

The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

Does Education Effect Police Promotion?

An Administrative Research Paper  
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## **Abstract**

The effect of higher education on the police promotional profession has increased exponentially over the past century. Minimum educational requirements for entry-level positions have reshaped departmental hiring guidelines nationwide. These requirements have not carried over regarding promotional advancement within an agency. The benefit of this study is to determine whether promotional advancement is based on educational knowledge, skills or abilities or from experience.

In order to assess the effect that education has on promotional advancement, numerous police agencies were surveyed to determine the effect that education had on the promotional process. Respondent results demonstrated that higher educational levels attained were not essential in the promotional process, but rather a combination of both learned agility and learned abilities.

It is concluded that educational requirements for the police promotional process will become a requirement if policing is ever to be viewed as a legitimate profession.

## **Introduction**

In many ways a college degree has become a de facto requirement in departmental hiring and promoting (Sheehan and Cordner, 1995). The current trend in law enforcement is not only to hire qualified and well-educated officers, it is to retain and promote the educated officer from within the agency. When this author began his law enforcement career approximately ten years ago, the immediate supervisor (who had only attained his high school G.E.D.) became his mentor. The question arose: how did such a knowledgeable and influential person have such an impact on one's career, even though he only possessed limited formal education?

In today's policing, it appears that higher education does play a prominent role in police promotions. Thus, the purpose of this research is to determine if higher education does, in fact, effect police promotions. On the surface, the subject of this research appears to be quite simple.

Should higher education levels determine whether a candidate is eligible for promotion? Is education alone a justification for promotion via a learning ability? Or, should promotion be a measure of learning agility factors, since people do not come out of school knowing how to do their jobs (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2001)? Most law enforcement professionals will come to an understanding of what is expected in their role as a police supervisor through years of hands-on experience.

"Today, it is estimated that approximately 30% of the nation's police officers have four year or higher degrees" (Mayo, 1990). Breci (1994) stated that educated officers are more effective decision-makers and better communicators. They are seen as adept at problem solving with effective oral and written communication. Breci also stated that their critical thinking skills far surpass their counterparts. Other research has indicated, however, that the number of years spent in college did not reflect the level of education of an individual. Career-oriented education

gained after appointment, in many cases, is higher quality education (Carter, 1989). Considering these, the question remains: Does higher education, either implied or direct, affect the police promotional process? It is hypothesized that officers who have attained higher levels of education are viewed as better candidates for promotion and are more likely to advance within a police agency.

The methods of inquiry used for research consisted of literature reviews of books, journals, and periodicals. In addition, information was gathered via survey, which was sent to various police agencies throughout the United States to gather the data to either support or negate the hypothesis that is the topic of this research. Compilation and analysis of that data followed.

Several different internal and external influences have forced police agencies to require higher educational requirements, in-service training, and continuing education to meet the needs of these agencies and their communities. Departmental guidelines for promotional eligibility requirements must adhere to specific departmental policy constraints. The issue becomes one of equality between a learned ability and a learned agility. The implications of this research will prompt police agencies to formulate written policies that address the issue of education-based promotion while providing avenues for fairness and equity to competent candidates who offer experience in place of formal education.

## Literature Review

Now that we have entered into the 21st century, one issue remains apparent, "law enforcement will continue to face complex social problems and increasingly sophisticated criminal behavior:" (Martin, 1994). It has been theorized that societal problems and criminal sophistication have increased exponentially with the level of higher education attained. "When society as a whole became more educated, it became apparent to law enforcement, that in order to be representative of the community, they would have to be better educated and more highly trained" (Totzke, Online).

The first emphasis on professional training and education for officers came in 1916 from August Vollmer" the father of modern day policing, who insisted that officers have college degrees (Stevens, 1999). Educational issues did not remain stagnant. J. Edgar Hoover once stressed:

"The efficiency of law enforcement today is commensurate with the degree of training to its officers. Only through modern police training can we keep abreast of the times in the necessary fight against lawlessness... police work by untrained men...is as obsolete as the practice of medicine by sorcery." (Saunders, 1970).

In 1973 the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals set target dates, which established formal educational requirements (Martin, 1994). Martin's research indicated that by 1983 every department should require, as a condition of employment, the completion of at least four years of education at an accredited college or university. What has been stressed over the past century remains constant today: History has dictated the need for continuing education in the law enforcement profession.

Today, it is apparent that higher education plays an important role in modern-day law enforcement. The function of an institution of higher learning is to educate (Valentine, Online). "College education is based upon the principle of vicarious learning, a principle that contrasts

anti-intellectual belief that one must personally experience a role in order to understand that role." (Palombo, 1995) The role of college was not designed to train an individual for a specific job as a police officer or supervisor. The role of a college education is to teach the individual the basic knowledge that will allow an officer to function effectively with society. Knowing this, one would speculate whether attaining a higher level of education has improved an officer's professional ability, and therefore his promotability. Have higher educational standards directly impacted police promotions?

