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The Justification for the Development of a Competency Based  
Field Training Program for a University Police Agency

A Policy Research Project  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Today's law enforcement organizations are under a great deal of scrutiny, from both society and the courts, on the way they train new police officers. It has long been recognized that the transition of a police recruit to a dependable officer is an extremely difficult and tedious process. Also, during this period, the recruit, the trainer, and the department are all exposed to a tremendous amount of civil liability. To facilitate the transition from a new officer to a capable law enforcement professional, police departments utilize what have become known as field training programs. There has been growing concern that some police training programs place more emphasis on program administration, while the actual content of the program is given comparatively little importance. This lack of content may cause the training program to lose credibility, lowering the defenses against liability.

The purpose of this paper is to present the justification for the development of a competency based training program for police recruits. A review of the history and development of police field training programs, the liability issues a department may face as a result of inadequate or inappropriate training, legal implications of police training, and educational theories used by current police field training programs are presented. A conceptual model of competency based training is presented to illustrate how a police department can construct, evaluate, and operate a field training program which is justifiable, and based on competencies which have been developed specifically for that agency. A competency based field training program is offered as an alternative to current models to ensure proper documentation and program content.

The conclusion of this research indicates that a competency based training program, specifically designed around the needs of the agency, will provide the officer with the competencies needed for that particular agency. In addition, a competency based training program which is well structured, researched, and evaluated, will more appropriately protect a police department from liability by justifying the way a police officer is trained to function for that agency and will therefore better prepare the officer to police in today's complex society.

## **Introduction**

Today's law enforcement professionals are faced with an ever changing and complex society. As a result, the requirements and expectations of law enforcement personnel have increased exponentially in these recent years. Police departments, and their employees, which have primary jurisdiction on college campuses, enjoy no exception to these increased expectations (Powell, Pander, and Nielsen 7-8). The transition of a new recruit to a professional, dependable officer has always been recognized as an extremely tedious and difficult task, which has become more so, because of these noted changes in society. In addition, police organizations have been held increasingly more responsible, under the legal doctrine of vicarious liability, for the negligent admission, training, and retention of officers who are unable to perform appropriately in the field of police work (Kuboviak 2; Hess and Wroblewski 139; del Carmen 1). To facilitate the transition of new officers to capable law enforcement professionals, and to protect the officer and the police organization from liability, modern professional police agencies have utilized what have become known as field training programs (Johnson 31).

The subject of training new police recruits seldom is discussed without some comment on the San Jose Police Department's Field Training and Evaluation Model program. This model has been the foundation of numerous police field training programs not only in the United States, but around the world (Johnson 31). However, many FTO program manuals, based on this model, emphasize administrative program structure with program content having comparatively little importance. This lack of program content does not allow proper documentation or evaluation for what is taught in the program or why a specific topic has been addressed. This lack of content causes the field training program to lose credibility, lowering the defense against liability issues (Schroeder 37). Recognizing that an FTO program, regardless of how thorough, cannot teach new officers everything they need to know nor can it prepare them for every situation which they may encounter in their career; an FTO program based on competencies developed from a specific department's task analysis may well

prepare them for what they will likely face at that agency. Therefore, the relevancy of this research project will be to review the current state of FTO programs with an emphasis on ways in which police agencies can more appropriately train new officers while limiting the agency from liability.

The purpose and intended outcome of this research project will be to review the justification for the development of a competency based training program for a university police agency. This will include a review of the history and development of police field training programs, the liability issues which departments may likely face resulting from that training process, and the legal implication of inadequate or inappropriate training. An objective of this research project will be to illustrate how police departments can construct, coordinate, and operate training programs that are justifiable, and based on competencies which have been developed specifically for their individual agency. Ultimately, this research project should serve as a guide for departments in the development of their field training programs. In addition, the concepts outlined in this project may also be used to develop in-service training programs for police agencies.

