Building A Better Law Enforcement Workforce:

Findings From the Arizona Law Enforcement Leadership Roundtable on Training and Education
About the Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board (AZ POST)

The Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board was created by an act of the 28th Arizona legislature on July 1, 1968. The Board was created to address the need for minimum peace officer selection, recruitment, retention, and training standards, and to provide curriculum and standards for all certified law enforcement training facilities. The Board is also vested with the responsibility of approving a state correctional officer-training curriculum and establishing minimum standards for state correctional officers. Currently the Board provides services to approximately 170 law enforcement agencies encompassing over 15,000 sworn peace officers, 9,000 correctional service officers, and 16 academies. The mission of the Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board is to foster public trust and confidence by establishing and maintaining standards of integrity, competence, and professionalism for Arizona peace officers and correctional officers.

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Letter from the Roundtable Hosts

A police officer’s uniform represents a unique form of civic authority. It symbolizes character—duty, service, and courage—as well as the competence to keep communities safe, respond to emergencies, and enforce the law. Today’s law enforcement officers must demonstrate an increasingly complex set of attributes and competencies to carry out their duties.

Yet law enforcement agencies across the United States face daunting challenges to hiring, training, and retaining qualified officers. In a 2011 International Association of Chiefs of Police survey, 94% of respondents indicated they saw “a new reality in American policing developing” as staffing and resource constraints fundamentally change the delivery of law enforcement services.¹

To explore the challenges of building a highly qualified police force and discuss potential solutions, University of Phoenix and the Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board (AZ POST) convened a roundtable to identify top-priority law enforcement education and training needs. Highlights of the Arizona Law Enforcement Leadership Roundtable on Training and Education, presented in this report, provide insights into the talent development challenges of the profession. The findings also offer a glimpse of opportunities for further collaboration among leaders in law enforcement and higher education to better align educational curricula with the industry’s unique workforce development needs.

Educating and training law enforcement personnel to serve the evolving needs of their communities is an urgent priority for many leaders in the profession. On behalf of all the roundtable participants, we are proud to have taken an important first step in jointly addressing the workforce development needs of police officers in Arizona in a discussion that has implications for agencies across the country.

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Introduction

Today’s law enforcement careers demand more than a passion and a willingness to serve. Law enforcement professionals require breadth and depth of knowledge and a continually evolving set of physical, technological, cognitive, and interpersonal skills to navigate a rapidly changing environment.

However, police officers and other law enforcement personnel often lack the competencies needed to keep pace with professional demands. The law enforcement community has urgent and mission-critical workforce development needs. Addressing these needs requires collaboration by leaders in law enforcement and higher education to identify education and training strategies aligned with the specific roles and values of the profession.

To explore the topic of workforce development for Arizona sworn officers and civilian law enforcement personnel, University of Phoenix co-hosted a roundtable discussion with the Arizona Peace Officer Standards and Training Board (AZ POST) in the fall of 2012. Subject matter experts from the AZ POST and leaders from the College of Criminal Justice and Security and the Industry Strategy Group of University of Phoenix joined more than 30 police chiefs and law enforcement leaders to review and prioritize the state’s training and education needs. This roundtable report summarizes insights from the discussion, and provides valuable guidance for closing education and training gaps.

Education, Training, and Experience

The law enforcement community defines training as specific skill development linked to activities and processes that support law enforcement officers’ routine duties—for example, search and seizure procedures, use of firearms, and driving skills. Yet Arizona’s law enforcement leaders said their profession also requires broader education and experience, which enables officers to adapt quickly to changing environments and to follow as well as lead. Education gives an officer a broad understanding—the why of the problem or situation—and training provides the how. Successful law enforcement organizations require a mix of both.

In recent years, individuals seeking a career in law enforcement were often encouraged to pursue a degree in criminal justice. However, some leaders in the field question that trend. Many police chiefs value a team of officers who have a wide range of abilities and experience to solve problems and to understand the communities they serve. Many police officers hold degrees in sociology, political science, psychology, or accounting—all fields that provide a valuable knowledge base for law enforcement.

