REFLECTIONS FROM THE ONE-PERCENT OF LOCAL POLICE DEPARTMENTS WITH MANDATORY FOUR-YEAR DEGREE REQUIREMENTS FOR NEW HIRES: ARE THEY DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH?

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Abstract

In an attempt to understand why only one-percent of local police departments require a four-year degree, surveys were sent to police chiefs of the 37 known local law enforcement agencies with mandatory four-year degree requirements. Data from 36 police chiefs were analyzed in this exploratory qualitative study to determine the utility of college degree requirements and why four-year degree requirements nationwide are merely a preference, not a standard mandatory hiring requirement. Current minimum educational requirements for local and state police agencies and implications for the future of the college-degreed officers are explored.

Key words: police departments, educational requirements, college degree requirements, police chiefs, law enforcement education program

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of a college degree for police officers has been debated for decades. Numerous studies have been conducted regarding the importance of the degreed officer, while others have described how a college degree is not an essential or important ingredient for success among police officers. That precise debate—the worth of the bachelor’s degree for police officers is not the focus of this endeavor. The focus here is central to three vital panels’ recommendations from 1967-1974 proclaiming that police officers obtain baccalaureate degree—the President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, and the American Bar Association Project on Standards for Criminal Justice—and why so few local and state police
departments have followed suit in requiring that police officers hold baccalaureate degrees, as less than 1% of such departments require a four-year degree (Hickman and Reeves, 2006).

Varricchio (1998) insisted that growing numbers of law enforcement administrators are considering higher education to be an important asset in transition into community policing as increasing amounts of officer education enhances officers’ problem-solving, dispute resolution (Mayo, 2006) and communication skills. However, it is evident that leaders in law enforcement are hesitant to embrace the educational movement. Most police agencies do report that they prefer a college-degreed officer; however, the majority of police agencies (local, state and special jurisdiction) do not require anything more than a high school diploma or equivalent. Upon reviewing the known departments that require a four-year degree, this exploratory analysis attempts to reveal and explore the reasoning behind the small number of police departments actually requiring the degree. Results of this analysis describe the departments with four-year mandatory degree requirements and include opinions of police chiefs regarding why a college degree is important. Qualitative explanations will yield information regarding how exemplary practices of a few departments should serve as role models and guides for departments across the nation in the one hundred year quest to professionalize the policing field.

As the literature suggests, police administrators do prefer police officers to hold a baccalaureate degree, but do not require it. Verrill (2007) called for the need to determine why the select one-percent of local police departments who require the degree actually do so. This study attempts to answer that question. Debates pertaining to the usefulness and value of a college degree for police officers have been commonplace in criminal justice literature for decades. However, at the outset, it is unclear how many police departments actually require a four-year degree and the locations of such departments. This lack of clarity is further exemplified by uncertainty as to how many police officers and police agencies there actually are the in U.S., and leads to difficulty in counting police agencies (Maguire, Snipes, Uchida, and Townsend, 1998). Whatever the case, we can be assured that few police agencies (non-federal) actually require a bachelor’s degree.

Current Knowledge About Educational Requirements for US Police Departments

According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2004), there are 12,766 local police departments with 3,067 sheriff’s offices, 49 primary state law enforcement agencies, 1,481 special jurisdiction agencies, and 513 ‘other’ agencies totaling 17,876 law enforcement agencies. As of 2003, in a sample of 3000 police departments, 98% of local police departments had an educational requirement for new recruits; 18% had ‘some type’ of college requirement; nine percent required a two-year degree and less than one-percent required a four-year degree (Hickman and Reaves, 2006).

Another source, The International Association for Chiefs of Police (2008) announced that 16% of state police agencies require a two-year degree, while four-percent require a four-year degree; 13% of county police agencies require a two-year degree and an unknown percentage of
county police agencies require a four-year degree. Nine percent of local police departments require a two-year degree and two-percent require a four-year degree. However, it was unclear the name and location of the departments that required a two or a four-year degree. Furthermore, it is unclear as to where that two-percent was derived.

