

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD  
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

Police Higher Education - Should a  
College Education Be Required

A Policy Research Project  
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of the Requirements for the Professional Designation  
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## **ABSTRACT**

There is a definite and growing trend toward higher education becoming a prerequisite for gaining employment in the police profession. Effective policing, out of necessity, is undergoing a facelift in comparison with traditional application of the laws and how it measures up to today's economic and sociological makeup. Current research indicates that police officers with college educations, in part or in whole, perform the tasks of policing better, communicate better, show more flexibility in dealing with difficult situations, and adapt better to organizational change. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to examine the feasibility of requiring a college education for police officers prior to entry into the law enforcement profession. This work will also explore incentives as a means of attracting recruits to the police profession, with aspirations of continuing their education and developing higher levels of academic achievement.

Recognizing the need for better Police agencies throughout the United States, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement recommended that police educational standards be raised in increments in the near future, with the ultimate goal of requiring a baccalaureate degree as a minimum standard for employment in this profession.

While it appears that the practice of requiring a college degree prior to entering the field of law enforcement is not widely supported in small agencies, just under half of these same agencies believe a college degree will be essential within the next ten years. Small Police Departments must find a way to circumvent the very real and ever present obstacles such as budget constraints and inadequate resources in order to attract and keep more highly educated officers.

## **Introduction**

Generally speaking, police officers today are better educated than their counterparts of decades past (Barbour 1983). Indeed, some states have already taken steps to ensure that their law enforcement officers will continue to grow in the ranks of the highly educated. One example is the State of Minnesota, which now has a mandatory two-year degree before individuals may even be licensed in that state (Breci 1994). San Diego, California also requires at least two years of college education for candidates to be considered for employment (Barbour 1983).

This research, upon review of pertinent literature, will attempt to discover the feasibility of incorporating a written policy statement requiring higher levels of education as a prerequisite for police employment in a small agency. This work will also explore the possibility of giving potential police recruits an incentive to enter the police profession by offering certain perks and stipends with degreed education as the ultimate goal (Clifton 1992). A final chapter will be included to compare the advantages and disadvantages of each option considered.

Making a higher education mandatory in the field of policing seems to be a relatively new idea for law enforcement and to those whose task it is to create the policies relating to recruitment. However, like most new concepts, the idea comes under the scrutiny of whether or not the advantages of requiring higher levels of education outweigh the disadvantages, particularly as they relate to the small police department operating under the limitations of modest staffing and inadequate budgets. With this in mind, some consideration must be given to the idea that requiring specific levels of education, beyond that of high school, may prevent otherwise qualified individuals from seeking and/or gaining successful employment in the police profession. Worthy of particular

scrutiny is the effect that required extended education would have on the minority population interested in the police profession. Police agencies within the United States have historically had a difficult time attracting highly educated and motivated individuals to remain employed in the field long enough to develop their experience and expertise to the level that the agency desires (Vodika 1993). The problems are compounded for the smaller agency which cannot offer competitive salaries, yet still need academically qualified officers within the ranks. The challenges of mandating two or four years post secondary education before an individual may even be licensed as a peace officer, such as exists in the state of Minnesota (Breci 1994), should be examined in minute detail in order to determine whether the benefits this type of learned police force will produce will outweigh the costs associated with such stringent directives.

This research will be a focal point, primarily for the city council of Kyle, Texas, with the endeavor of providing enough information for the governmental authorities to decide the feasibility of procuring written policy, not necessarily as a mandate, but as an incentive to facilitate higher levels of education in police recruits. The work will also extend to city administrations of other departments who may be considering educational requirements of their own so as to solicit input on both sides of the issue.

The sources of information for this research will include journals, magazines, newspaper articles and abstracts of previous research.

This research will be presented to the City of Kyle, Texas city council with intentions to serve as a catalyst for implementing a written form of policy to attract a more highly educated police recruit. In order to remain effective by today's standards, police departments, both large and small, must continually employ new technologies used in fighting crime. It would logically seem, then,

that higher educated individuals would more easily adapt to the changes required of this environment than those with less training and education (Walters 1990). This work, at the very least, will encourage Kyle's city government to initiate an incentive for individuals to continue growth and development in terms of higher education in the field of law enforcement.

### **Historical and Theoretical Context**

In the late 1960's there was a flurry of activity related to higher education and law enforcement. The impetus for this activity was a result of several factors: civil unrest, the nature of the police response to agitation and disorder, police relationships with minorities, increasing interest in law enforcement research, changes to the "reform" management style in policing, and a vision of "professionalism" in law enforcement. Upgrading police personnel by raising the educational levels of police officers has been - and remains - both an integral element of police professionalization (Fogelson 1977) and part of the conventional wisdom of police administration. Presidential commissions, academicians, and police executives have maintained that higher education is essential for anyone charged with such a complex and important task (Sherman-Goldstein 1980). When the movements to educate police gained momentum in the 1960's and early 1970's, advocates' arguments rested principally on intuitive propositions that connected college education to improved police performance (Sherman-Goldstein 1980). Since the mid-1960's, the American police community has made extensive efforts to be recognized as professionals. To achieve this, a college degree has been seen as essential.

