

Criminal Justice Professionalism in the 21st Century: Does Education Matter?

In the early years of law enforcement the normal selection process of city and county peace officers consisted of an appointment by community leaders of respective jurisdictions and that method became the model used into the early 1990s. The response to calls for service was often initiated by a system of flashing lights and horns until the advent of call boxes were used to notify officers that they should return to the station to receive an assignment. (Lyman, 2010)

Fast-forward 50 years: A few major metropolitan agencies were implementing formal hiring policies but most out-state, smaller agencies' hiring processes consisted of an interview with the chief, and if you were fortunate enough to get the job you were provided with a used set of uniforms that likely needed some mending, a gun, a badge, and a set of squad keys. There was no formal training, no inquiry of educational qualifications, and no paperwork. You were lucky if someone was assigned to mentor you for a brief period before you were assigned to solo patrol where you would learn the ins and outs of the job by trial and error.

The need for peace officer training and education was recognized by commissions and scholars as early as 1917; August Vollmer recruited officers at the University of California from student applications. An excerpt from *The Wickersham Report on Lawlessness in Law Enforcement* (1931) indicated there was a lack of commitment to train and educate rookies or terminate those who were deemed unfit to serve. The President's Commission of Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice (1967) recommended the goal of all law enforcement agencies should be that personnel with enforcement authority should have college degrees. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2007) reported that 98% of municipal police departments had a minimum education requirement for hiring new officers.

Professional police licensing became a standard in Minnesota in the early 1970s and the Peace Officer Standards and Training Board became the official watchdog to insure that keepers of the peace were properly trained before officers took to the streets. Two – three months of formal training was conducted by Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension instructors and every licensee was required to successfully complete mandated continuing education hours before renewal of their license every three years.

Moving into the 21st century, the public's expectations of modern-day law enforcement officers and leaders has become more complex than ever before and the need to develop skills and expertise has become essential to acquire new knowledge, think critically, and improve best practices. Today's criminal justice workforce has been tasked with an emphasis on high-order thinking and the ability to successfully meet that challenge is enhanced by a criminal justice professional who is educated.

According to Paynich (2009) existing literature on college education and policing suggests the following:

College-educated police officers:

- Demonstrate better thinking and understanding of the criminal justice system
- Write better reports and have better communication skills

College-educated police officers also:

- Are more professional and generate fewer citizen complaints
- Have fewer administrative and personnel issues and take less sick time away from work

College-educated officers report that they:

- Have a higher quality of performance on the job
- Are better equipped to deal with criticism, change, workload, and stress

If you're considering returning to college ask yourself these questions:

- 1) Why am I thinking about going back to school?
- 2) What am I going to do with this degree after I've earned it?

Our world is rapidly changing; more and more jobs require more education and the job market is very competitive. Do you have the desire to move up in your organization? Are you contemplating a lateral move to another organization? Are you considering your options after retirement? One thing is certain; to be a competitive candidate you need an education.

If you've decided returning to college and earning a degree is your best option, consider some of the issues that influence the quality and cost of your education. Most institutions provide handbooks that define tuition costs, curriculum and student life. This information can also be found online on the school's website. A very important issue that is sometimes overlooked is what type of accreditation the institution offers – regional or national; make sure you understand the definition of each. Regional accreditation institutions started as leagues of traditional colleges and universities in a specific area. National accreditation institutions started as associations of schools with a common theme.

Final considerations are whether you want to attend a traditional (on campus) college or university that offers curriculum that is entirely in the traditional classroom or a program that offers blended curriculum that is mix of classroom and online; or are you interested in a program that is entirely online. Ultimately the choice is yours to make so be sure it's worth your investment of time and money!

About the author:

Erv Weinkauff is a 40 year law enforcement veteran who served as an Army airborne military police officer, deputy sheriff and municipal police officer. After joining the New Ulm Police Department in 1974, he worked his way up through the ranks and eventually was promoted to chief before retiring in 2009. Erv went back to school and earned three degrees and took advantage of his education. He served as an adjunct instructor for several colleges and universities; was a guest instructor for the Minnesota Chiefs' Association Leadership and CLEO and Command Academies; served as a board member of the Minnesota Chiefs' of Police Association Advisory Board and past president of The Association of Training Officers of Minnesota (ATOM). Weinkauff currently serves as the Criminal Justice Department Chair (online) at Concordia University, Saint Paul. He can be reached at Weinkauff@csp.edu.

References:

Bureau of Justice Statistics (2007). *Local police department, 2007*. Washington, D.C: US Justice Department.

Lyman, M.D.. (2010). *The police and introduction*, 4th ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Paynich, R.D.. (2009). *The impact of a college-educated police force: A review of the literature*. Retrieved from

<http://www.masschiefs.org/documents/The%20Impact%20of%20Higher%20Education%20in%200%20Law%20Enforcement%20Feb%202009%20and%20Summary.pdf>

Presidents Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice. (1967) *Task force report: the police*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement.(The Wickersham Commission Report on Alcohol Prohibition). (1931). *Report on the enforcement of the prohibition laws of the united states*. Retrieved from <http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/library/studies/wick/>.