

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Enhancing Educational Standards for Law Enforcement:  
It is Time**

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

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite appeals for higher educational standards, from two presidential commissions (Wickersham Commission, 1931 and the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice, 1967), numerous scholars, and law enforcement practitioners, the educational standard for law enforcement has remained the high school diploma since the 1960s (as cited by Roberg & Bonn, 2004). This is ironic, as present day police officers are faced with some of the most complex challenges the field of law enforcement has ever seen. It is imperative that the modern police officer possess the broad-based knowledge, critical-thinking and analytical-problem solving skills imparted by the baccalaureate degree.

This paper will examine several of the factors that have lead to this inevitability. It will go on to explore some of the most relevant research available to support the assertion made by the author, as well as several of the concept's most significant criticisms. In the end, it will demonstrate to the reader that a college education is a necessary educational qualification for the police officer of today.

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## INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, law enforcement has been viewed as a blue collar job, which required more physical attributes, such as size, weight, and agility, than mental ones. Indeed, capturing violent criminals and controlling disorderly inebriates requires a certain amount of physical and tactical prowess, which is evidenced by the continued inclusion of defensive tactics courses in most basic law enforcement training courses. However, with the profound technological advances and the field's shift towards "community policing" in recent decades, as well as the stated goal of officials, advisors, and practitioners of the field to "professionalize" the police service, the topic of whether law enforcement, in general, and as a consequence, society as a whole, would benefit from a required mandatory of higher education continues to generate considerable discourse and debate among academicians and law enforcement practitioners. Currently, less than one percent of local law enforcement agencies throughout the nation, which employ public police officials vested with general arrest powers, mandate that their officers possess a four—year college education (as cited by Rydberg & Terrill, 2010).

Policing has evolved significantly from a time when all that one needed to be successful was a strong back and a weak mind, into a quasi—profession, approaching parity with other service professions, such as law, nursing and teaching. The police officer of today employs a considerable deal of technology during each shift, thinks critically to analyze problems and then solves myriad of complex social and legal issues, substitutes his best judgment for the judgment of others who are unwilling or otherwise incapable of discerning matters on their own, employs a tremendous amount

of discretion in sensitive situations, and is vested with the ultimate authority any public official can be granted in a free society—the authority to seize a person’s liberty, or even take human life, if appropriate to carry out his duties. Clearly, a free and open society, such as that which exists in the United States, and which relies so heavily on its law enforcement for order maintenance and deviance control, must require of the officials charged with those duties, the highest moral, ethical, and educational standards possible. The former standard of a high school diploma is no longer sufficient for the modern day law enforcement official; police officers of today need the wide breadth of understanding and the critical thinking skills imparted by a baccalaureate degree.

This paper will discuss the need for an increased level of education for the law enforcement vocation to obtain status as a true “profession.” Further it will go on to examine evidence that demonstrates that a growing body of research has proven a beneficial link between higher education and police work. It will examine, and then rebut, the major arguments against implementing a higher education standard for law enforcement. Finally, in sum, it will lay out evidence that demonstrates that law enforcement officers should be required to possess or obtain a four-year baccalaureate degrees as a requirement for peace officer licensing.

## **POSITION**

Increasing the standard of education for law enforcement practitioners to a four-year college degree is an idea whose time is long overdue. As far back as 1829, Sir Robert Peele, who is generally regarded as the founder of the first police force in London, advocated the need for a “professionally trained police force” (Travis, 1995, para. 5). During the early 1900s, August Vollmer, the first police chief of Berkley,

California, recognized the importance of education and intelligence to modern police practices, and was known to hire college students to bring some of those qualities and traits to his organization (Decker & Huckabee, 2002). Vollmer was widely known as a strong advocate of higher education for police officers (Roberg & Bonn, 2004). As recently as 1967, a four-year baccalaureate degree for all law enforcement officers was proposed by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (as cited by Roberg & Bonn, 2004). In 1984, the federal courts recognized a minimum standard of college education as a bona fide occupational qualification.

