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**Why Police Departments Should Not Impose A College Degree
Requirement On Applicants for Law Enforcement Officer Positions**

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ABSTRACT

Professionalization of policing is a noble goal that many have sought to implement through increased educational standards of police officers. This movement has gained popularity and often leads to implementation of a college degree as a pre-employment qualification which is detrimental to an agency's recruiting efforts. The author does not dispute the value of higher education and degree attainment but asserts that a better tactic for improving policing can be found through incentivizing college degrees through pay stipends for varying education levels and subsidization of degree attainment by in service officers.

The origins of the professional movement are traced to give a historical perspective on the evolution increasing police educational standards for law enforcement. The author then examines the evolution of this educational increase to the present day. The following arguments against increasing the pre-employment educational standard are examined: the unintended consequences of an increase in minimum educational standards which causes a reduction in available qualified applicants for entry level police positions; a college degree is not necessary to guarantee success in the police academy nor in active police service; college graduates require additional financial resources in the form of beginning base pay; a college degree requirement reduces minority applicants for policing. These points are weighed against counterpoints regarding the increase in societal education levels and the documented decrease in force used by college educated officers. The conclusion drawn shows the value in incentivizing and subsidizing educational achievement by officers after employment as opposed to requiring this educational standard pre-employment.

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INTRODUCTION

Carter & Sapp (1990) found that the universal goal of both educated constituents of police service and police administrators has been to professionalize law enforcement through the implementation of degree requirements for officers as a pre-employment standard (as cited in Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). In fact, the law enforcement professionalization movement has been the dream of many in the field for over 100 years. The goal of professionalization is portrayed as both a way to improve the social standing of law enforcement in society and to ensure that police service delivery is positively augmented for society's benefit. Although this desire has merit, there are unintended consequences associated with requiring a college degree of police officer applicants, which must be evaluated prior to the implementation of this type of policy in any department.

Sherman & the National Advisory Commission (1978) found that the beginning of the movement for professionalization and the mandate for a college degree is credited to August Vollmer, professor and Chief of Police for the University of California at Berkeley in 1916 (as cited in Bruns, 2010). Bennett & Marshal (1979) noted that the Wickersham Commission further bolstered the mandate for education, police reform and professionalization in 1931 which called for degreed officers to help improve policing (as cited in Bruns, 2010).

Although the mandate had some early adopters, the acceptance of the idea was not widespread and many struggled against the notion that the police could ever be considered a profession (Paoline III, Terrill, & Rossler, 2015). Citing the hurdle of education as a hindrance and pointing out that "teaching, engineering, ministry, and

pharmacy all required a minimum of four years of college”, Sloane dismissed the ease of transforming the police into a profession (Sloane, 1954, p. 78). This descent voiced by Sloane was dismissed, however, as education and a college degree were again sought as a solution for the troubled nation as America moved into the era of social upheaval of 1960s and early 1970s (Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). With the backdrop of racial discord and social unrest during the civil rights movement and Vietnam War, many saw professionalization of the police through educational improvement as a sure means to a more understanding police force (Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). During the 1960s this call was found in the 1967 Report of the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice in the 1968 National Bar Association Project on Standards for Criminal Justice (Buerger, 2004). Hickman and Reeves (2006) noted that the call was echoed a third time in less than a decade by the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals formed in 1971 (as cited in Bruns, 2010).

From the historical information presented here, times of distress in our nation cause the police to be at the vanguard of social conflict. Because of this positioning, the police often rightly receive a great deal of negative attention from the media and society. This focuses society on attempts to makeover, improve the police, and alter their actions and attitudes in a positive manner. Because education is seen in such a positive way by both those who wish to increase the reputation of the police and those who believe more education is the path to a better guardian of civil rights, college degree requirements for new hires are often considered by agency administrators and those in power to dictate the course of law enforcement. The goal of both movements

becomes focused in the same direction, toward the creation of a more understanding, intelligent officer who can sufficiently reason through problems and thereby improve outcomes in altercations between the police and society.

The loss of legitimacy for police is a current problem for law enforcement in this nation. The cause of this loss of is often negative altercations of officers in various locations rebroadcast across the nation for a viewing audience who are stunned as though the incident were recorded locally. This perception leads to calls for better guardians and thought to be easily had by professionalization of officers and requirements for more education. Therefore, it is paramount that those in the position to make policy decisions regarding hiring standards understand not only the perceived benefit for requiring more education and a college degree for prospective employees but also the detrimental impact of these decisions prior to implementation of this educational standard.

In light of the time gap since the beginning of this movement, it is important to note that statistical data demonstrates that police administrators have already begun embracing the desire to obtain a better-educated workforce (Bruns, 2010, p. 88). This was demonstrated in 2000, when Whetstone's (2000) research found that the educational level of officers and the number who have a degree is on the increase (as cited in Bruns, 2010). A 2008 publication on the topic of educational standards produced by The International Association for Chiefs of Police demonstrated that the number of state agencies requiring any type of degree was only 20%. County-based law enforcement requiring a degree was nearly 13% and 10% of local agencies required a formal degree, comprised of 9% requiring an associate and 1% requiring a bachelor

degree (Bruns, 2010). With the calls to increase education being repeated over the last century, it would seem reasonable that law enforcement would have to adopt these provisions at a higher rate given the time lapse but that is not found in the International Association of Chiefs of Police statistics.