Overall, scarce information is available regarding which departments require a two or a four-year degree. By searching state police agency and state highway patrol websites, it is evident that only three state police departments require officers to hold four-year degrees—Illinois State Police, New Jersey State Police, and North Dakota Highway Patrol. All three agencies, however, will waive educational requirements. Regarding the New Jersey State Police’s minimum qualifications,

An applicant must have (1) a bachelor’s degree, signifying completion of the undergraduate curriculum and graduation from an accredited college or university or, (2) alternatively, an associate’s degree or have complete 60 college credits from an accredited college or university, plus at least two years of satisfactory employment, or (3) alternately, have completed 30 college credits from an accredited college or university, plus at least two years of active duty military service with an honorable discharge (http://www.njsp.org/recruit/qual.html).

The Illinois State Police has the following minimum educational requirement:

Option 1). An Associate of Arts Degree or equivalent coursework and must meet one of the following two job experience requirements: Three consecutive years of continuous, full-time service as a police officer, with the same police agency or three consecutive years of active military duty.

Option 2). An Associate Degree of Science or equivalent coursework and meet one of the following two job experience requirements: three consecutive years of continuous, full-time service, as a police officer, with the same agency or three consecutive years of active military duty.

Option 3). An Associate of Applied Science Degree, only if the degree is in Law Enforcement/Criminal Justice and meet one of the following two job experience requirements: Three consecutive years of continuous, full-time service as a police officer, with the same agency, or three consecutive years of active military duty.


Lastly, North Dakota Highway Patrol’s minimum educational requirements are:
An Associate degree with two years of work-related experience or a Bachelor’s degree (http://nd.gov/ndhp/employment/qualifications.html).

Upon review of each state police or state highway patrol website, the following requirements by state were revealed: presently, ten states require an Associate’s Degree or 60 hours of college credit (PA, TX, KY, MN, MO, OK, DE, CN, WI, LA). The remaining states require a high school diploma or equivalent. However, one state—Nevada, stipulates no educational requirement.

Out of the 100 largest cities in the United States, only four police departments require a four-year degree (Jacksonville, FL, Arlington, TX, St. Paul, MN, and Tulsa, OK). Upon looking at the 100 largest police departments in the United States by number of sworn officers (list provided by the Police Executive Research Forum), only 3 of the largest police departments require a four-year degree (New Jersey State Police, Illinois State Police, and Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office). After reviewing each of the 100 largest cities websites, it was determined that 67% of such departments require police officers to have a high school diploma or equivalent; 6% require a high school diploma plus 12 hours college credit; 4% require between 30-40 hours of college credit, 19% require an Associate’s degree or 60 hours of college credit, with 4% requiring a four-year degree. Again after searching agency websites regarding career opportunities, the percentages were similar upon reviewing the largest 100 departments by number of sworn officers: 68% required a high school diploma or equivalent; 4% required a high school diploma or equivalent plus 12 hours of college credit; 4% required between 30-54 hours of college credits; 21% required an Associate’s degree of 60 hours of college credit, and 3% of the 100 largest police departments (by number of sworn officers) currently require a four-year degree. Once again, even the few that require the degree; the majority will waive the requirement, with certain stipulations—which will be discussed.

To estimate whether or not the one-percent of police departments with degree requirements were actually large or small departments necessitated reviewing the LEMAS report (2003), concluding that

Seventy-four percent (74%) of all local police departments served fewer than 10,000 residents, these agencies employed just 14% of all offices. About half of all officers served a jurisdiction with 100,000 or more residents. While departments serving the largest cities had thousands of officers on average, those serving fewer than 2,500 residents have an average of just four full-time employees, including three sworn officers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1916, police chief and professor at the University of California at Berkeley, August Vollmer, initiated the movement in support of police officer education (Sherman & The National Advisory Commission, 1978). It was Vollmer’s vision that a higher education would move the policing occupation into an esteemed profession. Vollmer (1926) acknowledged that
one of the main problems with policing was that officers did not have the necessary intellectual training to deal with the ever changing and cunning criminals of his time. He believed that advanced education would help to stop the constant temptations presented to police officers to break their ethical beliefs. In addition, Vollmer instituted a curriculum that included new fields of policing such as evidence collection, methods of identification and organizational structures of policing departments (Gault, 1918).