Education and training programs that prepare personnel to meet role-specific challenges may not only improve service quality, but may also avert negative outcomes. As one roundtable participant noted, “A better-educated workforce has fewer complaints and fewer ethical problems.” Educational programs must adapt to meet the increasing demand for more complex skill sets. “The educational component needs to be broader,” observed one police chief. “We need to go back to what it used to be—less training-focused and more educationally minded.” Another chief suggested that college students majoring in criminal justice should minor in mathematics, accounting, business, or a foreign language so that recruits can bring a wider skill set to the job. For example, with a background in accounting, an officer would understand the importance of budgeting and the consequences of poor budgetary oversight. This knowledge would improve the department’s ability to make sound operational decisions, implement responsible resource management, and demonstrate more competent leadership.

In addition to understanding the law, officers must be proficient in the use of technology and equipment; have well-developed verbal and written communication skills; and have the broad knowledge necessary to work effectively with diverse individuals and communities. Neither education nor training alone can develop this diverse set of competencies. Rather, a combination of education, training, and experience is needed to produce the cognitive, tactical, and behavioral skills that enable law enforcement professionals to respond effectively to situations and stakeholders.
Challenges to Developing a Qualified Workforce

A wide variety of factors create challenges for recruiting, educating, and retaining a highly qualified law enforcement workforce. Because law enforcement personnel have an impact on numerous industries and professions, these workforce development challenges can have wide-ranging effects.

"Regrettably, many younger officers lack the ability to use what we call a 'human algorithm'—the ability to develop information from a variety of sources, to be able to interface with others, communicate, have situational awareness, and exchange information."

AZ Law enforcement leader

Challenges in Arizona are not unique among those faced by enforcement agencies throughout the country. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) published a 2011 study that involved more than 400 law enforcement communities throughout the United States. More than 85% of agencies reported that they were forced to reduce their budgets over the last year, with nearly half of agencies reporting that they had to lay off or furlough staff. More than 55% of agencies reported that the new economy presented a serious or severe problem to their agency. Furthermore, while experiencing these challenges, more than 70% of agencies reported that they were asked to increase their support to other agencies and assume additional responsibilities.2

Regional Diversity. Arizona police chiefs recognized that regional differences among communities across the state prevent a "one-size-fits-all" approach to talent development. The state’s urban areas, college communities, rural towns, and border areas have distinctly different needs for law enforcement approaches, leadership, and personnel. Education and training strategies must take this regional diversity into account.

Generational Differences. Another challenge that police chiefs repeatedly acknowledged is generational differences among coworkers, especially between older supervisors and younger recruits. These differences emerge in multiple contexts, including:

- **Technology.** In 2013 the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) reported that since 2010, more than 50% of law enforcement agencies have cut back or eliminated plans to acquire new technology.3 The Arizona law enforcement community noted that challenges with technology can also occur among different age groups, as younger employees are generally adept at mobile communication technology such as smartphones but may have difficulty in face-to-face communications with coworkers or the public. Likewise, younger officers are seen as able to accept and learn new technologies more quickly than veterans.

Today’s technological advancements can make some tasks faster and more efficient, but police chiefs noted that their agencies often lack time and resources to train officers to use technology effectively. In addition, they cautioned that technology should not become a crutch. Participants emphasized that officers should always be trained in backup procedures to cope with situations when technology and communication systems fail.

- **Decision making and problem solving.** Officers must be able to exercise good judgment quickly, under stress, and in ever-changing situations. However, one police chief stated,

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2 IACP, Policing in the 21st Century: Preliminary Survey Results.
“Regrettably, many younger officers don’t come to us with the skill sets to be good problem solvers, to be able to think logically and use good reasoning skills. They lack the ability to use what we call a ‘human algorithm’—the ability to develop information from a variety of sources, to be able to interface with others, communicate, have situational awareness, and exchange information.” Failures in judgment and decision making can stem from younger officers’ lack of experience—which time can remedy—but participants noted that training to “get the mindset right” could help to recognize and correct flawed decision-making patterns before they become entrenched.

• **Attitude and outlook.** Police chiefs noted that attitude and outlook may be more problematic among younger officers than among seasoned veterans. The chiefs identified a need for greater personal accountability and follow-through among officers. For example, one chief expressed concern that younger generations may not understand competitive environments with winners and losers. “Everyone we are now hiring grew up getting participation ribbons. There were no losers—everybody wins. So when they apply to join a specialized unit, or try for a promotion and don’t get it, they say the process was bad. It could not possibly be any deficiency on their part.” This is an important issue to address, as this mindset can lead to misunderstandings and to employee dissatisfaction.

