

**DEVELOPING POLICE OFFICERS IN HIGH SCHOOL**

**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).

## **DEVELOPING POLICE OFFICERS IN HIGH SCHOOL**

During good times, law enforcement agencies do not pay much attention to recruiting. These are not good times, and many police departments are facing their worst budget crunch in recent history. Agencies are cutting staffing by attrition, early retirements, layoffs, and hiring freezes. Many have suspended recruiting altogether, while those with limited openings can choose from many qualified job seekers. Why should we pay much attention to recruiting now?

Demand for additional personnel has not evaporated; it has just been placed on hold. Think of our current budget problem as a log that falls across a stream. The water will pool behind the log until it eventually spills over and the stream begins flowing again. The same will happen with law enforcement hiring. Eventually, budgets will stabilize and funding will once again begin flowing to law enforcement agencies. When this happens, the agencies with solid recruiting strategies will fare much better than those with no plan in place.

We have an opportunity to change our focus from recruiting candidates to developing them. A shift in education is resulting in a renewed focus on high-school-level career courses. High schools have provided Regional Occupational Programs (ROP) or Career Technical Education (CTE) courses to their students for many years. Unfortunately, many of these courses have not kept pace with society and focused on career pathways in declining industries. For example, the traditional metal-shop class was intended to develop skills needed in manufacturing jobs, an industry that has all but disappeared from our economy. New legislation in 2006 required California to modernize its Regional Occupational Centers and Programs (ROCPs).<sup>1</sup> The change shifts

the focus from adult education classes to high school courses, and requires the development of curriculum targeting growth industries.

### The Need for Change

Law enforcement recruiting hasn't changed much over the years. Most agencies advertise in local papers, post the openings on their website, and some go as far as hosting career events and job fairs. Applications are collected, reviewed for minimum qualifications, and candidates are invited to attend oral interviews. Successful candidates enter the background process, and those that survive are placed in the local police academy. Some have already attended the police academy and are placed in a field training program. Candidates that pass the field training program become probationary officers, while many that do not pass the training program must be let go and the process repeated to fill the new vacancy.

The problem with law enforcement's traditional approach to recruiting is that it is often completely passive. Advertisements and website announcements rely on candidates to come looking for a job. While this approach does capture a number of applicants who are serious about a career in policing, it also generates a fair number of applicants who are not. The majority of "open" applications received are from candidates who have not prepared for the position, do not have a good understanding of what the job requires, and often lack the skills or background necessary to be successful in law enforcement. As an example, the City of Petaluma, a mid-sized police agency in northern California, received 429 applications for open positions from the CalOpps website in fiscal year 2008/09. Of those 429 applications, only 75 candidates met the minimum qualifications and were invited to interview for the position.<sup>ii</sup>

In a normal budget climate, law enforcement dedicates scant resources to recruiting. A California Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) study conducted during its 2005 Recruitment and Retention Symposium revealed that 54% of agencies budgeted no money for recruiting<sup>iii</sup>. In an era of declining budgets, one can only wonder about how many more that now dedicate no funding to recruiting in addition to that majority. If we can agree that law enforcement must recruit personnel in the future, and that the traditional model of recruiting is less than efficient, how do we overcome the reluctance to spend money on the recruiting process? Maybe it isn't money at all. In truth, we don't have to spend money to change how we recruit.

### Developing Recruits

One of the courses beginning to take shape is a public safety careers course presented at the high school level. Educators have recognized public safety is a growth industry with solid employment projections and better-than-average salary opportunities. They also recognize that public safety careers require specific skills and preparation that are well suited for teaching at the high school level. As a result, a handful of public high schools are experimenting with public safety careers courses. The course is designed to prepare young adults for a career in public safety by bolstering their skills and preparing them for entry level positions or continued education at the college level.<sup>iv</sup>

The San Bernardino County School District (SBCSD) Regional Occupational Programs (ROP) is a good example of the influence public safety careers courses can have on students. The SBCSD has offered an Introduction to Law Enforcement course in one or more of its schools for more than 15 years. Though a different model than the newer public safety careers course, the introductory course has been very successful.

Warren Wright, the Coordinator of Curriculum and ROP for SBCSD said in a telephone interview that many of the students “...get into it as a fluke, but once they are in there, they really enjoy it. The majority of students feed into the community college. Many of them go into related careers in corrections, drug counseling, law enforcement, and fire services.”<sup>v</sup> Wright said the course is often used to demonstrate the importance of science, math and English to students and improves their performance in other courses.