The Wickersham Commission, also known as the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement (1931) officially acknowledged the need for employees in the criminal justice profession, especially police officers, to be college-educated (Bennett and Marshal, 1979). In the 1960’s, politicians, educators, and criminal justice administrators called for the need for higher education to address crime control issues (Carter and Sapp, 1990). The President’s Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice was established in 1967 due to public criticisms of American police departments (Krimmel and Tartaro, 1999). The Commission found that the policing occupation had become more rigorous and complex; standards needed to be raised for new police officers and reported that without higher educational requirements, quality in police services could not be achieved or attained. College-educated and trained individuals were considered necessary to handle community and social problems and to devise new and adequate measures of social control. The Commission’s goal was a requirement that all police officers attain a baccalaureate degree and recommended that officers were in need of increased critical thinking skills. That recommendation lead to the Law Enforcement Education Program (LEEP), which offered financial incentives through educational grants and loans to officers with the ultimate goal of providing encouragement to complete the baccalaureate degree. Funding via LEEP also launched numerous studies on the effects of a higher education relative to policing.

Shernock (1992) observed that other similar reports offered by various Commissions followed: (1969) National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, (1971) President’s Commission on Campus Unrest, (1973) American Bar Association Project on Standards for Criminal Justice—which indicated “the police were unable to curb crime and no longer had a relationship with, nor understood, the communities they served” (Hawley, 1998, p. 38) and an era of community policing began in which officers would build partnerships with the community and help members to solve problems. The belief was that a college education would enable officers to become critical thinkers, better communicators and problem-solvers.

A report from the National Advisory Commission of Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, 1973, advised that all police departments mandate and require applicants to possess three years of college education prior to hire. An abundance of studies in the 1970’s analyzed the importance of officer education. However, Smith (1978) revealed that studies from the 1970’s pertaining to the benefits of higher education in relation to police performance were poorly designed and inconsistent.

Cascio (1977) described the most apparent explanation regarding the longstanding debate pertaining to higher education and policing--a lack of consensus on the definitions of police performance. Police performance has been addressed through a variety of different themes:
officers with four-year college degrees have better written and oral communication skills than non-college educated officers; officers with four-year college degrees have more professional attitudes and display more tolerant views; are more independent and well-rounded thinkers; better able to analyze problems; exhibit a greater understanding of human behavior; are more professional; place a higher emphasis on the value of ethical conduct; are more flexible; demonstrate lower levels of authoritarian attitudes; are more intellectually developed; display increased self-confidence, morale and motivation; require fewer disciplinary actions, including citizen complaints, and display better public relation skills than non–college educated officers (Alpert and Dunham, 1988; Carlan and Byxbe, 2000; Carter and Sapp, 1990; Cascio, 1977; Finckenauer, 2005; Hall, Ventura and Lambert, 2007; Scott, 1986; Sherman et al., 1978; Shernock, 1992; Smith, 1978; Scott, 1986; Worden, 1990).

Mahony and Prenzler (1996) found that studies suggest that the disadvantages of college-educated officers are offset by advantages including less discriminatory officers and fewer complaints from citizens, which mirrored findings from Carter, Sapp, and Stephens (1988) that “98% of the responding police departments indicated that officers with two or more years of education received fewer citizen complaints than their counterparts who had less education (p. 39).