• **Ethics.** Ethics are at the root of an officer’s worldview and decision-making abilities. Most choices officers face are not black and white; officers must be able to see the ethical context of their decisions. Ethics also impact how an officer talks about coworkers on and off the job, and may affect other personal or lifestyle choices. The police chiefs placed a high value on integrity and trustworthiness of their personnel.

• **Written and verbal communication skills.** The police chiefs expressed concern that the current law enforcement workforce and recruitment pool lacks the communication skills so critical to effective policing. Officers must be able to gather solid information in their line of duty and to document situations accurately in written reports. Some police chiefs suspected an overreliance on mobile technology as a source of communication deficiencies because hand-held devices do not encourage or require full sentences, correct grammar, or proper spelling.

• **Interpersonal skills.** Relational skills go hand-in-hand with effective communication. Relational skills are the ability to understand others and to contribute to a positive outcome in difficult situations and in the interrogation room. Officers who lack interpersonal skills tend to aggravate and inflame people and situations unnecessarily rather than drawing out information and cooperation.

• **Leadership and management training.** Police chiefs stated that leadership and management capabilities are key to continued quality improvement and succession planning in law enforcement organizations. Agencies must identify people with leadership potential and encourage them to seek promotions. “There are going to be new police chiefs sitting in our chairs in a few years,” one chief said. “Are we getting them ready?” To step into leadership roles, officers must be able to manage foundational tasks, like creating the organization’s budget, along with complex duties such as organizing and coaching diverse teams.

Not every officer makes law enforcement a lifelong career, and those who stay long enough to retire may go on to a
second career in the private sector, where their acquired skills—discipline, dependability, public relations—are highly desirable. Succession planning could include helping retiring law enforcement personnel transition to new careers. “We should support outgoing colleagues just as we do family members who move on to new roles,” a chief noted.

**Community involvement is as important a measure of police force effectiveness as are raw statistics.**

- **Measurement and evaluation.** With computer technology, law enforcement agencies are able to collect and analyze data as never before, and can provide the metrics to gauge a department’s effectiveness. The methodology of using computer statistics—CompStat⁴ or other statistical measuring systems—can be helpful in evaluating prospective initiatives and, when necessary, in redirecting efforts to address emerging needs. However, police chiefs pointed out that CompStat should not be used to drive quantity of service rather than quality. “I don’t care how many arrests you made last week,” one chief said. “I want to know how your work affected the community’s perception of safety in the neighborhood.”

  Community involvement is as important a measure of police force effectiveness as are raw statistics. Evaluation of law enforcement outcomes must include a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures that capture the systemic change to safer, more livable neighborhoods, the police chiefs said. “CompStat isn’t a bad thing and shouldn’t be a swear word,” noted the chiefs, but CompStat needs to be used consistently as a tool for improving service quality and outcomes. “CompStat everything,” stated one chief. “CompStat convictions; CompStat probation and parole; CompStat the whole system, and hold everybody accountable to the stats.”

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**Top Skills for Law Enforcement**

In light of their professional challenges, the police chiefs identified the top three competencies that education and training programs must develop in the current and future workforce: decision making and critical thinking; interpersonal skills; and written communication.

1. **Decision making and critical thinking** could enhance almost every kind of skill training. For example, officers must be skilled drivers, but they also need the ability to apply their skills in decisive ways. One police chief described a scene in which officers responding to a call exited a parking structure at high speeds and crashed their cars. Such accidents could be avoided if officers took the time to apply good decision making. Similarly, officers need manual skills in controlling unruly persons and using handcuffs, Taser®, and firearms. Yet the critical thinking and decision-making skills to determine when to apply those techniques are equally important.

   Training that presents various problem-solving scenarios was suggested as a way to develop critical thinking and decision making, since officers need opportunities to practice thinking outside the box. One chief noted, “Officers are often trained to think in a linear mode instead of taking a broader, more global view. We need to give them options to think creatively.” Another police chief said officers need experience working through an entire incident and deciding how to respond “so that when faced with a similar situation, the officer knows how to operate on multiple levels and isn’t living it for the first time.”

2. **Interpersonal skills** are critical, as officers must interact with the public, handle arrests, and communicate information. The police chiefs identified a clear need for training and education that helps officers treat others with dignity and respect. Demonstrating these attributes requires cultural sensitivity and personal communication skills that can be lost when technology replaces face-to-face interactions. One chief observed, “Many officers are focusing on technology, and that might be hampering their ability to communicate with the community and to be good listeners.”