Formal secondary courses seek to develop potential candidates, rather than find random candidates that might be considering public safety a career. Exposing students to public safety careers at the high school level greatly broadens the potential pool of candidates. As recent survey of police recruits revealed that 50% or more of the recruits decided they were interested in law enforcement by high school graduation.<sup>vi</sup> These courses reach a very diverse student body and have the ability to capture the attention of students that otherwise might not consider public safety.

Pat Dennen is a self-described disgruntled student. He wasn't a bad kid; he just didn't like high school. In fact, when he signed up for an off-campus fire science course, he did so to get out of school. Today, Chief Dennen runs the San Bernardino County Fire Department, is the President of the California Fire Chief's Association, and serves on the Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Task Force. Chief Dennen describes his high school course as “The turning point of my youth. I had no idea I would be interested in fire science and I fell in love with the career”.<sup>vii</sup> Chief Dennen said he has heard many similar stories over the years, and is an ardent supporter of careers courses at the high school level. He is a powerful example of the positive impact a high school career course can have on a

young student, and compelling evidence that similar courses dedicated to police careers can be equally as effective.

In the current model gaining popularity, public safety careers courses are presented in a year-long format and taught by current high school credentialed teachers. The teachers do not need to have a background in public safety. They follow a developed curriculum of instruction; broken into five basic blocks of instruction. Unit 1 is entitled Career Pathway Exploration and presents life choice material, resume building, integrity, problem solving, and similar background forming decision making skills. Unit 2 explores the careers available in law enforcement. Unit 3 explores the careers available in fire protection services. Unit 4 examines emergency medical care and first responder duties. And finally, Unit 5 incorporates all the instruction into public safety field training exercises where the students complete “table top” exercises and role playing scenarios using their new skills. All of the instruction is matched to the content taught in the local junior college programs, making the transition to college prep courses a natural “next step” for attendees.

### Competing with the Private Sector

The need to reach potential candidates at an early age is critical. As law enforcement becomes more complex, we need the best and the brightest candidates to enter the field. New officers must be able to speak well, write effectively, understand criminal law, know civil law, possess sound judgment, make decisions, and operate with limited supervision just to list a few skills. Unfortunately for public safety, these are the same skills that make these individuals marketable in almost any field they would choose to enter. Law enforcement is competing with the private sector for these very same

people. Carol Bernstein of the Adler Group states that “... one area of focus getting attention is the notion of shifting from the traditional, reactive corporate recruitment model to a more strategic, proactive framework.”<sup>viii</sup>

One of the most pressing problems facing public safety recruiters is the background requirements to enter the profession. How often does the perfect candidate get to the background stage only to wash out of the process due to mistakes they made at an early age? High school based public safety careers courses have the potential to reach these candidates during their formative years. The courses teach students how to avoid many common pitfalls and background mistakes that disqualify many candidates. The students are exposed to the importance of good decision making and are given the knowledge necessary to avoid many of the most common mistakes. Students are taught the importance of work ethic, personal choices, job performance, developing references, completing job applications, and other factors that build a solid background history. As an example, a California high school public safety course description states, “Integrated throughout the course are career preparation standards, which include basic academic skills, communication, interpersonal skills, problem solving and workplace safety, technology and employment literacy connection to core academic standards”<sup>ix</sup>

Public safety careers courses are not limited only to students considering a career in public safety. The course is a good general knowledge course that contains a wealth of information that benefits students no matter what career field they might pursue. The course teaches skills that translate very well into any career field. The ability to write clearly, understand law, build a solid work history, speak effectively, and so on, are all examples of skills that benefit students seeking employment in any occupation. Public

safety also stands to benefit from new generations with a better understanding of the demands placed on public safety. These students are our future business leaders and local politicians and will someday have an impact on local public safety decisions. In fact, early data indicates the impact can be both immediate and pronounced.

The Summit Leadership Academy High Desert is an example of a focused commitment to vocational preparation in secondary schools. Established in 2005-2006, the charter high school prepares students for careers in criminal justice, fire science and the military in addition to general education coursework. By its second year, the school achieved a 97% attendance rate with all seniors passing the California High School Exit Exam in English/language arts and math.<sup>x</sup> The school has a much lower dropout rate than the rest of the school district, and a higher graduation rate than the state average. True, this is an example at the extreme end of the spectrum, but the immediate success of the school supports the belief that focused vocational courses are very effective, a model that can be replicated elsewhere as one might desire.

