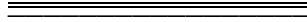


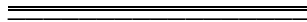
**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**



**Educational Standards in Law Enforcement**



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



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## **ABSTRACT**

Higher education standards are relevant to contemporary law enforcement because of the complexity of modern policing. It has been a topic routinely studied since the first recommendation made by Sir Robert Peele in 1829 following the inception of the London Metropolitan Police Act calling for mandatory college education for police officers. Although there have been numerous conclusions to emphasize the need for a college education standard in law enforcement, most police departments are hesitant to implement higher standards for a variety of reasons. These arguments are typically without any substantial evidence as to the detriment of requiring college degrees in the profession.

The position of the researcher is clear. Based on the study and analysis of multiple works and substantiation shown in a number of studies, there is no doubt of the benefits of the higher education for police officers and the public that they serve. State of Texas peace officers should have a four-year college degree as a minimum educational requirement.

The types of information used to support the researcher's position included a review of articles, Internet sites, periodicals, and journals. There were a number of studies cited, some with some historical significance. Other works and articles used included information that is more recent.

The conclusion drawn from this position paper is that higher education requirements in law enforcement are needed to provide the populace served by police agencies with the highest level of service. The recommendation to state and municipal administrators as well as police department heads is to implement a college degree

requirement for all state of Texas police officers. At the present time, there are only two police departments in the state of Texas that require a four-year college degree as a minimum hiring standard without exception: Arlington Police Department and Deer Park Police Department.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction . . . . .	1
Position . . . . .	2
Counter Position . . . . .	7
Conclusion. . . . .	11
References . . . . .	13

## INTRODUCTION

Educational requirements in the law enforcement profession are debatable from one law enforcement agency to another. While some agencies have stringent educational requirements, such as 60 hours of college credit or a bachelors' degree requirement prior to employment, a majority of agencies across the country still do not require any college credit to become a police officer. According to Travis (1995), Robert Peele referred to the need for a professionally trained police force. Sir Robert Peele, 1788-1850, is widely known as the father of policing and made education one of the primary goals for the newly formed London Metropolitan police force in 1829. Sir Peele's aspiration for an educated police force dates back to his crime and law enforcement reform initiatives as early as the inception of the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829.

Over 70 years ago, August Vollmer, another law enforcement reformer regarded as the Dean of Modern Policing and author of the book *The Police in Modern Society*, called for mandatory college education for police officers (Coons, 2004). Even today, most police agencies at the municipal and state levels require only a high school diploma. As a profession, educational requirements have not changed nationally to meet the demands of a more complex law enforcement arena as opposed to years past.

Travis (1995), then director of the National Institute of Justice, stated, "Only about 14 percent of the departments surveyed by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) require more than a high school diploma or equivalent for entry" ("The extent of higher education," para. 8). The argument brought forth is that the more formal education an officer possesses prior to becoming an officer, the more professional that

individual would be in carrying out the duties and responsibilities of policing. This argument is an area of exploration for this paper. It is not surprising that a majority of the policing function is effectively communicating with diverse and broad socio-economic populations, much like the populations of most modern colleges and universities. The educational experience is similar to the performance of a police officer in the field whereby communication is a key component to being an effective crime fighter. According to Clarke and Eck (2003), "...the more personal the police-citizen contacts the more likely it is that they will have an effect on crime" (para. 5).

The research presented in this paper responds to a call for more timely information in this arena. Police applicants and employed officers often pose the question of the importance of a college degree in policing. This paper hopes to be able to provide a substantive and informative answer to the question in relation to the performance of police service. State of Texas peace officers should have a four-year college degree as a minimum educational requirement.

## **POSITION**

Formal education for police officers beyond the standard high school education is in question. One area to gauge the need of higher education in law enforcement is in the position of citizen complaints in departments with varied educational requirements. There is a supposition that an officer with a degree or more formal education than a high-school diploma receives fewer complaints. The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (1967) stated, "The ultimate aim of all police departments should be that all personnel with general enforcement powers have baccalaureate degrees" (p. 109). It was also discussed in the Commissions' report that

modern law enforcement techniques were becoming increasingly more technical and higher education assisted in more proficient policing.