3. **Written communication** is also critical for effective law enforcement, and was identified as a top competency for the future workforce. Officers must document the situations they encounter and file written reports that can be used to

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⁴ The CompStat model is a management process within a performance management framework that synthesizes analysis of crime and disorder data, strategic problem solving, and a clear accountability structure. Ideally, CompStat facilitates accurate and timely analysis of crime and disorder data, which is used to identify crime patterns and problems.
prosecute criminals. Poorly written documents have serious implications, as one chief noted: “I don’t think the typical officer understands how important the total investigation is. A complete and thorough documentation on paperwork affects the overall outcome, including the prosecution.”

Educating the New Recruit

According to PERF, national recruitment trends are improving, with few agencies reporting discontinued, reduced, or delayed recruitment planning.\(^5\) Roundtable participants noted that a successful recruit for a law enforcement job needs a combination of education, training, and experience. Police chiefs look for a balance of those three elements—both individually in each recruit hired, and collectively as the chief builds and sustains a force. Although a high school diploma or GED is a minimum education requirement, no single educational pathway fits all law enforcement needs because every jurisdiction, and every agency within it, has unique requirements based on its specific community or constituency.

- **Impact of varying educational requirements on recruitment.** To date there is no national educational standard for an entry-level police officer. For a majority of police departments, a high school diploma is required. In some jurisdictions, an associate’s, bachelor’s, or higher degree may be required or encouraged, and for command staff or other executive law enforcement positions, a bachelor’s degree or higher may be desired. Roundtable participants emphasized that offering tuition assistance is one way for agencies to foster a culture of employee education.

The police chiefs noted that the higher the educational requirements, the smaller the applicant pool, which affects smaller jurisdictions with smaller budgets more severely than departments with larger budgets. Small towns or rural counties may not have the finances to offer salaries that will attract college-educated individuals to fill law enforcement jobs. In addition, if higher education is required for advancement, jurisdictions will be expected to raise salaries accordingly. Those that cannot afford to pay higher salaries will risk having their best educated officers recruited by wealthier departments, agencies, or the private sector.

Educational criteria alone do not solve a police chief’s recruitment challenges, because an individual’s educational level does not predict his or her success as a law enforcement officer. The police chiefs described law enforcement as more an art than a science, and related anecdotal examples of successful officers who had only a high school diploma. However, studies have shown that education levels overall correlate to “lower incidents of integrity failures,” noted one law enforcement leader.

>“Degrees are valuable for the learning involved as well as for the discipline and commitment that it takes to demonstrate success.”

AZ Law enforcement leader

Although college-educated recruits tend to have more advanced critical thinking and communication skills, and have demonstrated the persistence necessary to obtain their degrees, some police chiefs noted the exceptions. As one chief pointed out, “From my personal experience, you don’t need to be a rocket scientist to be a police officer. You need to have good common sense and people skills.”

- **Degree credentials drive leadership.** When it comes to promotions and leadership succession, having a college degree can prove a clear advantage. One police chief said officers who earn degrees “made the effort to advance themselves and better themselves” — an effort that should be rewarded. He added that “degrees are valuable for the learning involved as well as for the discipline and commitment that it takes to demonstrate success.”

- **Certified by the school of experience.** The police chiefs placed a high value on experience as one of the best “schools” in which to develop common sense and people skills. They noted that workforce experience is one of the most effective ways to learn how to communicate well with a variety of people, and that an ideal recruit might be someone who has held a number of jobs before seeking a law enforcement career. Higher education does not preclude workforce experience: Someone who has both often has an advantage.

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Other qualities that police chiefs may look for in an ideal recruit include specialized training in multiple languages, and skills in working with diverse populations. Military veterans often have desirable skills and training that translates well into the competencies needed for law enforcement careers. “Military personnel have discipline, structure, and life experience,” said one chief who admitted a preference for hiring military personnel over civilians.