The intended audience for this research project will generally be police administrators, police policy developers, police training coordinators, and anyone with an interest in the development of a competency based field training program for police departments. Specifically, departments which are of similar size, jurisdiction, and responsibility will be able to more directly benefit from the information derived from the project; however, departments of any size would be able to use the concepts explored in this project to develop a competency based training program.

There are several sources of information which will be reviewed and are pertinent to this project. There must be a review of the current case law on liability issues as it relates to training police officers. How police departments have constructed their current field training programs and the justifications for that development must be reviewed. A theoretical base will be discussed to explain the process of competency based education. Finally, an explanation of the concepts of needs assessments, job task analysis, and an appropriate evaluation

process will be suggested to ensure proper justification, development, and documentation of a competency based training program.

### **Historical, Legal, and Theoretical Context**

Currently, in the State of Texas, newly hired police officers are required to attend a 560 hour basic police academy. The curriculum, for this primarily classroom based training, is mandated by the State. At the conclusion of that classroom experience, the new police recruits are given a test administered by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement. New officers are required to pass this exam before they are licensed and permitted to officially act in the capacity of a police officer in Texas (TCLEOSE 6). Traditionally, the basic academy is conducted in a classroom setting and attempts to afford the new officers the basic competencies which will be required to adequately perform as police officers in the field. As with many classroom learning experiences, most academic police academies leave a wide gap between the knowledge provided in the classroom and the requirements needed to perform in the real world. To augment the knowledge, which the new officer is provided in the academy, an additional training program, commonly referred to as field training, is provided and required by most professional police agencies. Police field training programs attempt to expose new officers to actual street experiences while under relatively controlled and supervised environments. The current field training model is designed to have the new officer assigned to an experienced and specifically trained field training officer to gain street experience and knowledge necessary to perform properly (McC Campbell 111).

The concepts of field training programs are relatively new in American policing and will likely continue to play an important role in teaching new officers the proper techniques on how to effectively perform in the field. The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration (1967) recognized the need for more complete training of police officers and recommended that police agencies implement some form of supervised field training program to ensure that proper training was received. In addition, in 1973, the National Advisory

Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals suggested that police field training should be a minimum of four months in length after the police recruit completed an academic police academy, and that the police training officers should be specialists receiving forty hours of additional training directed to assist in the development and evaluation of the new recruits.

The field training for police officers gained additional support from the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies in 1983. The standards, which are used by agencies that seek accreditation by this organization, devote a full chapter to training and they require that all agencies seeking accreditation must conduct formal field training for their new officers. Since the inception of the current field training programs, criminal justice researchers have contended that the programs are important tools in the development of effective police officers and that this training is needed to supplement the training received in the classroom (McC Campbell 112). The trend is increasing in the use of field training programs in law enforcement. McC Campbell, in a study completed in 1989, found that sixty-four percent of the surveyed police agencies utilized a field training program to train new officers (113). In a more recent study of law enforcement agencies field training programs in Texas, Adams reported that ninety percent of the surveyed police departments in the Bexar County area reported using field training programs (4).

There are many reasons for police agencies to be concerned about their training programs. There are mandates from the state dictating an officer receive continued in-service training; most professional departments will regularly provide training to their officers on new techniques to ensure proper action on the streets. However, a predominate theme of most training programs continues to be limiting the liability to which an agency is open with regards to inadequate or improper training of its officers. It is a common belief that suing police in the United States has become a very popular sport (del Carmen 1). Police officials have long been concerned about the liability which they may face as a result of performing duties as police officers. It is not surprising that one of the largest areas of liability deals with the inadequate training of police personnel. There are two distinct areas

