

IT MAY NOT BE A TECHNOLOGY THING; IT MAY BE THE RIGHT THING

The future of technology-enabled learning on Basic Law Enforcement training

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.

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Keeping pace with technology in law enforcement can be explained by a simple metaphorical example: You are the law enforcement executive, standing by a fast moving freight train. Each train car is a technological solution to one or more of your vexing problems. The cars that just passed offered good solutions. The cars in front of you may offer better solutions; the cars arriving soon promise the best solutions. There is a cost for each train car; those which have passed are less expensive, but still obtainable, the ones arriving now are more expensive. The ones yet to come are much more costly, but offer great promise. When do you jump on the train? Do you leap now, wait for better opportunities, or chase past options that are less effective, but offer some savings? That question has been asked, answered, acted upon and not; all with tremendous results as well as tragic failures.

For the contemporary executive, tech acquisitions are like watching the train. When one is evaluating technology for two way communication, digital recorders or digital cameras; just watching technology and costs and deciding when to buy may be enough. When looking at basic training and the future careers of deputy sheriffs and police officers, however, more should be considered. The technology-driven “on line” academy may offer more than just a technological solution, it might completely change the way law enforcement selects, trains and hires the next generation of cops.

The Preferable Future

Consider the academy of the near future. In this future, a young person interested in law enforcement enrolls in the online “pre academy.” The enrollment entails a cursory background and personal identity verification. The future cadet begins a synchronous curriculum that teaches the law, state penal codes, vehicle codes and any other subject matter deemed public information. Simultaneously, benchmarks of physical fitness are given to the candidate, and an outsourced background is administered at the candidate’s cost. Ten to twelve weeks elapse, and the candidate has completed a full background, attests to have achieved the required physical fitness requirements and is offered a place in an upcoming “secondary academy”. All of this training, fully compliant with POST and agency standards, is delivered at almost no cost to the department, and thus, no cost to the taxpayers.

The trainee now steps foot onto a POST academy (the brick and mortar one) academically prepared to receive the hands-on portion of basic law enforcement training. If the physical fitness level is not what the trainee claimed, they are excused from the program, again no loss to any department or taxpayers. Several weeks later, our trainee finishes the basic academy (all at his or her cost) and is as prepared as the academy graduate of old to be considered for the job of police officer or deputy sheriff. The academy holds a career day; agencies in the region converge to find their next best cop. Conditional hires are offered and careers begin. In the end, a highly motivated police officer or deputy sheriff enters the profession.

The hiring department has shown better stewardship with the taxpayer's money and the academy is financially solvent and not dependent on a community college to make ends meet. Initial success hybrid approach to career preparation continues, and law enforcement becomes a more sought-after career for those who truly want it. With the cost barriers lowered, and the responsibility to self-select into the profession becoming the province of the prospective employee, the pay and benefits recede as an issue of focus; the candidate really wants the job for which he or she has prepared. Of course, the question begs an answer; can we make this scenario come true?

The Present

The ability to deliver an online, or hybrid model, academy is here; it's just a matter of whether law enforcement agencies are prepared to accept it. The Basic Academy and the manner in which its delivered has changed little in the last thirty years, a time when technology has changed so much. Why is that? Tradition maybe? Maybe because it is a case of, "that's the way we have always done it." It is this next generation of police officer, combined with ongoing constraints on training budgets, which could force what probably should have been happening gradually to occur more readily.

The current Basic Academy is very costly when one considers the fiscal obligation to provide trainers, purchase equipment and provide physical facilities. According to Lieutenant Nina Jansen, Academy Director at the San Bernardino Sheriff's Regional Training Center (SBSRTC), the full cost to train one cadet for the 880-hour basic academy is about \$35,000. This program, like most programs throughout the State, exist in affiliation with a local community

college. Academies are generally funded primarily through FTE's (Full Time Equivalents). A FTE is a ratio of attendance hours for a single student attending the academy fulltime. At SBSRTC the FTE rate is \$3.93 per hour. For one student, per academy, with no absences, the academy receives \$3,458.40. Subtract the \$1,828 paid for tuition paid by the hiring agency; the total subsidization per student is \$1,630. The difference between the \$35,000 and the \$1,630 is partially made up by the more students and the more hours. Most academies run four classes per year so the FTE's support some staffing and equipment. The rest is covered by the training center. Without the college affiliation the programs would clearly struggle survive. And the cost to train each cadet is further exacerbated by the added expense to compensate them if they have already been hired by the sponsoring agency.