The field of law enforcement in general, and society as a whole, would benefit from increasing the minimum educational standards from the high school diploma to the baccalaureate degree for a number of reasons. First, the overall value of a college education in terms of job performance has been universally recognized by human resource practitioners (Truxillo, Bennett, & Collins, 1998). College education simply confers tangible benefits above a high school education, which may equate to higher quality employees for the police field. College education has been shown, generally, to: increase average earnings, improve employment benefits (such as health and pension), increase job satisfaction, foster healthier lifestyles, increase volunteerism and active citizenship, and decrease instances of unemployment (The College Board, 2010). Additionally, college education is generally recognized as enhancing "knowledge, fulfillment, self—awareness, and broadening of horizons" (The College Board, 2010, p. 7). The value a college education imparts to individuals is of little question.

Second, a college education requirement is necessary for the professionalization of the field of law enforcement. The term "profession" is defined in a number of ways,

but most accepted formal definitions include the requirement of “long and intense academic preparation” (Association of Professionals in Business Management, n.d., para. 3). Based on this definition, law enforcement, though frequently referred to as a profession, falls short in the area of academic achievement. Campbell argued that, unlike the established service professions of law, medicine, nursing and teaching, which have established educational standards in addition to applied training, law enforcement has failed to keep pace by inappropriately assessing its future needs using the “rear view mirror” (Campbell, 1993, p. 215-216). Furthermore, although law enforcement comprises one of the largest components of the criminal justice system, enjoys a considerable amount of discretion with regard to the application of the law, and is generally the first component of the system that criminal offenders come in contact with, the educational standards for its practitioners generally fall short of the standards required of other members of the same system (probation/parole officers, attorneys and judges). LeDoux, Tully, Chronister, & Gransneder argued that increasing the education level of police officers would elevate the public’s perception of law enforcement to that equivalent to a professional occupation (as cited by Rydberg & Terrill, 2010).

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to the implementation of higher educational standards in law enforcement has been the assertion that not enough scientific evidence existed to validate the link between higher education and police work. However, a growing body of research conducted since the early 1970s seems to demonstrate that such a link does exist. Research examining the relationship between education levels and law enforcement has generally focused on two broad categories: behavioral measures and attitudinal measures (Paynich, 2009).

In terms of behavioral measures, social scientists have studied indicators such as: job performance, citizen complaints, arrest, search and seizure, use of force, promotions, job knowledge, and disciplinary action. A study conducted of data gathered during the late 1990s in the cities of St. Petersburg, Florida and Indianapolis, Indiana, attempted to measure the link between the educational level of police officers and the incidences of arrest, searches and use of force. While no correlation was found between education levels and arrests and searches, researchers did find that “officers with some college exposure or a four—year degree are significantly less likely to use force relative to non—college—educated officers” (Rydberg & Terrill, 2010, p. 110).

A longitudinal study pertaining to college education and police officer performance was conducted over the course of ten years, which attempted to measure the relationship between college education and work performance of a group of 84 police officers. The authors attempted to measure the indicators of promotions, job performance (based on supervisory ratings), and disciplinary actions taken against the officers, relative to educational levels attained. The results of the study showed a link between education and promotions and job knowledge, but the lack of a relationship between education and disciplinary actions (Truxillo, Bennett, & Collins, 1998).

Although disciplinary action was one indicator under study in the aforementioned research, it was not the sole focus of the study. The results of one exclusive study of that relationship were presented by the study’s author, Deputy Police Chief Scott Cunningham, Ph.D., of the Tampa, Florida, Police Department, at the 110<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in October of 2003. Cunningham’s (2003) research focused on data



obtained from the state of Florida's police officer licensing agency. Cunningham's study, which covered a five-year period (1997 to 2002) and included approximately 43,000 Florida police officers, revealed that: 1) 58% of all Florida police officers had high school diplomas only, yet accounted for 75% of the discipline issued out by the licensing agency, 2) 16% of all Florida police officers had associate degrees, yet accounted for only 12% of the discipline issued out by the licensing agency, and 3) 24% of all Florida police officers had bachelor degrees, yet accounted for only 12% of the discipline issued out by the licensing agency.