where the primary causes of tort actions are prevalent: the first is an alleged violation of a plaintiff's constitutionally protected rights by the officer and the department; the second area of concern is under the common law theory of vicarious liability and the doctrine of respondeat superior. The tort actions alleging violations of constitutionally protected rights is self explanatory. The vicarious liability issue involves the attributing of fault from one person to another; the respondeat superior doctrine shifts the incidents' responsibility up the ladder to the supervisory chain (Kuboviak 2). Prosser (1971) simply states that this doctrine looks to the supervisory personnel to be responsible for the employees' conduct (qtd. in Kuboviak 5). Generally stated, this doctrine declares that the employer has the responsibility and right to control their employee's conduct; therefore, the employer can be held vicariously liable for the negligent conduct of an employee if that conduct causes physical harm to the person or property of a third party. In summary, training cannot inoculate a department from tort action; yet, training programs which are justified and documented can help to reduce or eliminate areas where police departments may be the most vulnerable to liabilities.

A more lengthy explanation of the consequences and liability issues which affect the modern police agency is beyond the scope and nature of this research project; suffice to say that liability issues play an important role in dictating the actions of many areas in the field of law enforcement, of which training is only one. Police departments must be able to answer common questions concerning who, what, where, when, why, and how their officers were trained and to justify the particular methods used in the development and utilization of that training. The common practice of simply copying another police department's training program may not afford agencies proper or adequate liability (Wickman 10); nor, will a program which lacks detailed content and justification (Schroeder 37). However, a field training program based on specific job task analysis and one built upon job competencies with the appropriate evaluation techniques may offer a better defense against possible liabilities.

## Review of Practice

The recent history of police training has seen vast improvement in the way we prepare recruits to assume their duties as police officers. However, it has not been too many years ago, when a new officer embarked in the profession of law enforcement, the chief of police would issue a gun, a badge, a uniform, and the 'rookie' was subsequently sent out into the city to learn to fight crime on their own. This disaster, waiting to happen, was occasionally assigned to a more experienced officer for a short time to get acquainted with proper departmental and police techniques. The concepts of training, it's definition, or how to successfully accomplish or evaluate it's effectiveness was largely unknown, and the concern for it was less. This type of initiation into the police profession, for the most part, is a thing of the past. Most professional police agencies have changed their hiring practices and have developed and mandated training requirements for all new police officers. However, because of lack of standardized mandates in content, time, and philosophies, police training still may often be haphazard, without proper focus, documentation, be poorly taught, and not properly evaluated (Ness 15).

The San Jose Police Department's Field Training and Evaluation (FTO) program is often viewed as the seminal work for all subsequent police training programs. It has become the standard police training program for departments to achieve across the country and around the world. Developed in 1972, by then Captain Robert L. Allen of the San Jose Police Department and Dr. Michael D. Roberts, the program attempted to address the lack of training and documentation of police recruits. The impelling forces for the development of the program were two highly publicized incidents involving San Jose police officers who were responsible for the deaths of two citizens. The first death was the result of a traffic accident where an officer was traveling at an excessive speed, ran a red light at a major intersection and collided with another vehicle. A young passenger was killed as a result of the officer's actions (Johnson 31-38).

The second incident occurred about eighteen months later and was the result of a routine traffic stop which went terribly wrong and ended in the death of

another citizen. After making the stop for a relatively minor violation, the motorist, who felt that he had been unfairly detained, confronted the officer. The situation deteriorated and the motorist fled the scene on foot. Attempts by the officer to stop the fleeing suspect were unsuccessful, and the officer fired his service revolver hitting the suspect in the back, tragically killing him. These two incidents caused the police chief of San Jose to direct the training staff to explore ways to overcome the readily apparent training deficiencies within the agency. The outcome of the search for solutions to the problem was the development of the Recruit Training and Management Program, the predecessor of today's San Jose's Field Training Program. This program also became the model training program for many police agencies within the U.S. and around the world (Johnson 31-38).