Implementation has been slow for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that neither society nor law enforcement is ready to require this standard of applicants to police service because of the positions that already go unfilled. A further reduction in the applicant pool only increases the difficulty faced by departments with vacancies. Further, the cost to recruit and hire college educated employees is significantly higher and is a front-end cost unlike costs associated with hiring officers without a degree and then making degree attainment an option that is both inexpensive via subsidization and attractive via incentivizing. This approach will confer the most benefit to society without reducing the pool of quality applicants for police service.

The remainder of this paper seeks to evaluate the policy of requiring a college degree prior to employment as a law enforcement officer and examines the following areas as they relate to that mandate. First, a college degree is not a necessary requirement to be successful in law enforcement. Second, there are police vacancies throughout the country that remain unfilled and further reduction of the applicant pool moves society and law enforcement further from a solution. Third, the cost for a college-educated officer is naturally higher than the cost associated with hiring a person without a college degree. Finally, a college degree requirement has a negative impact on minority applicants to policing because of historical underrepresentation of minorities or “URM’s at 4-year colleges and universities (Strayhorn, 2014, p. 973).” This places

law enforcement in direct competition with corporate employers who have the ability to pay more to minorities applicants with college degrees.

The following counterpoints are also examined: Police officers should be better educated because the society we live in has a higher educational mean. This educational advancement criteria would allow officers to be more similar to the people they serve. Finally, there are several studies on the link between college education and a reduction in use of force with a higher percentage of force used ruled later to be justified. Because college educated officers' use less force than less educated officers', college education can be seen as a means to increase public safety. After evaluating these points and counter points it will be clear that law enforcement agencies should refrain from instituting a degree requirement for hiring purposes and should instead incentivize and subsidize college degree attainment by their employees in order to obtain the tangible benefits offered through higher education to law enforcement without the negative points expressed here.

POSITION

College education is not a necessity for an officer to be successful in police service. Skogan and Frdyl in 2004 cited the National Academics Panel on Police Policy and Performance's recommendation that college should not be required of police applicants (as cited in Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). Further, Bruns and Magnan (2014) found in their research that "the majority of respondents believed a college degree is not an overall necessary component for a police officer's educational background" (p. 42). The reasoning for this stance is because the basic skills necessary to perform as a police officer and adapt to changes in statutory authority are taught at the academy

level and through on the job training and not through a formal college education degree track (White & Escobar, 2008). Therefore, the lack of a college education or degree does not translate into an inability to perform as a police officer but acts as an enhancement for police service only. College training in criminal justice focuses on aspects that make officers more well-rounded and help the officer to understand not only the multidisciplinary foundation of criminal justice but also confers the ability to examine a topic more thoroughly through research and the augmentation of the writing ability practiced at the college level (Buerger, 2004). These are additive effects that increase ability that are available at any point in the officer's career.

Police departments across the nation have unfilled positions currently and additional hiring requirements would be ill advised. Research shows that most people seek to become police officers out of an altruistic desire to serve their communities (White & Escobar, 2008). Although this desire has probably not changed in the general population, Cox (2011) points out there has been a reduction in applicants for police positions in the past decade; the cause of which has not been identified but which can easily be observed in the number of vacant police positions available across the nation. With the requirement of a college degree as a further barrier to employment, this observable reduction in potential applicants is therefore ill advised and may well create a need to relax other hiring criteria simply to fill vacant positions (White & Escobar, 2008). A further complication of this realization is the fact that both remaining Baby Boomer and Generation X employees are eligible and likely to retire which will compound the vacancy issue (Cox, 2011).

Carter and Sapp found that the rate of pay necessary to attract a college degreed applicant is significantly higher than the cost to hire an applicant without a college degree (as cited in Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). A better way to obtain college degreed officers is to incentivize obtainment of a college degree as well as subsidizing this education for new and current employees.

The requirement of a college degree prior to employment also limits law enforcement as a career path for minorities and women, two groups who have historically been underrepresented in both higher education and policing (White & Escobar, 2008). The “historically underrepresented or underserved minorities (URMs) who tend to face serious barriers and challenges to preparing for college” then have no hope of becoming an officer and this stance makes the proposition of increasing their ranks in law enforcement more difficult (Strayhorn, 2014, p. 973). Further, it is well established that police departments should be racially and ethnically like the community they serve because underrepresentation is a barrier and a hindrance to police acceptance by the community. This representative aspect allows officers to understand and relate to nuances of the community they serve for community relations and ultimately police legitimacy to continue unabated (White & Escobar, 2008).

