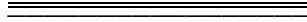
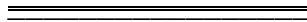


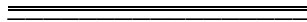
**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**



Police Officers and Higher Education



**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**



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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses police officer minimum education standards and explores the need for increasing the standard nationwide, helping to ensure that officers are better prepared for the new challenges of modern day policing. The majority of agencies today do not require any formal education beyond high school and graduation from an accredited police academy. While this standard may have been sufficient in policing in past decades, the increasing complexity of law enforcement today and the higher expectations placed upon pro-active, community-oriented police officers demonstrates a need for officers to have increased education standards. Various scholarly articles have shown that officers with higher education show superior performance in many areas of policing, such as less use of force incidents, fewer lawsuits, better handling of the mentally ill, and positive citizen feedback when compared to officers with no college education. Therefore, it is recommended that police officer candidates be required to obtain an associate degree or its equivalent from an accredited college or university as a minimum education standard prior to joining the law enforcement profession.

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INTRODUCTION

The requirements that exist today governing police officer minimum education standards do not mandate that higher learning, specifically, a college degree, be necessary to become licensed as a peace officer in the vast majority of agencies across the United States. According to Paoline and Terrill (2007), a Bureau of Justice Statistics study indicated that “nationally, only 1% of police agencies require a 4-year college degree to be hired as a police officer, whereas 6% require some college, and 8% require a 2-year degree” (p.181). In fact, police officers today must only possess a high school diploma and successfully complete a Basic Police Academy course to be eligible for hire by most county and municipal agencies (Paoline & Terrill, 2007).

As the complexities of policing and the levels of interaction with the public continue to grow, police officers with only a high school education are not as adequately prepared to meet the needs of the citizens they serve when compared to officers with a college education (Paoline & Terrill, 2007). Police must be highly skilled communicators and have advanced interpersonal skills, which enables them to influence, counsel, and inform citizens, as well as resolve conflicts with sound judgment. College educated officers have improved communication skills and are more flexible when compared to non-college educated officers (Baro & Burlingame, 1999).

According to Rydberg and Terrill (2010), the results of a study conducted by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) that surveyed various police departments indicated that “the adoption of a community policing model increased the responsibilities of patrol officers, which required them to be better decision makers, more innovative, and more tolerant” (p. 96). Carter and Sapp (1990) stated that “The authors of the

PERF report believed that these findings made college education for police officers more relevant than in the past” (as cited in Rydburg & Terrill, 2010, p. 96).

The notion that police officers should be better educated is nothing new; the topic has emerged many times throughout the history of policing. August Vollmer advocated for improved education for police as early as 1916, and his influence led to the creation of some of the earliest administrative police schools in the early 1930s (Strock, 2008). Since then, the idea of enhancing education requirements has re-surfaced on a number of occasions over time, and the concept has been visited by others who share the same view, but setting a universal minimum educational standard requiring a college degree has yet to be formally adopted by 90% of departments nationwide (Paoline & Terrill, 2007). In 1931, the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement, which is known as the Wickersham Commission, recognized the importance for developing more professional police officers and supported higher education standards (Strock, 2008). Then, in 1967, the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice suggested that the goal of all agencies should be to employ officers with baccalaureate degrees (Baro & Burlingame, 1999).

Despite the fact that the issue has been debated in decades past, times have changed, and the factors and complexities involved in modern policing are quite different in law enforcement today. Due to the increasing complexity of law enforcement and emerging evidence that education enhances performance, police officer candidates should be required to obtain an associate degree or its equivalent

from an accredited college or university as a minimum education standard prior to joining the law enforcement profession.

POSITION

Attaining a college education is beneficial to police departments for a variety of reasons, and one of the most significant is that it improves officers' ability to communicate effectively. By being better communicators, officers can interpret interactions with citizens with an improved sense of judgment, enabling them to adequately handle complex situations more effectively and consistently than their non-educated colleagues (Baro & Burlingame, 1999). This improved ability to communicate reduces the frequency of use of force incidents, citizen complaints, and exposure to civil liability (Baro & Burlingame, 1999). According to Rydberg and Terrill (2010), studies have found that officers with a college education were significantly less prone to utilize force when compared to counterparts with less education. College educated officers who write accurate reports and use less force result in a reduction of liability, for both the officer and his or her agency (Baro & Burlingame, 1999). Competent officers who can diffuse situations will utilize force less, and thus cause fewer injuries, which also prevents unnecessary lawsuits and other related costs. Further supporting this notion is Wimshurst and Ransley's (2007) assertion that authoritarian tendencies are reduced among police who are better educated, that they perform job functions more effectively, and that they possess a higher tolerance threshold.

