

6-15-2020

**Retired officer: Give police a real education before putting them
on the streets**

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I come from a family with deep roots in law enforcement. My father and I attended the police academy 22 years apart, and combined we served 45 years on the New York Police Department.

Though we served during different decades, our training was essentially indistinguishable. Even today, that training largely remains the same, despite the vast changes in society.

In recent days, activists and politicians have called for changes in how our police departments are funded and managed, but just as essential is throwing out the book on police training and replacing it with a robust system of modern education. That is the first step in changing the job into a full-fledged profession that provides police officers with the intellectual and ethical grounding they need to serve society.

Education is different from training. Generally, training means teaching police officers to react to a given situation in the field. Education involves developing the mental and moral tools police officers should possess to build strong relationships with the community. It will teach police officers to think about their response to various problems based on vast amounts of knowledge and then take thoughtful action to resolve a problem.

First, police academies should replace the standard five to six months of training with a two-year curriculum. In addition to the necessary physical, firearms and tactics training, recruits should take classes that you might typically find in an undergraduate program — from criminal and constitutional law to sociology, psychology and conflict resolution. A clear understanding of the nature of the society they will serve, and all its complexities, is fundamental to any member of a service profession.

Furthermore, recruits should perform field assignments for a month or so at a time, consistently returning to the police academy for reflection, continued education and performance review.

These courses should not be taught by law enforcement personnel only, as is currently the case, but by a combination of police officers, academics and other civilians who have

expertise in these areas. This would allow for recruits to work with civilians — the public — from their first day “on the job.”

We also need to create a point of entry for executive-level positions within police departments — precinct commanders and above. This is not a novel model. The U.S. military has had such points of entry into its service for years, in the form of national military academies and ROTC programs. The same process exists in public school education through “principal academies.” There are also numerous executive training programs within the private sector whereby qualified applicants are not required to start from the bottom. Again, this would serve as a recruitment tool to attract the brightest and best problem solvers our society has to offer.

This “executive academy” would mirror the two-year police academy with the expectation of a specific component focusing on leadership education. Additionally, executive recruits would be required to perform, learn and qualify in most facets of police work, from foot patrol to front-line supervision.

Certainly, police officers would not be precluded from advancement. However, the executive academy would eliminate the reliance on the haphazard process of waiting for police officers to ripen into the executive ranks, a process that can take 10 to 15 years, and would allow for selection of leaders from a broader pool of candidates.

Finally, we need to attract police recruits who are interested in undertaking these types of educational and leadership commitment. Becoming a police officer should not simply be starting a new job, but the first step into a true career. Imagine what the nature of policing in this country would be if police departments could attract those who have undertaken the commitment to better not only themselves but the world.

Our police are first responders. While we can certainly find methods to expand and delegate services beyond our police departments, we will always need the police. These dark times are an opportunity to give way to a new dawn on the profession.

– *Kirk Burkhalter is a law professor at New York Law School, a former NYPD detective and a USA TODAY Opinion contributor.*