

Law Enforcement Agencies Should Demand Excellence in Higher Education

by

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I am certain that you realize this already, but the title of this article is a very polite way of saying that the bar has been set so low, by regional accreditation agencies, for higher education to jump over these days relative to some very important issues associated with collegiate level education, that it might just as well not exist at all. These critical factors include such important issues as; academic integrity, instructional adequacy, student admission requirements, professor qualification, time in the classroom (virtual or traditional), requirements for assuring that students complete all instructional sequence requirements before moving to the class discussion, and some standard that examinations and testing actually measure student retention and understanding of the materials being presented. Police executives, in my opinion, should be very concerned about the capabilities of people graduating from college these days and not assume that because they graduated from a regionally accredited university, that the academic program met the standards required by our profession.

Over the past ten years the criminal justice profession has witnessed an explosion of for-profit “colleges” that claim to provide quality education, as well as the emergence of other online distance education degree programs offered by traditional chalk-and-talk universities, that conduct classes (online) that contain absolutely no lectures, no face-to-face meetings between the faculty and students, and severely shortened academic terms of just five to eight weeks so that they can maximize the number of terms per year and assure optimum profitability.

What happened to the standards that we all had to meet before we were awarded our degrees and why are we so reticent to complain about this erosion of expectations and lessening of standards for student and faculty performance? In an article published in the Journal of Criminal Justice Education in 2007 by Hummer, Sims, Wooditch and Salley, it was discovered that of the 379 institutions surveyed who reported conferring criminal justice degrees, 80 institutions offered some type of online criminal justice program, or about 21% of the degree-granting institutions (p. 15). Growth in this particular segment of the higher education market is not without its problems as many colleges and universities either scramble to enter this lucrative business enterprise or create new programs from scratch to take advantage of the popularity of law and justice student demand. Online education programs have been no stranger to issues of criticism about their failure to assure instructional sufficiency and their willingness to compromise for retention sake and maintain strict academic standards and assurance of academic rigor.

While few of these institutions would publicly admit they do not to offer quality education, there are those online institutions who in fact have failed to meet the high standards that we, as a profession, have prescribed for the law and justice education. The sad part is that young men and women apply for admission to these colleges and universities, expecting a world class education

(or at least an adequate education) that will prepare them for a meaningful career in the law and criminal justice disciplines, however instead they frequently discover that the instruction they received was not only out of date, but taught by faculty who have little, if any, professional experience. Puzziferro (2009) noted that today's "Nontraditional students expect faculty to have real-world experience, the ability to be flexible and dynamic, possess a comfort and fluency with shared decision-making, demonstrate entrepreneurial mindsets, and be customer-service oriented" (p. 6). While no one would argue that a formal education is invaluable for faculty in any profession, it stands to reason that experience in the profession should be precursor to selection for such positions so that the instructors provide their students with a blend of theory and experience. Unfortunately, finding and retaining such experienced faculty is a difficult task. Puzziferro (2009) stated in her article that "As online teaching has become more attractive, there is certainly a greater number of adjunct faculty available – but, fewer experienced online faculty are available. Retention is a serious issue, as a high instructor turnover rate can negatively affect quality and student satisfaction" (p. 6).

Additionally, many of these collegiate programs offer classes that are simply irrelevant nowadays to the career and charge tuition rates that are exorbitantly overpriced. For example, a 2001 article on Geteducated.com reported on its website that in a 2009 college costs survey found that among accredited colleges which offer the same courses online as on-campus about half charge more for online courses (p. 1). Even within many of the traditional campus-based law and justice programs, we observe quite often that there is a stagnation in the educational curriculum, an inability to keep pace with the ever changing needs of the profession, and in many cases, a significant over emphasis by faculty, who possess little or no professional experience, on the more theoretical aspects of the discipline, as opposed to providing students with an effective blend of theory and application that has direct relevance to the profession. Essentially, people who read a book, written by someone who has never served in the profession, and then lecturing about what they read in the book without a single day's experience themselves.