The range of disciplinary actions referred to above included all forms of sanctions, from letters of censure up to, and including, license revocation. When Cunningham looked only at the most serious sanction the agency could impose, license revocation, he found that the group of high-school-only educated officers (58% of the population) accounted for 77% of lost licenses. The associate degree group (16% of the population) accounted for 12% of lost licenses and the bachelor degree group (24% of the population) accounted for 11% of lost licenses. Cunningham argued that the data suggested that more highly educated officers were less likely to be disciplined at the state-level than their less-educated counterparts (Cunningham, 2003).

Other researchers have focused their attention on studying the effect of higher education on police officer attitudes and perceptions. In 1978, Roberg published a study in which he tested the relationship between education levels of patrol personnel and their beliefs. Roberg's study involved a group of 118 patrol officers, of the Lincoln, Nebraska, Police Department, all of whose education levels varied from high school diplomas to baccalaureate degrees. Roberg (1978) found that higher levels of

education were associated with more open belief systems and more satisfactory job performance, and that degreed officers possessed the most open belief systems and the highest levels of job performance. Roberg (1978) concluded that officers who possessed college education were more readily able to adapt to the “complex nature of the police role” (p. 344) Other studies of attitudes have found evidence that college-educated police officers were also less authoritarian (as cited by Paynich, 2009), less cynical (as cited by Paynich, 2009), possessed a broader concept of the police role (as cited by Paynich, 2009), and valued ethical conduct more highly (as cited by Paynich, 2009).

### **COUNTER POSITION**

Some oppose the imposition of a higher education standard in law enforcement, and they cite several reasons for their opposition. One seemingly valid argument pertains to the effect that such an imposition might have on minority and female police applicants (Breci, 1994), who have traditionally been under—represented in the ranks of law enforcement. Those who espouse this view argue that mandating a higher education requirement for employment as a police officer would have a deleterious effect against minority and female applicants. While there is certainly some truth to the assertion that minorities and females are generally under-represented in the ranks of law enforcement, there is evidence that demonstrates that, nationally, the pool of potential minority and female applicants (that possess a bachelor’s degree or higher) does not differ all that significantly from the number of potential white male applicants. According to US Census figures, 27.6% of Whites, 17.3% of Blacks, 49.8% of Asians, and 11.4% of Hispanics (25 years of age or older) possess a bachelor’s degree, or

higher (U.S. Census, 2004). Additionally, in 2002, Decker & Huckabee found in a study specifically designed to measure the effect raising educational (as well as age) requirements would have on the Indianapolis, Indiana, Police Department, that increasing the (pre-service) educational requirement to include a bachelor's degree would only have a "slightly higher" [exclusionary] effect on black officers, as opposed to the overall population, and that female applicants were affected "consistently" with the overall population (Decker & Huckabee, 2002).

While the former research may suggest that increasing educational requirements to a four—year degree may adversely affect minority applicants to a certain extent, case law does exist which justifies the effect the proposed standard may impose. In 1984, a federal court ruling in *Davis vs. City of Dallas* held that forty-five semester hours of college could be considered a "Bona Fide Occupational Qualification" (Police Association for College Education, (PACE), 2004), thus upholding the Dallas Police Department's minimum educational requirement of 45 semester hours of college for police applicants. Roberg & Bonn (2004) asserted that the Court's decision was based, in part, on the increasingly complex nature of police work, and the presumption that college education prepares officers for that role.

Strategies exist to mitigate the adverse affect an increased standard may have against minority and female applicants. One involves specifically targeting such applicants through focused recruitment efforts and recruiting at colleges and universities. Others include increasing pay, benefits, and implementing tuition assistance programs (Roberg & Bonn, 2004).