Public safety careers courses are not intended to be a quick fix for recruiting new candidates. Students typically take these courses as electives during their junior or senior years and typically are between 16 and 18 years old at the time of the class. Most of the students interested in the field will continue their education at the local junior college level and some will move on to a four-year college. Nellie Ainsworth, a 17 year old high school student and public safety career course graduate stated, “I wasn’t thinking about a career in law enforcement when I signed up for the course. Now I plan on exploring related jobs at the junior college”.<sup>xi</sup> If an agency desires to partner with their high school

in such an effort, having added candidates for explorer programs or internship opportunities is only a starting point.

Guest speakers and field trips to local agencies provide opportunities to create interest in your agency. The more exposure these students have to the public safety field, the more likely they will consider it as a career as they mature. Excitement, teamwork, decision-making, and a challenging environment are often more appealing to young students than working their way up a business ladder. In his book on recruiting and retention, Dwayne Orrick writes, "...particularly younger applicants see the exciting aspects of the career as a huge opportunity".<sup>xii</sup>

### Time for Change

Once a course is established, it will take between four and five years before local agencies can expect to see graduates entering their hiring process. Most of these courses are new and have only been in existence for 1 to 3 years, not enough time to gather data on their long-term success. In Northern California, Marin, Sonoma, Napa, Lake, and Mendocino counties all have public safety careers courses being taught at the high school level. As these courses mature, it should be relatively easy to gather data on the program's success by surveying the number of course graduates who apply for work in the public safety fields. During normal budget cycles, most agencies are focused on filling vacancies and do not have time to invest in long-term programs. With high school-based public safety courses, there is little to no monetary investment. With the current budget concerns constricting hiring, law enforcement can afford to wait for the results these courses should produce.

## Conclusion

If you are interested in learning more about high school based public safety careers courses, start by contacting your local high school district. Most districts have a Director of Curriculum who determines what course offerings are made in local schools. Make a call; find out if your local district is offering or considering public safety careers courses. If not, make an appointment and encourage them to consider starting one at the local level. You can also call your local County Office of Education and speak with someone in the Career Technical Education (CTE) program to start the advocacy process. They will most likely be aware of such programs, and can easily learn more by networking with colleagues in other counties who have established programs in place.

With more courses taking place, the curriculum for public safety careers courses is available and through the sharing of information, there is no need to reinvent the wheel, thus making start up time much quicker. Your interest in starting a course reaffirms the purpose of career education; preparing students to enter a rewarding career field with the potential for good salary and steady employment. Many times opportunity can be found in crisis. Now is the time to invest in the future by taking a new approach to recruiting. There are a lot of Chief Dennens out there waiting to be pointed in the right direction. Don't look for employees, develop them.

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<sup>i</sup> AB 2448 Regional Occupational Centers and Programs Accountability and Reform Act. (2006) Hancock. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/ct/rp/ab244807summary.asp>

<sup>ii</sup> City of Petaluma Police Department Annual Report (2008/09). Petaluma, California.

<sup>iii</sup> Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (April 2006). *Recruitment and Retention Best Practices Update* (POST publication No.POST2005TPS-0371A). [Publications@post.ca.gov](mailto:Publications@post.ca.gov)

<sup>iv</sup> Chancellor's Office, California Community Colleges. (2006). Grant Application Santa Rosa Junior College. RFA Specification Number 06-0090

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<sup>v</sup> Warren Wright, telephone interview. July 27, 2009

<sup>vi</sup> Spilberg, Shelley, PH.D., California Commission on POST. Law Enforcement Recruitment – Challenges & Strategies. (Power Point presentation, IMPAAC Conference, June 09, 2008).

<http://www.ipacweb.org/conf/08/spilberg.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> Pat Dennen, telephone interview. July 27, 2009

<sup>viii</sup> Bernstein, C. (2008, August 13). *Shifting from a Traditional, Reactive Corporate Recruitment Model to a Strategic, Proactive Framework*. From <http://adlerconcepts.com/resources/column/newsletter>

<sup>ix</sup> Anon. (November 2007). *Career Technical Education for Law, Public Safety, Corrections, and Security Pathways*. Mendocino County Office of Education Publication.

<sup>x</sup> School Accountability Report Card (2006-2007) Summit Leadership Academy High Desert.

<http://www.slahd.com/documents/0607sarc.pdf>

<sup>xi</sup> Ainsworth, Nellie. (2008, September 12). NGT Panel Discussion on Public Safety Career Courses. Petaluma, California.

<sup>xii</sup> Orrick, W. Dwayne (2008) *Recruitment, Retention, and Turnover of Police Personnel*. Springfield, Illinois. Charles C Thomas Publisher, LTD.