COUNTER POSITION

Because society has an increased education level police officers should also be college educated. In 2005, the Census Bureau reported that over one fourth of Americans over the age of 25 had a four-year degree. White and Escobar point out in their research that the police in a well-educated society must themselves be educated to be like the community they serve (White & Escobar, 2008). This need was also

articulated by Bruns (2010) who explained that the police need not only represent the racial and ethnic makeup of the communities they serve but also have similar educational abilities to communicate effectively and understand the issues facing the community. A straightforward way to accomplish this educational increase in policing without reducing the applicant pool discussed by Cox (2011) is to educate the police via incentivizing and subsidizing of college education after employment.

This solution is cost effective in the State of Texas because criminal justice courses are free of charge to full time sworn law enforcement officers through a provision of the Texas Education Code Section 54.3531. White and Escobar (2008) encourage police to obtain an education in their field because of the ability to garner a greater depth of understanding of the system. They also encourage officers to pursue “educational backgrounds in psychology, government, sociology, public management, communications, business and the natural sciences” (White & Escobar, 2008, p. 122). These lines of study are encouraged due to the benefit to their community that occurs wherein officers are exposed to other ideas and cultures while serving as police. Education and the garnering of it only lead to a more experienced officer who is willing to engage and entertain ideas outside of his or her own heritage (White & Escobar, 2008). These ideas are powerful for individual change and create a greater impact than continuing education courses taught by police instructors in academy style classes because the need to be tolerant of other cultural beliefs learned passively over time is more transformative when compared to simple classroom instruction (Buerger, 2004).

The desire for understanding members of the police service comprised of intelligent individuals who have sufficient life experience and understanding is a benefit

to their citizenry. This desire is borne out in a 2015 Department of Justice study, which reported that approximately 23% of police officers in the nation were employed by agencies that required at least a two-year degree (Reeves, 2015). The research showed that over half of these departments allowed for military service to stand as a partial or complete alternative to the degree requirement (Reeves, 2015). This substitution of military service in place of a formal college degree demonstrates the rationale sought for the degree requirement, life experience. That rationale is that life experience necessary to augment formal law enforcement training gained from the academy is found in many venues. These administrators seek various ways to ensure their staff are exposed to different ideas, topics and situations over time to better relate, understand and accept the communities they serve. This flexibility gets at the heart of Vollmer's idea of having better educated workforce without the rigidity found in strict adherence to the belief that college is the only place where learning and broadening of self occurs.

It has been articulated that a college educated officer uses less force than their non-degreed counterparts. As demonstrated by Aamodt's (2004) meta-analysis of force studies which included information on officer educational level (as cited in Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). Aamodt concluded that officers who were more educated used less force when necessary and were less likely to use force overall (as cited in Rydberg & Terrill, 2010). Worden (1996) also researched the use of force by officers and found that college educated police officers employed force, which was deemed reasonable in most use of force cases (as cited in Rydberg & Terrill, 2010).

It is well established by multiple researchers, college education has not translated reliably into a decrease in other areas of law enforcement beyond use of force. It is, therefore, necessary to delve into a possible reason for the findings regarding reduced use of force. Buerger in his 2004 work cited the benefit of a college education in giving officers a greater ability to look at information in a critical way and to continue to seek new and better information in opposition to taking situations and facts at face value. This critical thinking aspect may allow officers to better understand their opponent in a confrontation and articulate a more viable solution not available to their less educated peers. This benefit is easily conferred to the officer post-employment through the recommended incentivizing and subsidizing of a college degree.

RECOMMENDATION

Police administrators should not require a college degree of police applicants but should make the acquisition of a degree desirable through subsidies and incentives in a multitude of degree fields so their sworn staff and community can benefit by a better-educated police force. The preceding information clearly establishes that the requirement of a college degree is not a necessity in law enforcement but acts to augment the skills and abilities of the officer. Not requiring a degree pre-employment is a benefit to departments for the following reasons: keeping minimum educational standards allows for a greater number of applicants for selection overall; a college degree does not guarantee that a recruit will be successful in the academy or subsequent service; the financial burden to interest college graduates in policing is higher than the amount required to obtain non college educated applicants; minority

applicants for policing careers are reduced when a college degree requirement is implemented as a pre-employment standard.

The following points are often cited as justifications for an increased pre-employment education and degree standard: college educated officers are better able to relate with the more educated population in society presently; college educated officers perform better as it relates to the proper use of force than less educated officers do. A simple yet effective counter to both positions is that a college degree can be obtained by officers after initial employment through the use of incentivizing and subsidizing programs which make obtaining a college degree available and confers the same benefits to society and the agency without out any of the negative unintended consequences of a pre-employment degree requirement.

Based upon these findings it is important for agencies to understand this education may be obtained while the officer is in their working career and need not be present prior to employment. Further, incentivizing and subsidizing of a degree makes the obtaining of a degree possible and desirable for officers. The degree requirement for prospective police officer employees is detrimental and not necessary considering the ability of officers to obtain all the benefits of an education after employment. This position will allow agencies to fill as many currently unfilled positions as possible and thereby make communities safer and police departments both better educated and more diverse.

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