The Arguments: Pros and Cons of the College-Educated Police Officer

The idea surrounding the purpose of college-educated officers has stemmed from two sources: the alleged importance of professionalism for the police force and to change officer attitudes (Shernock, 1992). Friedmann (2006) made an excellent point,

When police officers try to do their job today without a degree, their already difficult task is made more difficult. However, chiefs who mandate the degree requirement should be aware that the transition period—where the police department does not already have a clear majority of officers with degrees—could be difficult. Police officers sometimes resist higher education requirements. Despite this resistance, police officers need higher education for the good of the profession” (p. 23).

Chief of Police Hawkins (2006) reiterated his department’s four-year requirement in Burnsville, MN.

Burnsville’s four-year degree requirement helps recruit big-picture thinkers who are creative, culturally aware, and technically sound in constitutional law, and who look for the best solution to the multitudes of challenges they encounter. An officer’s well-rounded background enhances his or her ability and desire to partner with community members, use the vast resources both the residents and business owners possess, and make them part of the problem-solving process. The synergy created between the
community and the officers is the basis foundation of Burnsville’s community policing efforts. (Friedman, 2006, p. 28).

As the debate over the need for an educated police officers has demonstrated contradictory evidence concerning college educated police officers—meaning that although many studies are supportive that officers need a college education, there is also conflicting evidence. Baro and Burlingame (1999) disputed recommendations that officers need a baccalaureate degree to increase levels of police professionalism, stating that officers need no more than a high school diploma or equivalency. Sherman and McLeod (1979) speculated that higher education for officers may be irrelevant because the education officers receive in higher educational institutions is quite similar to training officers receive in police academies. However, Sherman and McLeod (1979) both believed that advanced education for police officers added value and benefited the communities in which they served. Critics of higher educations believe the “college-educated officers are more likely to become frustrated with their work, with restrictions imposed by supervisors, and with limited opportunities for advancement” (Worden, 1990, p. 567). Hudzick (1978) found that officers with an education place less value on obedience to supervisors and are less satisfied with their careers. Other are concerned that “college-educated officers will quickly tire of the irregular hours, constant pressures, and relative low pay of policing” (Varricchio, 1988, p. 11). Whetstone (2000) acknowledged that, “hiring candidates with improved credentials also invites eventual problems such as greater job dissatisfaction and personnel turnover” (p. 247). Kakar (1998) further demonstrated that a college education might decrease officer’s quality of service because police work does not offer opportunities to stimulate the college-educated mind. Furthermore, because police performance measures differ in studies, no real consensus exists on exactly how police performance should be defined and measured.

Carter and Sapp (1990) indicated that regardless of degree requirements, 23% of police officers had obtained a four-year degree and 65% of police officers had at least one year of college. Peterson (2001) gave somewhat higher estimates, in that 30% of police officers sampled from ten medium-sized departments in the Midwest had four-year degrees. Mayo (2006) estimates between 25-30% of police officers have a four-year degree, which realistically nearly mirrors the percentage of U.S. population over age 25 who have obtained a bachelor’s degree. According to the US Census Bureau (2005) 28% of the US population over the age of 25 has obtained a bachelor’s degree, which is an all-time high. Common sense dictates that those percentages of police officers with four-year degrees are representative of the education levels of the communities they serve, if we utilize such figures and that line of reasoning. However, the small number of departments requiring degrees necessitates attention to raise awareness to the fact that less than 100 police departments, including special jurisdiction police, state police, county and local police departments mandate degrees, and whether this will change in the future.

Little information exists regarding the 1% of police departments that require the four-year degree. Mayo (2006) revealed several case studies of departments with four-year degrees
regarding the question of the degree and its importance to the sites’ organizational success in the communities they serve. One of the departments that was highlighted, the Dover Police Department in N.J., which is now the Toms River Police Department, has changed its language to relax its mandatory four-year requirement, the current ordinance:

requires candidates to possess a bachelor’s degree from an accredited college or university or, the candidate must possess a minimum of 64 college credits combined with two (2) full years of military experience or full time work experience (http://www.trpolice.org/Recruitment.html).