Another area of research is gauging the effectiveness of a college-educated officer over the officer without higher education. The argument is that an officer with a degree or higher education is a more effective law enforcement officer. The argument is made due to the supposition that a college educated officer has a larger amount of conceptual experience to draw upon while problem solving.

The final point in the position deals with liability within a police agency. It is argued that the officer with a four-year college degree or with higher formal education will find themselves in less litigious events while employed by an agency than an officer with minimal education will. This is especially impactful to municipalities and police agencies due to the risks routinely taken by police officers on a day-to-day basis.

As already stated, an area that can be used to measure success of a law enforcement agency in the policing of a community is citizen complaints against officers. Due to the dynamic nature of the profession, police officers fulfill various roles during the course of administering their duties. Police officers act as role models, counselors, teachers, protectors, report takers, and investigators. The opportunity for an officer to receive a complaint during the course of a shift is higher than in most professions. As witnessed repeatedly, police officer misconduct or allegations of misconduct make news and, sometimes, national headlines. Officers routinely face stiff administrative discipline or job loss due to the nature and severity of citizen complaints. Officers must perform at a higher level of service and hold themselves accountable. Understandably, there is a tremendous amount of stress in this profession; however, citizen complaints against

officers are a routine measurement of performance used by police administrations generally in the evaluation of their personnel.

According to a Florida study cited by Roberg and Bonn (2004), “officers with just a high school diploma made up slightly more than 50 percent of all sworn law enforcement personnel between 1997 and 2002, yet they accounted for nearly 75 percent of all disciplinary actions” (“The impact of higher education,” para. 6). The previously cited study indicated that officers with college degrees were less prone to receive a complaint during the course of discharging their duties. Another study conducted by Lersch and Kunzman (2001) found that “Overall, deputies who have not earned either a two-year or a four-year college degree log significantly more complaints than their college-educated counterparts” (p.166). Lersch and Kunzman further stated that deputies with a high-school diploma had the most sustained allegations.

In a landmark court decision, *Davis v. City of Dallas* in 1985, the court held that 45 semester college credits should be the absolute minimum of college education for an entry-level officer. This ruling deemed education in law enforcement a bona fide occupational skill due to the complexity of police work, which includes dealing with the public, the source for most complaints against officers. The City of Dallas Police Department currently has a minimum of 45 credit hours to apply for a police position. Although the court case was a significant step forward in requiring a minimal amount of college credit for all Texas Peace Officers, most agencies still do not require any college, even though it has been substantiated that a college education attributes to lower than average complaints against officers, a measure of a police agencies performance.



The next position put forth in this paper relates to job performance. As previously stated, higher education or a four-year college degree will lead to better job performance. The research found has substantiated this argument.

According to Roberg and Bonn (2004), "Several studies have indicated that officers with higher levels of education performed their jobs in a more satisfactory manner than their less educated peers, as indicated by higher evaluation ratings from their supervisors" ("The impact of higher education," para. 4). The fact that several studies have been performed in the course of examination of this particular topic adds credence to the argument that higher education has shown the propensity of educated officers to be considered more effective in the discharge of their duties. According to Roberg (1978), "...officers with college degrees had the most open belief systems and the highest levels of job performance, indicating that college-educated officers were better able to adapt to the complex nature of the police role" (as cited in Roberg & Bonn, 2004, p. 344).

Once again, the research found a correlation between having a college degree and performance measures. Roberg's 1978 study was more specific to the open belief systems and the complex nature of police work. A police officer must be able to adapt to a wide variety of circumstances, sometimes under duress or without the luxury of time. An officer's performance is not one-dimensional but multidimensional. Roberg's 1978 study correlated the complexity of performing police duties and the positive effects of higher education. Kakar (1998) performed a study that found, "The police officers with college education rated themselves significantly higher on several performance categories as compared to the officers without any college education and officers with

college degree rated themselves higher than the other two groups” (p. 639). As found by Kakar’s study, the fact that officers with college degrees rated themselves as having a higher level of performance against non-educated officers is significant in the fact that there appears to be a self-fulfilling prophecy or expectation of oneself to be above average. This correlation may explain the fact that multiple studies have shown that an officer with a college degree performs better on average than those without higher education.

