

**The Bill Blackwood
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**Improving Police Supervision with
Tuition Reimbursement Programs**

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ABSTRACT

The field of law enforcement has made many innovations since its early beginnings. The vehicles, weapons, and computers utilized by police officers are just a few examples of these innovations. One area where law enforcement has failed to advance pertains to the lack of college education in police supervisors, which has limited the professional development and leadership potential of our police leaders. The educational standards in other professions have improved, and law enforcement should conform to avoid obsolescence. Law enforcement agencies should offer supervisors tuition reimbursement programs to pursue a college education, in order to better serve the public and further cement the argument that policing is a profession.

By offering tuition reimbursement programs, law enforcement agencies incentivize their supervisors to pursue a college education. Tuition reimbursement programs are also an effective retention tool, as supervisors recognize the investment their agencies have made in them. A long-standing motto of police departments throughout the United States of America is to protect and serve the community. The research referenced in this paper supports that a college education will enhance the skills of police supervisors, which results in better community service. The field of law enforcement needs college educated supervisors in leadership positions, in order to shape the vision and culture of their departments, and safeguard the civil rights of the public.

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INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement is regarded as a noble profession. Though police officers from departments throughout the country continue to answer the call, the field of professional policing has evolved from its early beginnings. New threats have challenged law enforcement to increase policing standards, particularly in the area of educational standards. Communities have also raised their expectations of law enforcement, and they refuse to accept inept service from police departments that fail to innovate. The relationship between education and police standards was stressed by August Vollmer in the early 20th century. Vollmer knew during his timeframe that police officers with a higher education were better equipped to deal with the evolution of policing (Roberts, Herrington, Jones, White, & Day, 2016).

The case for increased educational standards needs to begin with law enforcement's leadership personnel. Many police supervisors lack college education, which limits their professional development and leadership potential (Slater, 2012). Attending college is more than just about earning a degree, it also provides a nuanced way of thinking about social issues. Law enforcement executives and their departments need to value learning, and challenge the assumptions of issues currently affecting policing today. The challenges facing professional policing are more complex than ever before, and law enforcement will have to make preparations, or fall victim to complacency. This is especially true for the supervisors who are accountable for the actions and decision making of the officers under their command. Law enforcement executives who question the value police supervisors obtaining an education should look to the trend of police departments requiring college education to promote to higher

levels of responsibility. Several federal law enforcement agencies require a bachelor's degree to be considered for employment (Carlan, 1999).

If law enforcement accepts the reality that education is a requisite for better service to the community, the next step is for law enforcement executives to provide assistance for their leadership in pursuing a college education. It will take support and an organization commitment to learning for police supervisors to achieve this vision of professionalism. Law enforcement agencies should offer supervisors tuition reimbursement programs to pursue a college education, in order to better serve the public and further cement the argument that policing is a profession.

POSITION

Tuition reimbursement programs will incentivize police supervisors to pursue a college education. There are several factors law enforcement personnel consider when deciding to attend college, which include scheduling, location of campus, and degree type. The most important factor in selecting a college program to pursue is costs associated with tuition and fees (Hall, Ventura, & Lambert, 2007). It is not difficult to understand why the financial investment of a college education would have to be considered against the other financial priorities in a police officer's life. For this reason, it is critical that law enforcement agencies step up, and provide the financial assistance needed for their leaders to pursue a college education.

Kentucky Department of Corrections (DOC) probation and parole officer Brittany Basberg attributed her department's tuition assistance program for creating the means for which she was able to continue pursuing a formal education. Another DOC employee, Brenda Overstreet-Kopatz, praised the tuition assistance program for

providing her with the opportunity to achieve her educational goals and career objectives (Harris, 2009). The examples provided by the Kentucky DOC exemplify how tuition reimbursement programs incentivize law enforcement personnel, including supervisors, to pursue a college education.

Tuition reimbursement programs will also assist police agencies with the retention of police supervisors. It is not inconceivable to see why an employee would want to stay with a law enforcement agency that supports them in accomplishing their educational goals. The Kentucky DOC attributes their tuition assistance program for higher levels of morale, productivity, and lower turnover rates. The DOC determined that their employees who take advantage of the tuition assistance program generally stay longer with their department, and they tend to be career minded and seek longevity (Harris, 2009).

Law enforcement agencies will have to seriously evaluate the importance of retaining quality police supervisors, in order to compete with the community's increasing demand for better public service. The most common reason for why employees leave their positions is a perceived limited potential for professional growth. This was apparent from one survey of newly hired Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recruits who were questioned why they left their former police officer positions (Terra, 2009).

If police supervisors perceive that the agencies they work for have failed to provide the professional development that is required to perform their jobs, they will seek employment at another agency that supports their leadership development (Terra, 2009). It would be difficult to argue against the importance of retaining quality police supervisors. Law enforcement agencies should recognize that lack of professional

development is a common reason for employee attrition, and consider the amount of time and training that goes into replacing quality supervisors. One research study found that college educated officers were more likely to promote within their agencies (Roberg & Bonn, 2004). The goal of obtaining a promotion in the department officers and supervisors have already invested their time and effort in could be a powerful retention tool for the department.