The Chief of Police, Thomas Nestle, III. of Upper Moreland, NJ, responded via email that Upper Moreland only requires 60 hours of college credit. Nestel (2009) offered his opinion, via email, as to why the degree requirements was relaxed at his department,

The applicant pool that is suited for this position frequently does not possess the educational pedigree you describe (a four-year degree). Law enforcement tends to draw military veterans and sons/daughters of existing officers. Neither group has a high rate of college graduates. Recruiting on college campuses has proven to be very unsuccessful. Policing doesn’t seem to be an appealing direction for the college graduate.

In recent years, other departments (Memphis, TN, Plano, TX, Portland, OR) once known to have had a four-year degree requirement, further made national headlines regarding the choice to relax their respective educational requirement. However, there are several special jurisdiction police agencies that also require officers to hold a baccalaureate degree and will not waive educational requirements, including the Missouri Department of Conservation (law enforcement) and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. However, special jurisdiction police agency degree requirements are not the focus of this analysis.

**METHODS**

Sixty police agencies (local and county) were discovered through extensive Internet searches to indeed have the requirement--Illinois has the greatest number of police departments requiring a four-year degree, with eleven; New Jersey has seven; Ohio has eight; Pennsylvania has six; Michigan has 5; Texas has four; Wisconsin has 4; Colorado has 3; South Carolina has 2; Florida has 2; Minnesota has 2; Oregon, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and Missouri each have one local police department that has a four-year degree requirement.

Special jurisdiction police agencies aside, caution however, that of those 60 police departments, only 37 will not waive or relax their educational requirements for any exception. Therefore, there are 37 local police departments that will not waive their educational
requirements on any grounds. It was those 37 police departments that served as the sample of this study.

This was an exploratory study of 37 police departments known to have mandatory four-year degree requirements for new hires. A questionnaire instrument, utilizing a mixed-method design, consisted of 30 open and closed-ended items. The purpose of the instrument was to provide data that could be utilized to determine why so few departments across America actually require a four-year degree. The survey instrument, which was developed and linked to existing research, has not been previously implemented.

A qualitative approach was employed to uncover themes predominant to this analysis. Few attempts have been taken to qualitatively explore the important issues relevant here—opinions of police chiefs from the one-percent of police departments with mandatory degree requirements. Of the 37 questionnaires mailed, 36 were returned, with a response rate of 97%. Two questions were explored: Why do their departments actually have a mandatory degree requirement and why they believe so few departments actually require the degree. Several themes emerged from the data describing this phenomenon.

Table 1 contains the 37 local departments that will not waive educational requirements. Population size, gathered from Sperling’s Best Places (www.bestplaces.net) follow to demonstrate the size of each city in which the respective department is located. Regarding county police departments, population size was not included.

RESULTS

Only one-percent of over 12,000 local police departments require a four-year degree. As stated previously, few studies have addressed why this is the case. This study revealed that many police departments are hesitant to adopt a mandatory educational requirement due to fears that applicant pools will dwindle if requirement is enforced.

According to this sample, nearly 64% of police chiefs reported that their respective applicant pools have indeed decreased due to their educational mandate. However, others felt differently,

The four-year degree requirement has served us well. We typically receive about 70 applicants for every 1-3 openings we try to fill. All of which have the four-year degree and either enrollment or completion of the police academy.

