks.pdf>; accessed March 21, 2008.

Partnership Academies

Partnership academies prepare high school students for careers while involving business partners in their high school curriculum. Partnership academies combine a number of features generally considered to be effective. They:

- Group 10th through 12th grade students into several related courses
- Organize cross-curricular teams to teach these classes
- Frame these classes within a broadly combined career theme
- Show students the connections between their academic subjects and this theme
- Show students connections between coursework and life beyond high school: college and career
- Incorporate employer and community support in the form of advisory groups, speakers, field trips, mentors and internships¹⁶

At least 50% of these students must be identified as “at-risk” according to criteria governing these academies. This format takes the at-risk student and provides them with the opportunity for hope and success.

ROCPs

Regional Occupation Centers (ROCPs) allow students from schools within certain areas or districts to attend career training at a single location. This strategy is effective when resources such as classroom space, equipment, teacher availability as well as employer availability is limited. “Regionalization provides for efficient use of limited resources, while allowing student access to a broad array of training opportunities that often require

¹⁶ Denise Bradby, “A Profile of the California Partnership Academies 2004-2005,” ConnectEd, (March 2007): 6, http://www.connectedcalifornia.org/publications/CA_Partnerships.pdf; accessed March 21, 2008.

expensive technical equipment and specially trained and experienced instructors.”¹⁷

Students enrolled in ROCP’s learn entry level occupations and skills in demand by employers.

The Students

The numbers and diversity of these students should catch the interest of law enforcement recruiters. They are part of a unique generation referred to as Generation “Y”, Nexters or Millennials. These individuals were born between 1980 and 2000. They are a part of the young workforce and the future recruiting class for years to come. Police recruiters have several reasons to fall in love with this generation. There are approximately 72.9 million of them.¹⁸ Twenty-two million more than Generation “X”. Agencies currently have the oldest of the Millennials working on their forces. Many more are becoming eligible which shows promise for police recruiters

While these numbers show promise, the demographics of this group are also encouraging. A study conducted by Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), indicated agencies with over 500 officers are having significant problems drawing sufficient qualified applicants. “Agencies are also having difficulty in attracting and hiring qualified female applicants across all agency size categories, and concerns still remain about the hiring of minority candidates. These data provide reasons to be concerned about the future of police staffing.”¹⁹ Law enforcement professionals across the nation have continued to make

¹⁷ Perkins, California State Plan for Career Technical Education, 14.

¹⁸ Raines, Generations at Work, 129.

¹⁹ Bruce Taylor, “The Cop Crunch: Recruiting and Hiring Crises in Law Enforcement,” (Part 1), Police Executive Research Forum; (December 2005) 4.
<http://www.iacpnet.com/iacpnet/members/databases/core/doc; Document # 582773>, accessed June 1, 2006.

concerted efforts to hire both women and minority candidates. This statement reinforces the fact that the profession must be resilient in its efforts and continue to be diligent in recruiting eligible candidates from all demographic categories.

A goal of public service is to have those serving mirror the public they serve. The law enforcement profession as a whole has fallen short in attempts to reach this goal. In an article by the National Center for Women and Policing, gender discrimination, underutilization of female officers, sexual harassment and inflexible working patterns were identified as barriers to women in law enforcement.²⁰ A separate study conducted in the United Kingdom identified the idea of working in a racist environment, facing prejudice from both colleagues and the public, and a lack in confidence colleagues assisting them in circumstances where their life or physical safety were at risk as factors which discouraged ethnic groups from applying for police officer positions.²¹ While this study was conducted in the United Kingdom the same perspectives exist in the United States. Fortunately, those in CTE's represent the "mirror of the community" we are seeking.

According to the California State Plan for Career Technical Education the 2006 – 2007 Career Technical Education enrollment figures revealed the following demographic statistics.²²

²⁰ Kim Lonsway, "Hiring and Retaining More Women: The Advantages to Law Enforcement Agencies," National Center for Women and Policing a Division of the Feminist Majority Foundation, Spring 2003, 9. <http://www.womenandpolicing.org/pdf/NewAdvantagesReport.pdf>; accessed March 17, 2008.

²¹ Vanessa Stone and Rachel Tuffin, "Attitudes of People from Minority Ethnic Communities towards a Career in the Police Services," Police Research Series Paper, (London: Policing and Reducing Crime Unit, 2000), 136

²² Perkins, California State Plan for Career Technical Education, 28, http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cte/downloads/cteplan_v5.pdf

CTE Student Enrollment

Gender

Male	55.4%
Female	44.6%

Ethnicity

Asian and Indian	8.4%
Filipino and Pacific Islander	3.4%
Hispanic	43.2%
Black	7.0%
White	36%
Multiple	1.9%

According to the California Department of Finance, these figures reflect the population of what California communities might look like in the next ten to twenty years. The Demographic Research Unit projects California's population will include an equal number of males and females. Ethnically the population will be made up of 13 percent Asian/Indian, 41 percent Hispanic, five percent Black and 37 percent White.²³ Changes continue at a rapid pace. Increases in the Hispanic population will quite possibly double in the next fifty years. The diversity contained within the CTE's provides an attractive recruiting pool for police officials.

Desirable Characteristics

²³California Department of Finance Demographic Research Unit 2007, "Population Projections by Race/Ethnicity Gender and Age Report 06 P-3," (July 2007), <http://www.dof.ca.gov/HTML/DEMOGRAP/ReportsPapers/Projections/P3/documents/CALIFORNIA.XLS>; accessed March 22, 2008.