The final position in this paper is one of department liability and the relationship of higher education and or a college degree. Roberg and Bonn (2004) stated, “There is also evidence that college-educated officers become involved in cases of individual liability significantly less frequently than non-college officers” (“The impact of higher education,” para. 9). The research by Roberg and Bonn suggested that there is a direct correlation between higher education and officers subjecting themselves to a liable act or actions. In modern law enforcement, officers and police departments are subject to a litigious society. Officers and police departments are typically sued for the use of force in the commission of police enforcement. Roberg and Bonn’s work clearly illustrated that college educated officers may be more aware of this type situation, and one assumption could be that they use communication or logic in a manner befitting a person with a higher level of education. The results were not elaborated on in the research conducted by Roberg and Bonn, and this justification is merely supposition.

A study by Hughes (2001) found, “...higher educated officers consider the legal ramifications of stopping citizens more often than less educated officers. Thus, while lawsuits generally do not enter an officer’s mind while stopping citizens, consideration of

them does vary somewhat by officer demographics” (Discussion, para. 5). Hughes’ study indicated that officers with higher education were more cognizant of being sued while performing basic police functions. Hughes did not elaborate on the correlation; however, this is an observable result of his study that is noteworthy in this argument.

Another study by Hall, Ventura, Yung, and Lambert in 2003 found a slight correlation between lawsuits and officers being sued. In their study, they found that higher education slightly minimizes the risk of being sued. Hall et al. (2003) concluded, “Higher levels of education were significantly associated with the threat of civil litigation being one of the top ten things an officer thinks about when performing emergency duties” (Discussion, para. 11). The research regarding levels of education and minimizing lawsuits completed clearly indicates a correlation with a lower incidence of liability the more education an officer has.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

It is often argued that higher education is not needed in the police profession, especially from officers that work for agencies that do not require any education other than a high school diploma and or a GED. A respected consultant in the area of management recruiting stated in a management course that he advises municipalities to consider not requiring a college degree of police chief candidates because it shrinks the applicant pool and that there are fine candidates without a bachelors degree (Hartung, 2010).

The counter position will focus on three arguments against the need for higher education in law enforcement. The first counter position will concentrate on the fact that having a college degree does not make police employees a better officer. The second

argument will focus on shrinking the number of qualified applicants in the police pool if higher education is required. The final counter position will concentrate on the lack of diversity in the pool of police applicants if a degree is a minimum requirement.

Veteran officers will often agree that experience in the field makes a good police officer. Roberg and Bonn (2004) cited, "The Smith and Aamodt (1997) study, which consisted of 299 officers from 12 municipal departments in Virginia, found that the benefits of a college education did not become apparent until the officers gained some experience" (The impact of higher education on police attitudes and performance, para. 5). A ten-year study conducted by Bennett (1998) found that there was a small correlation to job performance and a college degree but that a more substantial study in this area was needed. According to Bennett (1998), "...the relationship between college major or course work and law enforcement effectiveness deserves more study, as other college majors (e.g., public administration) may prove to be relevant to police work, especially at the administrative level" (Discussion, para. 3). Bennett's work indicated that there was some positive correlation with higher education, but the data could not be substantially validated; therefore, even this data could not be used for or against the argument that a degree correlates with job performance with any significance.

A study performed by Bostrom (2002), using the St. Paul Minnesota police department as the test site, found that a degree does not create better work habits. However, Bostrom (2002) also stated, "The positive findings of this research indicate that as a group, officers with bachelor of arts degrees are excellent employees who use less sick time, are involved in fewer traffic collisions, are disciplined less often, and receive more commendations" ("The degree discipline makes a difference," para. 2).

Even though Bostrom put forth the argument that the degree requirement does not correlate to positive work habits, his research indicated a positive correlation between several other categories that are routinely used in evaluations of police officers. The additional areas identified by Bostrom justify that a degreed officer is a better overall performer than non-degreed peers are.

Although there is an abundance of anecdotal information and a perception for the argument that a college degree does not assist an officer carrying out law enforcement responsibilities, there is little data to support the argument. There are many more studies indicating a college-educated individual is more suited for the position, and few studies marginalize higher education in the performance of duties (Bostrom, 2002; Roberg & Bonn, 2004; Roberg, 1978; Smith & Aamodt, 1997; Truxillo, Bennett & Collins, 1998).