To address the issue of a higher educational requirement on police promotions, one needs to evaluate the values of a police supervisor. The core values of an effective supervisor are excellence, integrity, commitment, loyalty, and fairness (Charles, 2000). A qualified supervisor has the ability to effectively lead by experience. This experience teaches specific competencies associated with a job function. In every sense, a supervisor is a mentor. Mentors are people who take others under their care and personally guide them through a learning process. Mentors challenge one's ability to think. An effective supervisor can become a role model through mentoring, which plays a critical role in the subordinate's learning process throughout their career. The role model they serve is a direct substitute for experience (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2001).

To determine if higher education has an effect on police promotion, one needs to look at the motivational factors which cause an officer to learn. Most successful officers want to earn a degree for personal reasons. Higher educational levels do not make a poorly skilled officer a better officer. Better quality police services require better trained officers who, during the course of their career, educate themselves further to enhance themselves, their families and their communities (Stevens, 1999). One of the relationships between education and promotions could

be that the motivation for educational achievement is similar to that for promotional achievement. Those who have more education will also have mastered some skill necessary for promotion. There is also a view that "College education instills a degree of professionalism and maturity that is needed and valued at higher organizational levels" (Truxillo, 1998). The issue addressed for this research indicates that the two different factors in the learning process are learning ability and learning agility.

For the purposes of this research, this researcher has defined learning ability as the capacity to obtain knowledge that relates to a job function. Learning ability is primarily innate, and involves possessing an affinity for memorization, concept retention, and test taking abilities. On the other hand, learning agility is the capacity to actually apply learned knowledge to the work place.

If one validates the theory that education does directly increase the number of promotions, one must take into consideration the learning agility of the officer. For example, an individual who goes to school and obtains the necessary educational levels but is unable to apply the knowledge learned they will most likely not be promoted. Those who have the ability to learn and to apply that knowledge are the ones who are most likely to promote. Learning agility comes from "true life" experiences such as years of service, previous experience, and mentoring.

This learning process can be viewed as multi-dimensional. Hence, learning from experience is developable since one can be taught how to learn. "This discussion is not to suggest that college is the panacea for all the difficulties associated with policing. Nor should this be interpreted as a replacement for valuable academy training. Education must compliment both field experience and technical training necessary to carry out law enforcement activities." (Gamer, 1998).



While promotional qualifications for many agencies do not require a college education, Garner's research indicated that, in the hiring and promotional process, college education has a clear advantage. Other research indicated that, "Much of what is wrong with higher education could be blamed on the colleges that educate the police" (Sherman, 1978, p. 92).

This author's research discovered that several agencies have placed personal experience as more influential in the promotional process than a higher education. Research has also indicated that officers with higher educational levels have been observed to possess both positive and negative advantages and disadvantages. These are listed but are not limited to:

### **Advantages**

- Different outlook on issues, which provide different decision and option capabilities. (Sanchez,1995.
- Better adaptability to organizational changes and more responsiveness to alternative approaches toward policing.
- Fewer. administrative problems, which allows for improvement in personnel development as future administrators.
- Goal-oriented, better task performers, and higher ethical standards.
- Better communication skills than their counterparts.

### **Disadvanta2es**

- More marketability and less satisfaction with local conditions.
- Negative treatment under the idea that "common sense" plays more of a factor than a college education.
- Lack of challenge may cause them to leave the department for "greener pastures".

- Induce a lower sense of morale among fellow officers with less education.

The preceding positive and negative influences have forced police agencies to require the need for structural change in departmental guidelines for promotional eligibility requirements. These requirements should adhere to specific departmental policy constraints. These changes should be based on equality with an ultimate goal of developing men and women who can lead us forward into the future of law enforcement. Although every department has requirements specific to promotional advancement, several issues regarding the need for higher educational requirements were identified. These issues identified structural and departmental differences that addressed concerns such as competitive salaries, insufficient educational programs, cultural bias among non-educated officers, and litigation.

Since the first line supervisor is seen as the backbone to any police agency, how does one determine the level of higher education necessary to perform effectively at this level within a police agency? This research indicated that it may continue to be difficult to gain professional respect among any recognized profession without any type of formal educational requirements. Identifiable forms of educational requirements remain necessary to obtain minimum standards for entry in to any type of police profession (i.e., police academy). Along with these requirements, it was apparent that an increase in the educational standards for promotion eligibility remains necessary for police supervisors. Ultimately, a combination of both learned ability and learned agility factors better afford an officer the opportunity for promotional achievement.

## Methodology

The methods of inquiry used for this research consisted of literature review of books, journals, periodicals, and a survey, in the form of a written questionnaire *to* support or negate the hypothesis developed. It is hypothesized that officers who had attained higher levels of education are viewed as better candidates for promotion and are more likely *to* advance within a police agency.