Education also enhances one's vocabulary and interpersonal skills, which make officers more effective when communicating with citizens. Paoline and Terrill (2007) wrote, "It is interesting that in the most comprehensive study of police education, Carter,

Sapp, and Stephens (1989) found that college-educated officers have better communication skills in dealing with the public” (p. 183). Not only is education a benefit for speaking to others verbally, but also for writing technical reports, many of which must be highly accurate with little room for errors. Case narratives describing the officer’s actions that are not grammatically correct or deficient in content may jeopardize cases that fall under the scrutiny of highly skilled and often times aggressive defense attorneys.

In addition to enhanced written communication skills, fewer use of force incidents, and improved linguistic abilities, college educated officers have been shown to handle persons with mental illness more satisfactorily. In a study conducted by LaGrange (2003) in a medium-sized agency in Cleveland, Ohio, a sample of officers with only a high school education were compared to a group of officers that had college degrees, and they were interviewed to determine how they had handled situations involving persons who appeared to them to be mentally impaired. The study showed that those with a high school education made fewer referrals of subjects to psychiatric hospitals than did college educated officers. The difference in frequency was significant, in that officers with only a high school education made referrals only about half the time (54%) compared to college educated officers making referrals to a much higher degree (82%) (LaGrange, 2003). The disposition or outcome of the encounters with mentally ill subjects also ended with an arrest in 21% of cases in the non-college degree group, compared to only 2% of the college degreed officers. The results of this study illustrate that college degreed officers are better at evaluating situations involving

the mentally ill and making appropriate decisions to ensure that the correct assistance is provided for them than their less educated police officer counterparts (LaGrange, 2003).

Clearly, much research has been done on the subject, and it is difficult to logically argue against increasing the minimum education requirements for police when education in itself carries with it numerous benefits. Police officers can use increased knowledge to their advantage as they determine how to address a variety of situations, many times with subjects who are mentally ill or emotionally distraught. Expanding the general knowledge of police officers would provide them with additional tools to remedy situations beyond the typical use of batons, electric stun-weapons, firearms, or other force options. However, there are opponents who do not support a college degree requirement for officers, and question research that finds enhanced education beneficial to job performance to the degree that it should become mandatory.

COUNTER POSITION

In past decades, arguments against increasing the educational requirements for officers had some merit in that policing, generally speaking, was a relatively simple, reactive-based job requiring only a basic education and skill-set. Officers had to be able to read and write, respond to calls, and collect limited information from citizens for reports. A high school education and basic police academy training were deemed sufficient in preparing officers for the job, and there are those who assert that this standard remains adequate in modern times. According to Stevens (1999), the critical thinking skills and self-knowledge acquired with a higher education is not necessary for officers to perform their duties. Stevens (1999) asserted that police officers should focus on enforcement and prevention, and higher learning may cause them to question

authority or overanalyze issues in empirical fashion. Stevens (1999) also stated that through his own research he found that “A degree doesn’t make a poorly skilled cop a better cop” (p. 41).

Opponents and critics of a college degree requirement for police officers may also point out that many of the existing studies on the subject are inconclusive when determining whether an enhanced education is beneficial to police performance. As Hilal and Erickson (2010) stated, “Several decades of research concerning the relationship between higher education and policing has led to little agreement concerning the appropriate extent of education for entry-level law enforcement officers” (p.1). Hilal and Erickson (2010) also pointed out that officers with minimal education have apparently performed their jobs adequately up to this point, and they questioned the assertion that an enhanced education is necessary for job efficiency.

Another argument regarding a college requirement for police officers is that policing is actually a craft, not a science, and that the necessary skills to perform well are best learned on-the-job, and not from a lecture in a classroom (Paoline & Terrill, 2007). Experience gleaned from interactions with suspects over time is often considered superior to education, and Paoline and Terrill (2007) explored this notion in a study they conducted using data sets from Indianapolis, Indiana, and St. Petersburg, Florida, along with in-person interviews of officers. The study focused on the frequency of use of force among college educated officers versus officers with no college education but significant experience. The results from the study indicated that both groups used less force than less experienced officers. In other words, officers with

significant on the job experience used force less, despite not having a college degree, just as their college educated counterparts did (Paoline & Terrill, 2007).

While there are officers today who perform well despite a lack of education, research has shown that policing styles nationwide have shifted from being reactive and incident driven, to a more proactive, community-oriented approach, which has increased overall officer responsibilities and decision making demands (Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). According to Schanlaub (2005), the past decade has seen dramatic changes in policing, and a modern police department ten years ago would only be mediocre in comparison to today's standards because of the drastic changes in policies, equipment, and technology. Arguments that suggest police seem to be doing well right now and have throughout history without college degrees ignore the fact that times have changed drastically. Technological advances have increased the speed that information can be shared, and criminals are able to spread information regarding crimes, police vulnerabilities, plan coordinated attacks, and orchestrate sophisticated internet schemes in a manner never before seen. Officers' general knowledge and skill levels must, at a minimum, keep on par with these advances to ensure they remain effective at fighting crime. As Maggard (2001) stated "Today, street police officers are asked to prevent and confront crime, think critically, solve unique community problems, enhance the quality of life in neighborhoods and compassionately serve an ever-changing multicultural society" (p. 3).