Another responded in a way to overcome the issue of lower applicant pools, cautioning a reason why this will not happen at large,

Yes, the requirement decreases this applicant pool. In my opinion, for a department to have an educational requirement such as ours, a strong recruitment effort is necessary. We recruit over 15 northern Ohio colleges that have law enforcement majors programs
TABLE 1 LOCAL POLICE DEPARTMENTS REQUIRING FOUR-YEAR DEGREES, NO EXCEPTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police Department</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Population Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arvada Police Department</td>
<td>CO</td>
<td>104,838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arlington Police Department</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>367,197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethel Park Police Department</td>
<td>PA</td>
<td>31,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloomfield Township Police Department</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>65,796</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canfield Police Department</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>7,061</td>
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<tr>
<td>Centerville Police Department</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>23,046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland Heights Police Department</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>47,097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deer Park Police Department</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>29,748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnsville Police Department</td>
<td>MN</td>
<td>59,321</td>
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<td>Eatontown Police Department</td>
<td>NJ</td>
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<td>Elgin Police Department</td>
<td>IL</td>
<td>98,846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaston County Police Department</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint Township Police Department</td>
<td>MI</td>
<td>32,753</td>
</tr>
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<td>Green Tree Borough Police Department</td>
<td>PA</td>
<td>4,396</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lakewood Police Department</td>
<td>CO</td>
<td>140,024</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leonia Police Department</td>
<td>NJ</td>
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<td>Mahwah Police Department</td>
<td>NJ</td>
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<td>Mt. Lebanon Police Department</td>
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<td>Multnomah County Sheriff’s Department</td>
<td>OR</td>
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<td>Naperville Police Department</td>
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<td>140,633</td>
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<td>Norton Shores Police Department</td>
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<td>Novi Police Department</td>
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<td>Owasso Police Department</td>
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<td>Tulsa Police Department</td>
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<td>Wheaton Police Department</td>
<td>IL</td>
<td>54,611</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wilmette Police Department</td>
<td>IL</td>
<td>26,737</td>
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</table>

Note: N=37. This may not be the complete list. However, no other such list is available.
to get an adequate number of participants to take our civil service tests. That is an expensive endeavor, one that most cities won’t make.

One of the predominant reasons offered as to why more police departments do not have a mandatory degree requirement is that enforcing such a mandate would have a negative impact on recruiting. One chief replied,

It’s ‘politically correct’ to lower education standards to avoid the wrath of the special interest-minority groups who wish to lower educational standards to increase the minority population in the applicant pool.

Other interesting responses emerged regarding the process of calming the regarded negative impact on recruiting,

If I can keep the requirement a few more years, we will have a majority of officers with degrees and there will be less internal pressure to lower standards. As long as we hire a significant percentage of minorities, there will be less claims of adverse impact—nine are female, five are Hispanic. We will evolve to the point that candidates for promotion with degrees are more likely to get the appointment.

We have fewer applicants, but they are higher quality. Our recruitment methods continually change to reach our target audience. We work with many minority groups to reach out to minority populations.

One respondent was adamant regarding this issue,

The minority community that believes there would be an ‘adverse impact.’ There isn’t.

Herein, two vital questions needed exploration: Why do their departments actually have their mandatory degree requirement and why they believe so few departments actually require the degree? After careful thought and consideration, they shared their opinions and beliefs—those of which should be held in high regard, as they are the select few who have shown to be pioneers in their concrete efforts to bring about professionalism to the policing field.

Police Chief’s Explanations as to Why Their Respective Departments Have the Four-Year Degree Requirement

Aside from stern recommendations encouraging police administrators and community leaders to adopt educational standards, six themes emerged from analyzing the data regarding why these departments actually have the degree requirement.
1. It is our tradition and part of our institutional, organizational and community culture and we are valued,

We are the only agency in the state that still requires a four-year degree. We have always required this and I believe we hire exemplary people with more maturity and a strong sense of direction than those without the degree. It’s really a huge part of our culture.

We hope to keep our four-year educational degree requirement forever. With the high percentage of college graduates in today’s society, I don’t believe this requirement is unreasonable. It’s our goal to continue to pursue the ‘most qualified’ applicants for our department.

2. The degree carries with it a level of expertise, knowledge and perseverance that represents us in our communities well,

The requirement for a bachelor’s degree generally assures that an applicant can read and write; has been exposed to complex written materials requiring some level of analysis; has developed some level of critical thinking and communication skills, and has achieved at least some measurable relatively long-term goal in their lifetime.