A written questionnaire was the primary source of material utilized for the collection of data. The participants in this study were from law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. Agencies were selected *to* represent similar size and population served with a respondent size, *not to* exceed 250 sworn personnel. The respondent number was chosen *to* directly reflect the researchers own agency. Several agencies surveyed were active participants from the Leadership Command College of the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas. Other agencies were selected based on their CALEA (Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies) status.

The questionnaire was mailed *to* sixty police agencies. The total number of respondents was thirty-seven (61.7%). Electronic mail and fax returns were accepted as well as those by self addressed stamped envelope, which were paid by this researcher. A copy of the questionnaire is found at appendix A.

Information obtained from this questionnaire was designed for brief and concise responses from all respondents. Compilation of data was analyzed in summary format *to* facilitate this researchers finding.

## **Conclusion**

There has been a dramatic change in societal "evolution" over the past century. As with any form of adaptation, the law enforcement community has reluctantly, at times, been forced to adapt to social change. "It's reasonable to expect the conditions surrounding the police profession to continue its pattern of change. " (Young, 1996)

Internal and external influences have pressed police agencies to expand higher educational requirements, in-service training, and continuing education to meet departmental and societal needs. In the area of promotional advancement, the issue clearly became an assessment of both learned ability and learned agility. The purpose of this research was to determine whether promotional advancement was based on educational knowledge, skills and abilities or from "true-life" experiences. Does education effect police promotion?

It was hypothesized that officers who had attained higher levels of education were viewed as better candidates for promotion and were more likely to promote within a police agency.

The findings of this research neither supported nor negated the hypothesis derived. Compilation of data collected demonstrated that higher educational levels were given consideration in the promotional process, but not viewed as an essential requirement. Eligibility requirements based on education only accounted a fraction in the promotional process for an overwhelming majority of the agencies surveyed. In 1976, Leroy Harvey summarized his Sam Houston State Masters Thesis by stating "A final conclusion is that, as indicated in the review of the literature, much of the value of education is based on faith rather than available data. Our society is based on the belief that a higher education is good for nearly everyone and that those with a higher education are better able to meet life's challenges". (Harvey, 1976). Harvey's

concluding statement remains true today. This research concluded, regarding today's police profession, education remains secondary to experience.

On the surface, the researcher miscalculated the importance placed on higher educational standards due to personal bias. He initially placed a higher value on formalized education than the surveyed agencies indicated. A majority of the agencies did not place a higher standard on an educational requirement for promotion. These findings would conclude that learning agility is still considered preferential to education. The findings were limited by restricted departmental size and perhaps gender-bias since a large percentage of respondents were male.

In conclusion, the current demands placed on the police profession will continue to reshape modern day policing by altering departmental promotional policies along with mandating state and federal law changes. State and Federal guidelines should be established for minimum mandatory educational requirements for police personnel. Future departmental hiring and promotional practices regarding eligibility requirements must raise minimum education requirements if policing is ever to be viewed as a true profession.

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## Appendix A: Questionnaire

AGENCY NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY: \_\_\_\_\_ STATE: \_\_\_\_\_

POPULATION SERVED: \_\_\_\_\_

NUMBER OF SWORN OFFICERS: \_\_\_\_\_

NUMBER OF SWORN SUPERVISORS: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Please list the average educational level attained by a police supervisor within your agency:

HIGH SCHOOL/GED  SOME COLLEGE  ASSOCIATES   
 BACHELORS DEGREE  MASTERS  DOCTORATE

2." Using the same list of supervisor's, please provide the average years of service within your agency prior to becoming a first line supervisor:

1-3 YEARS  3-5 YEARS  5-7 YEARS  7-10 YEARS  
 OVER 10 YEARS

3. How is a supervisor promoted within your agency? (Check all that apply. If more than one, rate in order of importance.)

TESTING  
 APPOINTMENT  
 EXPERIENCE  
 SENIORITY  
 ASSESSMENT CENTER  
 OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you have departmental policy provisions that require formal higher educational levels, beyond a high school diploma, for promotional advancement?  YES  NO

If so, briefly describe these requirements: \_\_\_\_\_



5. Do you believe that higher educational requirements are necessary for promotional advancement? (please check one choice.)

Extremely Important    
  Very Important    
  Important    
  Little Importance    
  No Importance

Briefly describe why? \_\_\_\_\_

6. Does your agency offer any incentive based program for continuing education beyond what is necessary to retain your state license?  YES  NO

If yes, briefly describe

\_\_\_\_\_

If no, describe \_\_\_\_\_

7. In the future, do you believe that higher educational levels (college) will become a requirement for promotion within a police agency?  YES  NO

If so, how long?

1-5 YEARS

5-10 YEARS

10-IS YEARS

BEYOND 15 YEARS

Thank you for your participation in this questionnaire.