Officers today must have excellent communication skills as they interact with the public and address community concerns, and they must have a broad knowledge base to remain effective in the age of technology and instant information. The modern era of

the community-oriented, pro-active approach to policing has broadened the required skills needed to perform job duties, and the time for increasing the minimum standards for police education has never been more significant. According to LaGrange (2003) “Newer orientations to law enforcement, such as community policing, place increased emphasis on problem-solving skills and require significantly more analysis and discretion than traditional response-oriented policing” (p. 92).

In terms of studies that appear to provide inconclusive information regarding the benefits of a college degree for police officers, Rydberg and Terrill (2010) pointed out that much prior work is flawed. Issues such as inadequate samples, lack of appropriate control variables, and poor methodologies have been cited as reasons for conflicting results from various studies (Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). Rydberg and Terrill’s (2010) more recent study indicated that use of force frequency among officers was significantly less among college educated officers. Also in a recent article, Strock (2008) alluded to the same concept, that, generally speaking, more recent studies and other salient articles are in favor of college education for police than in the past. As Strock (2008) stated, “The desire for a police officer to have a college education appears settled. National commissions, criminal justice professional associations, academicians, attorneys, and courts have all expressed this view” (p. 15).

The experience versus education argument may indeed show that experience may be just as valuable as education in some areas of police work; however, the argument does not address the issue of how well a rookie officer will perform when compared to a college educated officer with matching experience. The more suitable comparison would be between a rookie officer with a college degree and a similarly

inexperienced officer with only a high school education. Strock (2008) summed up this notion quite well when he stated “Today, there is a general agreement that a college education will not necessarily make a person a good police officer, but a good police officer can be made better by having one” (p. 11).

RECOMMENDATION

After considering all of the research that suggests an enhanced education is favorable for the performance of police officers, a shift toward a new minimum education standard is logical. While the enhanced education for police officers movement has been explored many times in previous generations, it is now apparent that change is necessary in order to enhance the level of policing in the modern age. Proactive, community oriented policing has become the standard, and officers have greater responsibilities and higher expectations placed upon them than ever before. Modern police officers are expected to write reports using in-car computers, operate advanced software to enter data, and also read and comprehend case law and interpret court rulings correctly as decisions set precedent, either limiting or enhancing police powers. A new minimum standard requiring a two year degree prior to becoming a police officer would assist in meeting new challenges, and result in better educated and functioning officers. Officers who have attained a college degree would be capable of analyzing situations with improved judgment, using knowledge to determine the appropriate course of action, often times without the use of force.

Enhanced communication skills gleaned from at least two years of higher learning would improve officers' ability to talk subjects into compliance rather than resort to physical force, and have greater tolerance for differences of opinion. These benefits

would translate into fewer citizen complaints, fewer injuries to both officers and citizens, and a reduction in civil lawsuits. As lawsuits decrease and injuries are minimized, fewer resources would be necessary for legal defense funding, workers' compensation benefits, and investigatory expenses related to citizen complaints. Over time, the cost avoidance could potentially offset the initial investment that agencies may be required to implement as salary increases or other incentive based costs are created.

In addition to these factors, new laws are enacted every year, requiring police officers to continually make changes to their law enforcement tactics and procedures. As laws and statutes grow increasingly complicated, especially in areas of white-collar internet crimes and other innovative fraudulent scams, officers need the ability to conduct research, write detailed reports, make presentations to superiors and prosecution teams, and have an overall intelligent demeanor to succeed. By acquiring a college education, police officers will be more knowledgeable about a greater number of topics, and develop the skills necessary to remain effective and efficient in the practice of their everyday duties. Creating a requirement that officers attain college degrees is beneficial not only the agency, but to the general public, the officers themselves, and society in general.

According to Maggard (2001), "Contemporary police leaders and academics believe that a college education will provide police officers of the 21st century with the knowledge and reasoning ability to serve a society which has increased expectations" (p. 3). In order for police officers to reach the expectation levels to which Maggard (2001) alludes, and to ensure that police officers remain efficient, competent, and prepared in the near future, agencies would be wise to enhance minimum education

standards sooner rather than later. Analyzing the results of various studies conducted on the subject show that evidence does exist that there are benefits to officers having college degrees, and according to Paoline and Terrill (2007), police agencies should make note, and consider implementing a college education requirement for officers.

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