According to John Stafford, director of JMS Associates, Generation Y'ers possess many characteristics law enforcement recruiters look for in qualified applicants. They are cooperative team players and are willing to accept authority. They follow rules, are optimistic in their outlook, independent, and like structured time.²⁴ They possess core values of optimism, civic duty, confidence, achievement, sociability, morality, street smarts and diversity.²⁵ These characteristics and values often take years to develop in employees. Police supervisors and administrators often site these characteristics and values as desirable not only when recruiting but in their current employees. The personality of this group of collective individuals gives an optimistic outlook for policing in the 21st century.

This Generation grew up with technological gadgets such iPods to cell phones. Text messaging and e-mail is their normal means of communication. The Nexter's have seen the internet evolve over the course of their lives from inception to where it is today. They are accustom to e-learning, blogging and pod casts. This group will probably be the first generation to earn their high school diploma's on-line. These e-learners will bring this technical knowledge with them at a time when tech is impacting law enforcement at a rapid rate.

The Partnership Opportunity

The resurgence in high school vocational programs offers law enforcement the opportunity to develop more in depth partnerships with the schools and students. In

²⁴ John Stafford, "Managing Generational Change-Generation X, Y and the Boom," IACP Training Program. 2003, 37.

²⁵ Raines, Generations at Work, 132.

2006, California had 1100 comprehensive high schools with an enrollment of 1,953,077 students.²⁶ Career Technical Education programs, magnet schools and charter schools offer 24,000 courses and accounted for 39 percent of these enrollments in 2005-2006.²⁷ These statistics certainly suggest numerous recruiting opportunities for law enforcement agencies.

The common thread throughout each of these vocational education opportunities is the fact they all offer law enforcement and public safety programs. Students have displayed an early interest in law enforcement and are a captive group in the high school environment. Partnerships have been developed between law enforcement and these vocational programs. The question is, to what level has relationship been developed? Is this partnership short term and fragmented or comprehensive? Has the future of law enforcement been taken into account? These questions must be answered to determine the impact high school law enforcement vocational programs will have on law enforcement recruiting in the future.

Putting it All Together

In general, peace officers have limited access to high school classrooms. They continue to commit to primary schools as school resource officers. Many teach DARE and GREAT classes. The transition to high school has been somewhat problematic. High school teachers are required to possess teaching credentials. Those teachers instructing in

²⁶Perkins, California State Plan for Career Technical Education, 25, http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cte/downloads/cteplan_v5.pdf

²⁷Perkins, California State Plan for Career Technical Education, 21, http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cte/downloads/cteplan_v5.pdf

the law enforcement vocational programs often have limited experience or institutional knowledge. They rely on periodic contact with officers and mentoring programs requiring monthly contact with students. Positive daily interaction between the school, police and the students is rare. The schools and police must intensify this relationship if their goal is to motivate these students towards a career in law enforcement.

Police administrators must think of officer's assignments as an investment in the future. Just like the commitment made in primary school, the partnership between the local high schools and the police has value. The focus must shift from crime prevention to the development of career paths for these students. Departments must allow officers to work with the teachers or "team teach" these programs in order to see positive results. Prime candidates for this position are officers who have worked as school resource officers, DARE and GREAT instructors and basic academy coordinators. Recruit training officers, certified academy instructors, graduates of the Master Instructor Development Program could become "team teachers."

Jr. ROTC programs have developed successful programs using this strategy between the schools and the military. Jr. ROTC programs in high schools around the country partner servicemen and educators who are committed to the students in these programs. They keep students engaged through interesting lessons and provide these students a chance to succeed. The Defense Department claims approximately forty percent of Jr. ROTC graduates from around the country enlist in the military²⁸. Officers and teachers in law

²⁸David Goodman, "Recruiting the Class of 2005," MotherJones.com (January/February 2002) 4. <http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2002/01/rotc.html>; accessed December 18, 2007.

enforcement vocational courses must make this same commitment to keep students motivated and interested in the profession. Law enforcement could have the same success rate by providing exciting and realistic views of the police profession in the classroom. Guidance and daily contact with the police is the key to keeping their interest. The development of stimulating lesson plans and unique curriculum delivery is paramount in keeping students engaged. If the students are engaged this strategy will have a positive impact for years to come.

Police agencies must make a further commitment to these students upon graduation. The gap between high school graduation and employment with a police agency can take from three to five years. Agencies must commit to qualified individuals in this program. These individuals should be offered access to department sponsored programs, part time and volunteer positions in the department and financial support to those continuing their vocation with a local community college. Many vocational programs have found success when the partnerships assist the student move from the high school and community college programs on to apprenticeship then work. This type of commitment is needed to keep these young hopefuls interested in a peace officer career.

Conclusion

While every successful police applicant is a recruiting triumph the challenge is currently outpacing successes. Retirements, shrinking applicant pools, lack of qualified applicants, along with increasing populations and continued increase in public demand for service have increased the number of unfilled police positions throughout the state.

Simple math prevails. California law enforcement agencies have experienced a seventeen percent increase in open police officer positions in the last three years. The profession must take advantage of recruiting opportunities as they become available.

The rise of law enforcement vocational programs around the state provides excellent opportunities for police and students attending these courses. State and federal funding is currently allotted to finance the programs. The courses provide officers the opportunity to recruit from a captive audience interested in law enforcement. The number of estimated students in police vocational programs around the state has reached 70,000. This is fertile territory. The level of success, for both the police and the students, will be directly related to the strength of the bond formed between law enforcement, the educators and the students.