It has been my observation that we as a profession seem to be all too willing to accept the notion that there are professional standards being applied to college and university programs and we mistakenly infer that "regional accreditation" of a university somehow guarantees the adequacy of a particular academic discipline in meeting the demands prescribed by the profession it serves. Nothing could be further from the truth however. Regional accreditation, which many colleges and universities seek to qualify for Title IV funding, is not the same as programmatic accreditation, and has more to do with the day to day services that a college or university provides than it does with assuring academic sufficiency, instructional integrity, and pertinence of the curriculum to the profession. In a significant number of cases, the people who conduct the site visit at the campus for regional accreditation agencies, do not hold an advanced degree in the law and justice disciplines, and yet they are the one's tasked with evaluating the department for sufficiency. The only independent accreditor that presently provides programmatic accreditation of criminal justice degrees is the Accrediting Commission for Law and Justice Education (www.aclje.org). While the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences does offer a "certification" (not full accreditation), there is only one organization presently that is watching out for the professions best interests, but there is little or no incentive by academic institutions to endure such scrutiny, because we as a profession don't demand that they subject their program to it.

As applied specifically to the law and justice professions it is safe to assume that the consequence of colleges and universities failing to adequately prepare young men and women for a career is, at best, a debilitating effect to the student regarding their level of scholastic preparation, not just about the discipline, but in their ability to read and write at the level we expect as a profession. Even worse inadequate preparation may prove to be catastrophic to the criminal justice profession, simply because we believe that since they graduated from a regionally accredited university, they must meet our rigorous standards for preparation. By providing an education that is marginally sufficient in topical coverage, less than demanding in academic rigor, and not in keeping with the ever changing demands of the profession, we find ourselves in the position of having to accept candidates for employment who have (technically) met our requirements for advanced education. However, unfortunately we have no way of assuring that the caliber of instruction they received was commensurate with the profession's expectations for sufficiency. I have often wondered why, we as a profession, allow such a situation to exist, and why our professional associations such as the IACP, the National Sheriff's Association, or even our Peace Officer Associations fail to step forward and demand assurance that collegiate level programs either meet or exceed our expectations for adequacy. Instead, more often than not, we simply assume that because a college or university is regionally accredited that the academic programs it provides must also be demanding and pertinent to the profession. It probably has something to do with the fact that we, as a profession, do not feel comfortable asserting ourselves over the domain of higher education, which we often (incorrectly) put on some sort of pedestal. The fact remains that it is the law and justice professions that will feel the impact and have to endure this failure to assure conformance with academic standards.

There are innumerable areas where law and justice organizations can and should play an integral role in assuring the outcome of collegiate level education, but for the most part, it is an uncommon practice to get involved. These might include participation in the development of admissions standards, oversight of quality instruction, actively assuring that academic rigor in the curriculum meets local standards, and prescribing remediation requirements for students who fail to demonstrate sufficient scholastic abilities, influencing the college to adopt real-world student performance measures, and finally encouraging department members who do have experience and advanced degrees to serve as instructors at local and national colleges.

Programmatic accreditation of certain academic disciplines has been a standard requirement in many other professions such as nursing, computer science, forensics, paralegal, and other professionally oriented degrees, yet not in the disciplines of criminal justice and undergraduate pre-law education. This is largely because the criminal justice profession, as a whole, doesn't demand it, either on a national level or even on a state by state basis. If this were to change however, the likely outcome would be closer interaction between the higher education institutions that offer such programs and the law enforcement and justice agencies that employ their graduates.

There are a number of methods available for taking progressive action in assuring that colleges and universities become attentive to the needs of the profession. Some examples might include county or state involvement in collegiate curricular strategies and degree programs using existing entities such as P.O.S.T. or the formation of a statewide governance committee that is comprised of members from the law enforcement, prosecution, the judiciary, and higher education arenas

that collaborate to assure conformance with the profession's requirements (New York has an excellent example of this approach). Or, it might be accomplished at the local level by Police Chiefs and Sheriff's making a telephone call to the President of nearby colleges that offer such degrees and forging an alliance that endeavors to deal with these issues.

There are many possible solutions to this challenge, and some agencies have been aggressive in dealing with the situation, but generally speaking, on a national level, there is much work to be done.

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