A recent survey of municipal, county, and state law enforcement agencies by the Police

Executive Research Forum (PERF) reveals that more than half of the responding departments offer educational pay incentives and/or tuition assistant programs; all but a small fraction have policies of some kind that are intended to facilitate higher education for officers (Carter, Sapp, and Stephens 1989). Evidently these programs are having a profound effect among the career officers in those areas. In fact, according to a survey published by PERF in 1989, the State of Colorado showed a marked decrease in the “percentage of police officers with no college education at all (80% in 1960; only 35% in 1988)” (Copley, 1992). Similar improvements are shown in the percentage of police officers possessing a four-year college from 1960 to 1988 (Copley, 1992). Another critical factor in this massive acquisition of education by the police was the passage of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 with its component Law Enforcement Education Program, which in fiscal year 1975 alone provided more than \$44,000,000 for in-service and pre-service criminal justice students, many of whom were police (Swanson 1977).

While these isolated efforts on state and local levels are all admirable, one researcher indicates that State legislatures throughout the U.S. will soon have to begin implementing statewide educational standards in order to bring together the myriad police agencies and the educational institutions to work toward a common goal. Breci further states that “Cooperation between academia and law enforcement is, therefore, essential for shaping the curriculum for law enforcement officers in the 21st century” (Brexi, 1994).

### **Review of Literature or Practice**

In spite of the expected outcomes, some research has shown that police officers who earned

college degrees as pre-service students did not differ substantially from those of their less educated counterparts (Worden, 1990). Furthermore, research bears out that individual officers who obtained their higher education prior to entering the field of law enforcement showed little to no differences from officers who had no post-secondary education. This is especially so in attitudes affecting the officer's ability to get along with his or her superiors (Worden, 1990). Conversely, individual officers who acquired their higher education while working in the field of law enforcement showed a significant increase in the desire for autonomy in the workforce (Worden, 1990).

One researcher indicates that higher education produces within police ranks a more professional attitude and the view of their work as a lasting career rather than simply a job. Higher education in peace officers also lends itself to better communication skills and interpersonal development (Vodika 1993). Other differences exist between those persons who have extended education versus the ones who do not, although, for the most part, these divergent attitudes and actions do not indicate major splits between the educated and non-educated. Although college-educated police officers may be superior from the perspective of supervisors who find that such officers are more reliable employees and better report writers, they may not seem superior from the perspective of citizens who are concerned primarily with effective and courteous service. Police officer's performance is a multidimensional theoretical construct, for some dimensions of which it is difficult to devise valid measures. There, it appears inherently ambiguous because the findings show any one study are not cumulative. If college-educated recruits differ in the expected ways from other officers, the source of the differences is irrelevant for some policy purposes; whatever the reasons for the differences, it might be desirable to recruit college graduates (Worden 1990).

Nevertheless, more and more departments are joining the ranks of those who offer incentives



for their experienced officers to further their education, and thereby, improve the level of policing for their community. One such department that recently began following in the footsteps of the pioneers of extended education is the Police Department in Sandy City, Utah. Sandy City Police Department enlisted the help of Salt Lake Community College in the area to offer criminal justice courses taught at the Police Station to its employees. The officers who choose to take advantage of this offer not only have the opportunity to earn an associates degree while working a flexible schedule, but other advantages extended as incentives include “promotions, raises and more benefits upon retirement.” Sandy City Administration has agreed to reimburse employees who take part in this offering full tuition for grades of ‘B’ or better, and 75% of tuition for other passing grades(Law and Order, March 1996). This type of agreement between city government and its employees is becoming more common as more and more departments encourage their officers to expand their knowledge in their chosen profession. Sometimes these scholarships and reimbursement funds provide the only way certain individuals can go to college.

### **Discussion of Relevant Issues**

As a society in general, Americans tend to believe that higher education equals (or instigates) success. With that attitude it is reasonable to assume that any field of endeavor might be improved upon by expanding the store of knowledge available. Career law enforcement officers, apparently, do not differ with the general population in this dogma. Indeed, in a 1990 survey of some 7,500 officers in Minnesota, many respondents agreed that at least some college education benefited both the officer and the citizens he/she is sworn to protect and serve. The responding officers indicated

that they believed the additional education helps to create well-rounded officers who better understand the public and have improved communication skills which, in turn, makes them more effective in dealing with the public on a day-to-day basis. Those surveyed also noted that higher education better equipped them to deal with such things as computers (Breci, 1994) and other equipment being widely instituted as a result of the electronic revolution.

