



## University Perspective: The Policing Profession in 2050

By Robert R. Friedmann, Ph.D., Professor of Criminal Justice, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia

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.

The police department as a whole must support police officers who have higher education. Some officers with master's degrees have acknowledged that they were placed on the graveyard shift after their graduation from the academy. Motives for this may range from envy to fear: degreed officers can be seen as a threat to the careers of colleagues who do not have a degree.

### The Good of the Profession

Police officers need the degree, not only for what it brings to individual officers and their departments, but also for what the degree brings to policing as a profession.

Policing lags far behind the other helping professions. The professions of nursing and health, teaching and education, social work and psychology have a basic entry-level requirement of varied college degrees in the social services field, and as such, are recognized as professions. Policing lacks this educational requirement, and its reputation suffers as a result.

Education requirements set now will determine how police officers-and policing as a whole-are going to look in 50 or 100 years from now. Higher education helps future officers acquire a basic skill that is crucial to modern policing: critical thinking. Officers need to know how to think critically because they not only have to abide by the Constitution, and provide services in that context but also have to serve in the front line of government services.

### Generalists vs. Specialists

The absence of a college-degree requirement means that policing is often not seen as a prestigious occupation. In fact, that is why hiring those candidates with higher education is easier. The policing profession, encompassing psychology, sociology, counseling, and often medicine, is a generalist one that appeals to people who seek variety. Most other professions are highly specific.

Without a degree, police officers are at a disadvantage whenever they meet with people who do have a degree: community representatives, civil committees, neighborhood organizations, associations, and volunteers. Almost everyone in those categories will probably be better educated than police officers. The officers risk having their valuable insights and suggestions unheeded because police officers lack professional certification or what, in the modern world, is seen as such: a college degree.

To remedy this problem, to forestall objections to police, and to increase the status of policing as a profession, police departments need to require their officers to have, or earn, degrees.

### Beyond Budget

Higher education is not merely an annual budget issue between the police chief and the city manager. Since frequently the higher the education, the higher the salary, some managers have attempted to solve financial challenges by rejecting the degree requirement. But the issue goes beyond finances and budgets-important as those issues are.

Higher education has to do with how policing stacks up to all other professions. Requiring a degree for police officers is the first step in ensuring that the policing is taken seriously as a profession. ■