The average wage paid to a sponsored cadet or an entry-level police officer in California is \$20.09 per hour. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Using San Bernardino Sheriff's Academy's 880-hour program, that translates to \$17,679 dollars during the academy. If the trainee does not complete the training, any of that cost is lost and never recovered. Rather than continuing this outdated, expensive and largely inefficient model of hire, pay and then train, the generation entering the workplace, and the technology advancements now in place, present an opportunity for some real change.

Online platforms are less expensive, easily sustainable and adaptable for almost any training experience. In fact, such platforms will likely be preferred by near future generations. According to James Thompson, the Dean of McClellan Center at The Sacramento Regional Public Safety Training Center, "I think new learners will force us to look at on line training;

currently we are conducting a double blind study on virtual training. The obvious advantages are lower costs, but we want to make sure the training has a high persistence rate and thus a high success rate before we change how we do things.” Right now, 30 percent of all post secondary education is online; experts say that number will rise to 37 percent by 2015. (Sloan Survey, 2010). Additionally, two-thirds of for-profit institutions now say online learning is a critical part of their long-term strategy. (Goldman, 2011) Think of the radical possibilities if California’s police academies followed suit.

Some Resistance in Reality

Transition to the next generation of law enforcement academies will not come without some resistance. Anytime we nudge beliefs so drastically, there will be friction. The potential is the same for law enforcement as it has been in mainstream learning. Sometimes there is fear that technology will inappropriately dictate how the program is delivered, thus adversely affecting the quality of well established face-to-face programs. (Schulte, 2010). Perhaps we can be reminded of other sea changes in the past twenty years that initially received negative scrutiny, but which now are quite commonplace. Mobile Data Computers and “TASER” technology are examples of technological changes that were doubted and now revered. (Seaskate, 1998). Although great technological change is most often met with skepticism and opposition, even technology detractors would acknowledge the technology they are now using to make their jobs easier or more productive. The scary thing about technological change is the fear or the impossibility of incremental change. Examining the shift to a pre academy scenario should be tested and dished out incrementally.

The best way to do this is to offer prerequisite online training to a test group of an upcoming academy. Don't change the existing program, just take a small group and give them certain subjects on line and test their knowledge when they start the "on location program." This proof of concept approach will offer not only a test of knowledge but an opinion from participants as to the quality of the on line training versus the classroom training. In this proposal, they will have experienced both. As time goes on, more subjects can be added to the prerequisite menu and students can study and complete on line tests to measure their progress before they arrive. The process must then be continually assessed before moving on. A true assessment will not only include grade points and knowledge, but should also consider efficiency perceptions by the students and financial projections by administrators.

After merit for the initiative is proven and some policies and procedures have been established, a block of a future academy can be offered exclusively on line and the academy can be shortened by the respective time. The foundation has been set and all that needs to occur is a repeat of the initial step for additional subjects until the only curriculum left is that which must be taught in house. For years we have been agonizing over what is taught; now we must focus on how it is taught. (Siemens and Tittenburg, 2009).

The California Basic Academy is rich in tradition and has produced thousands of competent and successful police officers and deputy sheriffs. That high standard should never change and should be applied to all future endeavors. In today's environment, technology is changing so quickly and so powerfully it is changing our culture and the way the next generation learns. (The economist intelligence unit, 2008). The academy of the future should

look very different from the current academy, driven both by the expanded use of remote technologies and the recruits entering police service. It will change; if we start taking a look at adapting to that change now, we will be better prepared for the future. Examining how we train, select and hire future law enforcement officers is a constant responsibility, but the current conditions demand a harder look. It may not be a technology thing. It may be the right thing.

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