A bachelor’s degree limits the number of applicants who, most probably, would not be selected anyway. It also increases the quality of the applicant pool (education-level wise), which makes for a better police officer and increases the minimum age of the applicants, making them more experienced in life. It also shows that you have people at the very least, had the ‘stick-to-it-ivness’ to persevere through four years of college. It also eliminates the need for education reimbursement for officers pursuing bachelor’s degrees.

We believe that it provides us with a more mature, well-rounded and worldly candidate who has more experience interacting with many different people from all walks of life.

3. Education levels of the police force should mirror the education level of the communities they serve,

The requirement is important to reflect the demographics of the community we serve. According to the Census, Wilmette has one of the highest education levels in America. We want to be representative of those we serve in race, gender,
education level and foreign language. This is also a successful strategy for maintaining high salaries and benefits.

We wanted to ensure our police officers’ education level closely mirrored the education level and demographics of our community.

4. A belief in excellence and quality—the degree makes a difference in performance,

The department instituted this educational requirement in 1993 due to the belief that educated officers will be better decision makers and have better communication skills, both in oral and written form. It is our department belief in excellence—higher quality of service to community, being leaders in profession.

We believe that a better-educated work force is necessary in dealing with the public and are higher educated. We also believe that education enhances communication skills, which are necessary in police work.

A higher educated person is a more rounded individual, which leads to a better police officer.

5. A belief that the mandatory degree promotes professionalism both in their communities and for the entire police field,

We believe that this should be the standard if we are to continue to develop and promote a professional police organization.

Academics have pushed our department to a new level of professionalism and innovation.

6. Officers with a college degree are more mature and have stronger goal-reaching abilities.

I feel that a person demonstrates his/her desire to be a police officer by completing four years of study in criminal justice. They prove not only a strong desire to become a police officer, but possess the ability to set a goal and achieve it. It also demonstrates that ability to learn. That is why a four-year bachelors degree in criminal justice, criminology or law enforcement exists. It is specific to those who set a goal for law enforcement and achieve it.
Police Chief’s Explanations as to Why They Believe So Few Departments in the U.S. Actually Require a Four-Year Degree

Only three out of the 36 police chiefs surveyed stated that they were not satisfied with their department’s educational policy. However, over 90% were satisfied with their departmental policies requiring college degrees. Aside from the following two realities many police leaders encounter—one being that the college degree is not mandated as a requirement by most licensing boards, and it may be prevented because of civil service regulations—five themes emerged regarding police chiefs explanations as to why they believe so few departments actually require degrees:

1. It’s all about money and over-all job satisfaction that one perceives a college-degree should bring,

   We have issues retaining officers and we frequently lose them to higher paying positions outside the field of policing. University instructors, technical school instructors, social work have all been attractive to our officers.
   
   Higher degreed people are not satisfied being a police officer.
   
   Money. Most departments cannot afford to start out a patrol officer at what a college graduate could make.

2. The degree requirement decreases applicant pools. Although some did not agree, the majority of police chiefs surveyed stated their department’s mandatory degree requirement has reduced applicant pools,

   It reduces the pool of potential applicants at a time when suitable applicants are hard to find. There remain a high percentage of law enforcement executives and government officials who believe a four-year degree is not a necessity in preparing an individual for a law enforcement career.

3. The chiefs in this studied strongly valued education, however education overall is under-valued in policing,

   Most chiefs say they value education, but stop short of making it a requirement.
   
   Education is under-valued in policing. The four-year degree requirement makes recruiting tougher and it creates challenges for retaining personnel.
I still believe that the majority of police leaders are, as a law-enforcement culture, anti-education for police officers.

4. Police leaders who have not attained a college degree may not find one necessary. Therefore, this presents itself as a great challenge, one of increasing overall education standards,

Administrators may not believe a college degree is necessary, especially if they have not earned one.