The arguments for and against measures intended to raise the educational levels of police officers has been advanced on several fronts. Advocates of higher education for police maintain - implicitly or explicitly - that it will improve the quality of policing partly by shaping the attitudes and values of police officers. According to this hypothesis, college educated officers are more likely to appreciate the role of police in a democratic society and to be more tolerant of people different from themselves (Brown 1974; Lynch 1976; Saunders 1970; Smith, Locke and Fenster 1970; and Goldstein 1977). Such officers are more likely to recognize the need to operate within the parameters set by the rule of law.

On the other hand, critics takes the position that college-educated officers are more likely to become frustrated with limited opportunities for advancement and the lack of challenging tasks on the job. Therefore, they are more likely to be disaffected from their jobs and the organizations in which they work, and are less likely to remain in policing (Swanson 1977). Whereas critics maintain that police tasks, which require common sense and/or street sense, are not performed better by college-educated officers, proponents hypothesize that college-educated officers are better able to analyze complex problems with which the police are frequently confronted, are more articulate, and for these reasons are able to choose more judiciously from a wider repertoire of responses (Cascio/Real 1976; Finckenauer 1975; Sterling 1974; and Muir 1977). These propositions rest

largely on more general expectations about attitudinal and behavioral changes that are caused by educational experiences; these expectations form the theoretical foundations for policies that encourage officers to go (or return) to college (Smith, Locke, and Walker 1967).

While research shows that “college-educated officers appear to be more amenable to restrictions imposed by the courts” (Worden, 1990), Hudzik’s (1978) findings show that these same officers place less value on obedience to supervisors than do officers without a college education.

One seldomly mentioned benefit to having a more highly educated police force is the possibility of lower civil liability due to the improved interpersonal communication skills developed by the work force with more post secondary education. The past few years have shown us how damaging liability lawsuits can be to individual police departments. The most notorious case recently in the news, the Rodney King civil litigation in which the Los Angeles Police Department was forced to pay out over \$100,000, remind us of how costly non-discretionary behavior of police officers can be. Although there is no conclusive evidence showing a correlation between the level of education of a police officer and his actions in a stressful situation, one researcher argues that considering the greater tendency toward open-mindedness and tolerance of different cultures and life-style choices, an officer with higher levels of education will be “less likely to resort to force, unlawful means, or disrespect in resolving the conflict.” This author further suggests that “the officer will tolerate the differences and attempt to mediate a resolution to the problem.” Conclusions can then logically be drawn that officers of this behavior type are “less likely to discriminate against minority group members”(Carter, 1989). This possible benefit, alone, would make it desirable for police administration to encourage all of its employees to further their education by taking advantage of all possible resources.

## **Conclusion**

The initial purpose of this project, as stated earlier, is to ascertain whether or not it would be beneficial to the small police agency to develop written policies requiring higher education, such as a two-year or four-year college degree, or some variation, before recruits would be hired, and before current officers could be promoted. According to current trend, more and more departments are implementing some form of this education requirement in an attempt to “upgrade” the quality of the personnel staffing a department. Much research has been conducted on this topic and several surveys confirm that most people believe that higher education does, indeed, make for better police officers. Changes within the court system, advances in the type of electronic equipment developed to make the departments more modern and efficient, as well as more and greater hostility between citizens and their police departments are all evidence to the fact that changes need to occur within state and local police agencies.

The dilemma which has yet to be resolved, however, is whether or not the benefits of mandating this change will outweigh the hardships that would be inherited specifically by the small agencies. Police Departments operating in a sparsely populated area have a much smaller pool from which to draw its prospective employees. While it might be the best of situations in a perfect world to have all peace officers possess a four-year degree, this author has concluded that it is simply not plausible to have a written policy that absolutely demands higher levels of education past secondary schools. Council from this study would be to set in place as many incentives as is possible to encourage and inspire both current officers and new recruits to continue their education as a life long learning habit. Specific recommendations toward making further education a possibility would

include but not be limited to:

- scholarships and/or reimbursement funds for those who take and pass courses relevant to this profession
- flexible scheduling in order to accommodate those individuals industrious enough to go back to school while they are working full time
- look into the possibility of having an instructor come to the troops when the troops cannot go to the instructor. If several officers need and desire to study the same course, it might be expedient to work with a Junior College or University in the area to have an instructor come and teach a course one or two nights a week at the police department or other city building.
- incentive pay, (stipends) and promotions directly related the number of college hours obtained

Although it is agreed that all course work should relate to the law enforcement career, the City Governing body should develop a liberal curricula in which courses such as sociology, speech, interpersonal communications, and psychology, along with criminal justice classes, would qualify for the implemented programs.

The environment in which we work has changed drastically over the past twenty or thirty years. It is reasonable to expect the conditions surrounding the police profession to continue its pattern of change. Since we are only able to postulate what it will take to maintain our effectiveness in the years to come, all members of law enforcement should set it as a priority to keep up with current trends and constantly increase our knowledge of this profession as well as human nature.

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