Yet another argument made against increasing educational standards is one that posits that, due to the trade-like nature of the work, and the regimented and bureaucratic organizations officers operate in, there is no need for a college education (Decker & Huckabee, 2002). This argument may have been valid at one time; however, recent trends in law enforcement practices are requiring just the opposite from officers. In recent decades most law enforcement agencies have moved to a model of policing referred to as "Community Policing." Bureau of Justice Statistics indicated that approximately 90% of local law enforcement agencies either formally or informally employ the community policing model (as cited by Roberg & Bonn, 2004). The community policing model advocates components and processes contrary to its predecessor, the bureaucratic model, which was top-down in composition and practice, and militaristic in nature. The community policing model advocates forming community partnerships and problem-solving at the lowest possible level; efforts that require critical thinking skills and analytical problem solving techniques of officers on the beat. These particular sets of skills are precisely those that are introduced and nurtured through traditional college education.

Akin to the above argument is the one that puts forth that a college education is not needed to practice law enforcement and that the educational status quo is sufficient. Proponents of this argument assert that the need for police officers to have a college education has not been validated by scientific study. This argument fails on more than one level. First, the high school diploma has been the educational standard for (local) law enforcement for decades (as cited by Decker & Huckabee, 2002). For comparison's sake, if medical standards had remained the same from 1910 to 1993,

medical doctors, by 1993, would not have had to possess a high school diploma (Campbell, 1993). The field of law enforcement, like the field of medicine, is becoming increasingly complex and law enforcement cannot afford to maintain the status quo, insofar as education and training is concerned.

Second, it is imperative that the vocation keep pace in terms of education with the overall U.S. population. The average educational attainment of the population has increased significantly in recent years and, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2009), 27.5% of Americans 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher. Compare this with an estimated 22.6% of police officers throughout the country who possess four—year degrees (PACE, 2004), and it becomes evident that law enforcement may be failing to keep up with American society in this regard. In order to maintain credibility with the population it polices, law enforcement, at a minimum, must maintain a level of education that meets or exceeds that of the general population.

## **CONCLUSION**

The environment in which the police must operate is changing constantly, and the role of the police in society continues to evolve. In days past, the police functioned primarily as crime fighters, and the quality of their efforts were often measured objectively through crime statistics and what those statistics revealed vis-à-vis the presence or absence of crime in a community. The last several decades have witnessed a marked departure from that old style of policing, and have presented today's police officer with new and complex issues and ever—changing priorities. The community policing model is now, more than ever, requiring officers to think analytically and become problem solvers at the lowest organizational level. Crime is no longer the

sole focus of the police; they are expected to become active participants in improving the quality of life in their respective communities, by partnering with local citizens. Furthermore, the tools officers now employ to do their jobs are technologically advanced and require a solid understanding; officers are expected to partner with members of their community, many of whom are of different cultures and backgrounds; and the post 9/11 era requires that officers be constantly vigilant in their added role of defending the homeland from terrorist attacks. The outdated and militaristic bureaucratic model has been replaced with one that requires officers at every level to analyze, deliberate, decide and act on his or her own. Today's police officer must be fully equipped, both mentally and physically, in order to adequately perform these tasks.

Evidence has been presented that demonstrates that college-educated police officers are generally less authoritarian, less dogmatic, more ethical and more readily able to adapt to the complex and discretionary police role. In addition, it has been shown that college—educated police officers are significantly less likely to use force, require significantly less discipline, are more likely to promote through the ranks, and generally possess more job knowledge and perform their jobs more satisfactorily. In order to keep up with the demands society has placed on law enforcement, its practitioners must be as well educated and trained as possible. A high school education used to be a sufficient standard, but that standard was implemented at a time when much of the population was without a high school education (Roberg & Bonn, 2004). Now that nearly 30% of American society is educated at or above the bachelor degree level, that is no longer the case. In order for law enforcement not to be left

behind, it must raise its educational standard to that of a four-year baccalaureate degree.

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