Another aspect to consider is that a college education will enhance the skills of police supervisors, so they can provide better service to the community. Research indicates that better job performance and job satisfaction are characteristics of law enforcement employees with higher levels of higher levels of education. The research also indicates that law enforcement employees with higher education appear less authoritarian, and show empathy towards their communities with respect to social and cultural differences (Hall et al., 2007).

Other studies have shown that college educated officers are more proficient in their writing and communication abilities, which is important in a profession where officers take incident reports and interview members of the community. Some of the other positive characteristics referenced included greater professionalism, tolerance, and understanding for human behavior, which all lead to fewer disciplinary actions. College educated officers also display increased self-confidence, morale, and motivation, while emphasizing ethical conduct and displaying greater problem analysis skills (Bruns & Bruns, 2015).

Job proficiency and experience is crucial to becoming an effective police officer, and it requires higher levels of critical thinking, strategic insight, and communication to

be an effective police supervisor (Roberts et al., 2016). Police officers' bare higher levels of responsibility and accountability over their officers, and it would be a disservice to the community to not have supervisors who were intellectually and emotionally equipped to lead their teams.

Another study determined that citizens perceived better problem-solving and judgement skills from police officers that were college graduates (Carlan, 1999). This is important considering that the public's perception can become the narrative that defines the reputation of a police department. Research posits that college educated officers better understand human behavior, and they are more sensitive to community relations. This research stands to reason that college educated officers are more "humanistic" in the performance of their duties, which matches the national trend of more police departments adopting the community policing philosophy. Police departments that implement community policing strategies would benefit from employing supervisors that empathize with their local citizens, and adapt to the complex nature of policing (Roberg & Bonn, 2004).

Lastly, an increase of police supervisors with college education will strengthen the argument that policing is a profession. College educated supervisors are vital to the movement that policing is a profession. The law enforcement community needs well-educated supervisors in leadership positions, in order to make crucial policy decisions and to be the protector of their communities' inalienable rights. To break away from the traditional perception that law enforcement is a "semiskilled occupation", law enforcement agencies will have to accept that a college education is necessary for its supervisors (Carlan, 1999).

There is much more to being a professional police officer than arriving to work promptly with a neat uniform appearance. Higher education standards need to be implemented across the board, and it should begin with our leadership in law enforcement. Police supervisors cannot rely on their instincts or field experience. They must be knowledgeable of a broad spectrum of issues affecting policing, and obtain that knowledge from a formal education (Day, 1956).

The current role of a police officer in society is vastly different than that of a police officer 100 years ago. The initial requirement of a high school diploma to enter policing occurred in an era where a large number of the nation's population failed to graduate from high school. It stands to reason that during this era police officers maintained an above average education level.

In more recent times, law enforcement in general has failed to raise the educational requirement to become a police officer, and thereby failed to keep pace with previous standards of police officers maintaining an above average education level when compared to the public. These notions that police officers and supervisor lack a college education are not new to law enforcement. In the early 1900's, Chief August Vollmer required the officers under his command to attend college courses, because he believed that police officers should study the psychology and sociology of crime. In the 1960's, the conversation of professionalism and policing was examined closely again after a major crime rate increase and riots that occurred across the nation (Carlan, 1999).

To further the debate, in 1967, The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice released a report which identified the need for college

educated police officers to address issues affecting society. The report stated the “ultimate aim of all police departments should be that all personnel with general enforcement powers have baccalaureate degrees” (President’s Commission, 1967, p. 109). In 1973, the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals released the *Report on Police*, which included a timetable that recommended all police officers have at least two years (60 semester units) of college education from an accredited college by 1975, three years (90 semester units) by 1978, and a baccalaureate degree by 1982 (National Advisory Commission, 1973, p. 369). These reports are a direct reflection of the progressive argument that policing is a profession.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

It is understandable that many law enforcement administrators question the fundamental cost of a college education. Like these administrators, the general public also views college education as unaffordable. Even former President Obama publicly criticized the increasing rate of college tuition (Gutmann, 2014). However, there is much more to consider when determining the value of a college educated supervisory staff.

Studies have shown the correlation between higher education levels and lower involvement in liability incidents, and lower use of force situations. Studies also found that police officers who earned college degrees received less citizen complaints compared to police officers that lacked college degrees. A study involving sheriff’s deputies determined that deputies who lacked a college degree were significantly more likely to have sustained administrative violations, and received a higher number of sustained complaints (Manis, Archbold, & Hassell, 2008).

It is difficult to gauge the universal price of initiating an internal affairs investigation, because the resources used during the investigation depends on the severity of the misconduct allegation. Another factor to consider is the high cost of a lawsuit that stems from ineffective police supervision. It has been established that police supervisors are required to make critical decisions in volatile situations, and an inadequate supervisor could cost the department unnecessary money.