It is challenging to staff a police agency with a four-year college degree requirement and research indicates officers with experience may out perform those only with a college degree.

5. The other side of the debate that a college degree is not necessary for a police officer,

The traits required of a police officer are not learned at the college level. Character is forged long before that point in one’s life and if not it is probably too late.

It is unnecessary. The qualities required of a police officer—maturity, judgment, discipline, are not attained by going to college. College can make a good person more educated, but it does not make a good person. We have been forced to bypass very qualified and exceptional people owing to the lack of a college degree. I have several officers I would gladly exchange for non-college graduates with a good work ethic.

CONCLUSION

Although at first glance, that one-percent of police departments requiring degrees signifies that professionalism for policing is stalling. However, there have been enormous improvements over the past 60 years. Bell (1979) found that in the 1950’s, increasing numbers of local police departments began requiring at least some college as a prerequisite for entry-level hiring. By 1990, Carter and Sapp realized that 65% of police officers had at least one year of college and 23% attained a four-year degree. According to the Police Foundation (1979) approximately 25% of officers had at least one year of college. Whetstone (2000) added the “every national consensus of police personnel shows the average educational level is on the rise, as is the proportion of officers holding degrees” (p. 247). In reality, the one-percent possibly may not receive attention because it may be all about perceptions, and a paradox—
The number of police departments requiring degree is low because most law enforcement agencies do not serve a community that demands a college education. However, even without the requirement, many or most candidates have the college degree.

Additionally, there is irony in the mix—

It’s ironic because although many law enforcement agencies have low minimum entry level educational standards, the final pool generally consists of candidates possessing bachelor’s degrees, Master’s degrees and higher.

Those three vital panels’ recommendations of the 1960’s and 1970’s stipulated that a degree would be good for the policing profession. As one chief suggested, this may not have happened because agencies are not selling themselves well to the public. However, if it is done correctly, mandatory degree requirements may serve communities well.

We have had the four-year degree requirement since 1991, and it has served us well. If I were to speculate, it could be that lower wage agencies have trouble attracting four-year candidates or that these agencies do not do a good job ‘selling’ their departments to the public and applicant pool.

The survey instrument in this analysis has not been previously implemented. Therefore, sufficient evidence for validity cannot be provided. Lastly, other variables not explored such as crime rates of communities, organizational cultures and style of policing may influence educational degree requirements and deserve attention in the future.

As stated earlier, the limitations presented in this analysis are obviously an estimate of the true numbers and locations of police departments requiring degrees. However, information regarding the subject is sparse. This rings true among police chiefs who required the degree. The majority was unaware as to whom the rest of the one-percent actually was. This is merely a beginning, and as this list and information unfold-- regarding the realities of educational requirements-- there will continue to be disagreements and misunderstandings representing the true purpose of a college education for a police officer. Whatever the case, police officers are appearing to become educated regardless of the requirement. Therefore, the degree does matter. It is unclear whether findings from this study can be generalized. For example, do police chiefs’ opinions differ regarding whether their department requires the degree, but will waive the degree? One aspect is clear: the chiefs in this study as a whole do not intend to alter their degree requirement in the future—which may separate them from others.

Overall, the one-percent of police departments requiring degrees should be recognized and celebrated for their efforts in being role models and leaders in bringing about professionalism. They are entities that truly should be considered as diamonds in the rough. Roberg and Bonn (2004) reiterated the nearly nonexistent numbers of police departments requiring degrees. Although leaders in law enforcement continue to hesitate the implementation
of educational requirements (Breci, 2004; Carlan, 2007; Remington, 1990; Roberg and Bonn, 2004), recruitment for college graduates continues to increase.

Future study should focus on officers’ abilities to adjust to new technological demands, as well as the language barrier in the U.S. population demographic shift in the 21st century and beyond. The effect of educational attainment upon the community policing movement is also another area of needed research.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

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