The common FTO program of today begins after an officer completes the police academy. Typically, the FTO program is sixteen weeks long and is divided into five phases. Phase 1, which usually last two weeks, begins the field training process and gives the new officer an administrative orientation to the department. The next three Phases, 2, 3, and 4, are four weeks in length, deal more with actual field activities and attempt to give the officer the connection from classroom learning to actual police work. During these phases, the recruit officer is accompanied by a Field Training Officer who not only supervises activities but evaluates the recruit on a daily basis to apprise the learning of proper procedures. As the phases continue, the recruit is encouraged to handle more and more of the work load. By the end of Phase 4 the recruit should be handling the majority of the activity without the assistance of the trainer. Phase 5 is the final phase of the program. During this two week period, the recruit is accompanied by the trainer, but receives no help or assistance. The recruit is required to handle all of the activities as though they were on their own. The trainer's responsibility is solely to evaluate the recruit and to ensure that proper training has been provided which will allow appropriate action as a police officer (Texas A&M University Police Department Field Training Manual 22). Many departments have included their own

unique requirements and particular changes to this model, but for the most part, this is the way police departments around the country train their new recruits.

There is little doubt that the training of police officers today is far better than the training from years past. The requirements and responsibilities differ among police agencies; therefore, it is important to ensure that each department's field training program meets the needs which are specific to that agency. Too often, when a department begins to implement a training program, they simply copy a previously developed training program from another agency. This procedure may be more prevalent in smaller departments which often lack the financial resources to attend training courses on the development of training programs or to hire consultants. The result is a training program which may or may not address the specific needs of that agency. In addition, the need is always there for field training programs to be updated and evaluated to ensure that changes within the agency and laws are taught, as well as to incorporate new training methods and learning strategies (Wickman 10). A competency model program, as described, built specifically for that agency may address these concerns while providing a police agency the best trained officer for that department.

### **Discussion of Relevant Issues**

Throughout the development of training programs there has long been controversy about the relationship between education and training. Education has been characterized as having a more broad, global objective including being concerned with the growth and development of the individual as a person. In contrast, the term training is used where rather specific objectives can be identified, quantified, and analyzed. Training then is defined to be more concerned about preparing a particular person for a particular job or event (Snelbecker 455). Using these definitions, the term education would best fit the process accomplished in the police academy. Training would be that which takes place after the academy, in the field, for the specific purpose of preparing an officer to accomplish the police mission. With that definition, the development of a training

process begins with research. This initial research has been identified by several names: needs analysis, front-end analysis, performance problem analysis, or simply a job task analysis. This type of initial analysis attempts to close the gap between the actual and desired job performance. Regardless of the name, effective training cannot be accomplished without proper and thorough research (Gorden, Zemke, and Jones 37; Fisher, Schoenfeldt, and Shaw 314).

The police occupation has been identified as having one of the strongest vocational subcultures in American society. The recruiting, hiring, and training of new officers with the subsequent inculcation of that subculture on them affects every part of the police function (Samaha 257). Police departments apparently recognized the strength of this subculture and discovered that the phenomenon of human modeling was one of the most dependable ways to pass the culture on to new recruits. The basic tenet of human modeling posits that a person who is respected, admired, or is perceived to possess credibility, will become an example to learners and convince the learner to copy their choices and personal behaviors (Bell-Gredler 235; Gagne 232; Zemke 151). In Bandura's (1977) own words:

In the social learning view, people are neither driven by inner forces nor buffeted by environmental stimuli. Rather, psychological functioning is explained in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction of personal and environmental determinants (11).

It is apparent that the police field training programs of today, by mistake or design, rely heavily on the human modeling or Bandura's Social Learning Theory. The question remains: Is this the best technique to prepare and document the preparation of police officers to perform their appointed jobs? An FTO program based on competencies developed from a department's job task analysis would document and more appropriately train new officers.

To begin the research process for developing the competency based training program, a needs assessment should be completed in order to make effective recommendations and decisions about the actual job performance versus the desired performance of officers. The needs assessment attempts to identify problems and define the best solutions to those problems (Sauls 21; Wolfe et al. 15). In the case of an FTO program, the needs assessment is relatively straight

forward. It is generally believed that a recruit officer, just graduating from the police academy, lacks the knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform critical activities associated with field police work. The identification of abilities versus desired job performance gives way to the next step in the process. The identification and development of competencies that a new officer must be able to successfully demonstrate after completion of the training is paramount to the success of the training program.