Research suggests that college educated officers become involved in cases of individual liability less often, and have a better understanding of civil rights issues. It is not uncommon for a lawsuit based on negligence to cost departments between \$1 million and \$2 million per case (Roberg & Bonn, 2004). Law enforcement administrators should recognize the true value of college educated supervisors, and understand that a reduction of police misconduct allegations and lawsuits outweigh the cost of tuition.

Another counter to the argument against agencies providing tuition reimbursement is the traditional point of view that work experience is a sufficient qualification for police supervision. Many law enforcement administrators question the value of a college degree, and perceive it less necessary compared to other professional fields (Carlan, 1999). This reluctance from law enforcement administrators stems from a historic reliance on practical experience, which undermines the value a college education to professional policing (Roberts et al., 2016). However, technology and other social events have caused professional policing to evolve, and police supervisors need to possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities to adapt to the changes. The public expects this current and future generations to be receptive to new

technologies, narcotic and gang activity, terrorist attacks, and cybercrime. Police supervisors could utilize knowledge obtained from college to cope with society's social changes (Bruns & Bruns, 2015).

Law enforcement administrators should also realize that college education could provide their supervisors with the necessary skills to problem solve issues evaluating nontraditional solutions. For example, the threat of terrorism has presented challenges to law enforcement that will challenge the social and analytical skills of police supervisors. The analytical skills police supervisors receive from a college education would better prepare them to manage the threat of terrorist attacks, and produce a more socially conscious supervisor (Roberg & Bonn, 2004). Critical thinking, creativity, and innovation are benefits that college education could officer a police supervisor, which would make supervisors more effective leaders that have a better ability to understand complex conceptual and managerial problems (Roberts et al., 2016).

Historically, law enforcement survived by relying mostly on work experience, but experience alone is no longer a sufficient qualification for police supervisors. The inability for law enforcement to adapt to the evolution of policing will be devastating. Law enforcement agencies should recognize the value of a college education, and support its leaders in obtaining a college education.

RECOMMENDATION

Given the current landscape of law enforcement today, and predictions of the future, it is logical that police supervisors need college education. Many studies have determined that college educated supervisors provide better service to the communities they are sworn to protect. The burden is now on law enforcement agencies to step up

and provide support to its leaders, or else fall victim to complacency. Law enforcement agencies should challenge assumptions, and provide its supervisors tuition reimbursement programs to earn a college education.

It is understandable how the cost of tuition can deter police supervisors from pursuing education, and that law enforcement agencies who offer tuition reimbursement programs incentivize their police supervisors to attend college. Law enforcement agencies would also retain quality supervisors who are career minded, as tuition reimbursement programs assist with employee retention. Research also suggests that college educated police supervisors possess many skills and abilities that results in better service to the community. Due to the complexities of modern society, effective police leadership is essential in order to respond to the demand for increased community standards. Studies also support the argument that an increase in the number of college education police supervisors will strengthen the argument that policing is a profession. Law enforcement needs to recognize that higher education standards are necessary in order to keep pace with other industries.

Opponents of tuition reimbursement programs might say that the cost of tuition reimbursement programs are too high. Law enforcement administrators who hold this opinion are not considering the cost of ineffective police supervision. Studies support that college educated officers sustain less complaints of misconduct and less civil liability, which can easily cost more than college tuition. Another argument against tuition reimbursement programs stems from the traditional notion that police supervisors can rely solely on field experience. Given the evolving nature of policing, law

enforcement supervisors can no longer remain complacent, and refuse to enhance their leadership abilities by obtaining a college education.

Implementing a tuition reimbursement program is not difficult, and many law enforcement organizations throughout the nation have already implemented them. One example of such a program is the Kentucky Employee Educational Assistance Program, which is a state-funded tuition reimbursement program for all permanent, full-time state employees. Kentucky Department of Corrections employees have taken advantage of this program to mitigate the financial cost incurred when taking college courses on the employee's own time. The assistance program covers 100% of tuition at state colleges, but does not cover additional fees, parking costs, or textbooks. The DOC typically approves one undergraduate degree and one graduate degree, and employees applying for tuition reimbursement are required to submit a copy of the curriculum with the tuition assistance form. Employees who participate in the tuition assistance program are required to remain employed by the Kentucky State Government for a minimum of six months after completion of the final course. If the employee separates from employment for any reason other than retirement, the employee is required to pay back the funds for coursework taken within the previous six months (Harris, 2009).

Another alternative is for law enforcement agencies to form partnerships with colleges to offer education to its police supervisors. In 1997, the Phoenix, Arizona, Police Department launched a graduate program in partnership with a local university that allowed its officers to earn an expedited master's degree in two years. The program also included a tuition reimbursement package (Terra, 2009). Law enforcement agencies interested in starting a tuition reimbursement program should

add provisions to meet the specific needs of their organizations. Regardless of the provisions added by the organization, police supervisors, and the communities they serve, would benefit from tuition reimbursement programs. By providing tuition assistance, law enforcement agencies are creating a pathway for educational learning and higher standards for professional policing.

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