The second counter argument focuses on the shrinking number of police applicants if higher education is a minimum requirement. According to a research paper completed by Wood (1997), he indicated that implementing a four-year college degree requirement “could severely impact small departments” (p. 34). Wood further stated, “It might be very difficult to attract college graduates to law enforcement jobs that offer little opportunity for advancement” (p. 34). Although Wood made a valid argument, it is a supposition. Even in his own research, Wood allowed for the re-tooling of recruitment efforts to attract college-educated applicants.

Johnson (2006) reported the difficulties of the Plano, Texas police department to recruit applicants after the department made having a four-year college degree mandatory for all applicants. Johnson (2006) stated, “...Plano strained to find enough

recruits, the city eased its hiring requirements and began accepting those with two years of college or three years in the military” (para. 3). Johnson’s article did not address the overall hiring practices of the Plano Police Department, one of the most stringent in the Dallas/Ft.Worth metropolitan area according to Holguin (2006) in a recruitment and market analysis of the five top paying police departments in the region. The overall hiring process was a concern for the Plano Police Department in addition to the newly added four-year college requirement. After the integration of the four-year college degree requirement into Plano’s minimum standards, the hiring process was not modified to attract college graduates. However, this is not unique to the Plano Police Department, and generally, most departments in the state take several months to process police applicants.

The final argument against a four-year college degree is that it impedes the hiring a diverse workforce, primarily minorities entering law enforcement. Wood (1997) stated, “Without a doubt, a requirement for higher education for entry level officers is a discriminatory requirement” (p. 13). Wood pointed to a number of studies in general that showed that minority students are prone to not finishing college for a variety of reasons. However, the argument that the practice is discriminatory against police applicants was not addressed in his paper. Although his research in the vast area of minorities and degrees was notable, the information used to make his argument against requirement of a degree for purposes of hiring was very broad based and not specific to hiring practices in law enforcement.

Johnson (2006) also reported that the college degree requirement would affect overall minority hiring. Johnson (2006) quoted Louis Mayo, then executive director of

the Police Association for College Education, “Most departments give higher pay to recruits with four-year degrees, he says, but have avoided requiring recruits to have them [college degree] for several reasons. Among them: concerns about recruiting enough minority officers in increasingly diverse urban areas” (para. 6).

As a counter to this argument, Bulen (2009) stated, “The typical police officer today is better educated, better trained, and more representative of the community the departments serve” (p. 73). Bulen further asserted in his study that education and training programs have improved and increased the number of minority and female officers than ever before.

Recruiting police applicants with any level of education is considered a challenge by most police department’s standards. The task is daunting. However, it appears that most departments have not done an in-depth analysis of their own hiring practices that might mitigate their inability to attract qualified applicants with or without degrees.

Recruiting minorities has always been a challenge for many police departments. The reason may also be related to the generation now getting into law enforcement. The expectations of the millennial generation can be negatively impacted by the totality and immensity of the hiring processes of most police agencies, a point that would require more study to substantiate. The typically slow and cumbersome hiring practices of most agencies may do more to stymie the recruitment of minority applicants than any other factor.

## **CONCLUSION**

The analysis of the body of research is clear. An officer with a college degree has shown to be more effective, have fewer disciplinary cases, and has a multifaceted

approach to completing basic police functions. The research indicated that there are a number of explanations to this, but the one constant is the inherent qualities derived from a modern college education. Based on the research, college graduates are shown to have a broader perspective than their non-educated counterparts do. Multiple studies indicated that this was a factor in gauging overall police effectiveness.

After an in depth study and analysis to help reverse the trends of police corruption within the New York City Police Department, the New York City Commission to Combat Police Corruption in 1997 made it mandatory to, “Raise the minimum education requirement from a high school diploma to a two-year college associate degree” (p.12). The recommendation was part of the overall effort to hire officers with more stringent minimum standards to curb future police corruption. In the opinion of the Commission, more education required by applicants minimized the likelihood of integrity issues, leading to problems in the future. This was a substantial affirmation to the need to require education in the law enforcement profession in addition to the aforementioned areas. It is undeniable that the benefits of a degree far outweigh the current ideology and practice of most police agencies only requiring a high-school diploma or GED. Based on the research, the position is that a college-educated officer is more effective, receives fewer complaints, and is less prone to litigious situations, reducing the liability of police agencies and municipalities.



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