The next step in the process of developing the competency based training program is a job task analysis. The job task analysis is the process of determining exactly what a particular job includes and exactly what is the best method for performing the job (Wolfe et al. 135). Police agencies, to often, simply adopt the task analysis completed by another department. A recent study reported that ninety-three percent of the surveyed departments decided to adopt a task analysis done by another agency as oppose to completing one for their specific agency (Adams 5). The problem associated with using a task analysis completed by another agency is that the job requirements from agency to agency may differ greatly. This difference may drastically limit the generalizability of the task analysis and could make a training program developed from it inaccurate for the agency. From the job task analysis, job competencies must be developed. Job competencies can be described as specific, precisely stated outcomes which have been verified as being essential for the successful completion of a task (Blank 58). The identification of these competencies is usually accomplished by a team of individuals who have an expertise in the field. Subject matter experts, actual police officers, supervisors, and possible representatives of the management team for the police department all help to define and identify the attitudes, motor skills performance, and related knowledge necessary to perform as a police officer (Wolfe et at. 85; Zemke 141).

Once the list of competencies has been developed, the next step is to validate the inventory to ensure that it accurately represents the entire set of required job competencies. A simple procedure to validate the list of competencies is to present them to a panel of subject matter experts and ask them

for a consensus of the tasks which are needed to adequately perform as a police officer. Since it is impossible to train a police officer for every eventuality, there must be some priority assessed to the list of competencies. The prioritizing technique is similar to the validation technique and can be accomplished concurrently (Wolfe et al. 91). The prioritizing of identified competencies is important to balance the time needed to train for those competencies which have a high criticality, yet have a low occurrence, like using a firearm, with competencies with low criticality, yet have a high occurrence, such as taking a routine report. Once all the competencies have been identified and prioritized, decisions must be made about the final content of the training program. It is important to recognize that for the program to fit the department, the training must be consistent with the precise job that the officer will perform within that department.

The completion of the development of this program includes documenting the entire process of development and subsequent operation of the program in the police department. This documentation will serve to justify the who, what, why, when, and how an officer was trained to perform a specific competency. In addition to the documentation of development, there must be an evaluation component in the program to ensure that as changes affect the police profession, the competency based training program adapts to those changes and continues to prepare new officers to adequately perform their jobs (Herman, Morris, and Fitz-Gibbons 11; Armstrong 105). Ultimately, a well structured, researched and justified competency based training program will protect the department from the liability of new officers and will more effectively prepare officers to handle the complexities of police in today's society.

## **Conclusion**

The purposes of this research project have been to review the justification for the development of competency based field training programs for university police agencies, and to demonstrate how a competency based program could be constructed and justified. The transition of police recruits to dependable officers is

an extremely difficult and tedious process and one in which the department is exposed to tremendous liability. When developing a field training program, many agencies simply copy a previously developed training program from another police department. In addition, many field training programs place heavy emphasis on administrative procedures with the actual training content component having little importance or documentation. The lack of actual program content and documentation causes the training program to lose credibility which may lower its defense against liability. Ironically, field training programs were developed to protect agencies from the liabilities associated with improperly trained officers, as well as, to provide citizens with a highly trained and professional police force.

Police training programs are relatively new and have provided vast improvements in the way recruits are prepared to assume the duties of police officers in today's society. A competency based training program, designed around the needs of a specific agency, goes one step further and provides an officer with the particular competencies which are needed for that individual agency. In conclusion, a competency based training program, which is well structured, researched, and evaluated, will more appropriately protect a police department from liability by justifying the way that police officers are trained to function for that particular agency, and will better prepare the officer to handle the difficult job of policing in today's complex society.

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