Fostering a Learning Culture

Law enforcement agencies have struggled with reductions in training programs in the new economy. Despite departmental budget constraints, agencies have several ways to encourage their officers to continue their education and to keep their skills sharp:

- **Tuition assistance programs** can help officers earn college degrees that position them for expanded responsibilities, promotions, or salary increases.
- **Continuing education and training** available through police academies or POST organizations (or state equivalents) and other providers can help meet immediate and changing workforce needs.
- **Field Training Officers (FTOs)** provide invaluable in-service, on-the-job training and institutional knowledge for new recruits. A well-designed FTO program is the conduit for veteran officers to transfer their years of experience and knowledge to their colleagues.

Police chiefs cited lack of money and lack of time as the main barriers to a culture of education and training. “Training is often not the number-one priority in our agencies—it’s the first thing that gets cut,” one chief lamented. He made a comparison to fire departments, which typically train continually for events that rarely happen. “In law enforcement, we don’t even train on the things that happen to us every day or every week,” he said. “Training costs time, it requires scheduling, and it costs money—but we’re failing our officers and our citizens if we don’t prioritize training.”

Meeting Future Workforce Development Demands

For the most part, the education system and police academies do a good job of preparing the future law enforcement workforce, the police chiefs said. Yet there are challenges and gaps, as law enforcement seeks to stay ahead of community needs.

The police chiefs proposed the following actions to help meet future workforce development demands:

- **Setting minimum competency requirements** for entry into law enforcement academies. Admission requirements could help establish baseline skills, but each organization must still be responsible for evaluating their new hires. In general, funds are not available to ensure basic reading and writing skills, so law enforcement depends on a quality education system to graduate young people with these essentials.

> “Training costs time, it requires scheduling, and it costs money—but we’re failing our officers and our citizens if we don’t prioritize training.”
> 
> AZ Law enforcement leader

- **Creating a Criminal Justice Certificate program** as an alternative to a bachelor’s degree. Such a program would be even more valuable if it could be adapted to specific agencies’ needs or to changing community environments.
- **Collaboration among higher education institutions** to address course content and degree requirements so that credits are easily transferred from one school to another. Portability of credits among accredited institutions would ease access and streamline the education pathway for law enforcement officers, the police chiefs said.
- **New approaches to FTO training** were discussed as a valuable way to fill gaps in an officer’s preparation, especially in problem solving and decision making, and to identify goals for continuous improvement. Some police chiefs cited the transition from the San Jose FTO training model to the newer Reno model as offering a needed “change of philosophy.” The Reno model separates the training and evaluation functions, thus putting the burden of proof on the cadet to learn rather than on the field-training officer to teach. “All FTOs and cadets meet regularly in addition to their daily one-on-one, on-the-job training,” one chief described. “This newer FTO training takes place in an adult-learning format, through a collaborative process in a team environment.”

Also with the Reno model, cadets and FTOs alike keep a daily journal about their contacts and activities, and an evaluation

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2. In 1999, the US DOJ Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office funded the Reno (Nevada) Police Department and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) to develop an alternative national model for field training that would incorporate community policing and problem-solving principles. The result of their collaboration is a new training program called the Police Training Officer (PTO) Program. It incorporates contemporary methods of adult education and a version of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) method of teaching adapted for police. Most importantly, it serves to ensure that academy graduates’ first experience as law enforcement officers is one that reflects policing in the 21st century.

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of the cadet’s performance. “Apparently, new officers tend to be very honest and up-front in their journaling,” and as the cadet and FTO compare journals at the end of the day, “a lot of issues can be found by the officers themselves during that dialogue,” said one law enforcement leader. The model was described as “taking the negative and making it a positive”—a reframing of mistakes into a productive learning experience.

The FTO program was seen as a data source to evaluate the effectiveness of law enforcement education and training. Information from the program could then be used to suggest revisions in existing educational curricula and point to additional in-service training needs. For example, one chief suggested, “Let’s check the FTO’s last three academy classes, and find out their progress. Let’s get the FTO reports and find out, are they just trying to meet a timeline to get recruits on the road, or are the recruits really applying what they’ve learned in the academy?”

Summary

The challenges of modern policing in the new economy require law enforcement to do more with less. Arizona police chiefs and law enforcement leaders who participated in the training and education roundtable agreed that their organizations need individuals who are skilled in decision making and critical thinking, interpersonal interactions, and written communication. These competencies, along with integrity and ethics, are at the core of strong law enforcement, yet many agencies struggle to develop a workforce with these skills and attributes.

Law enforcement leaders in Arizona recognize the overall value of higher education while also acknowledging that they continue to find potential leaders among recruits with high school diplomas. As departments in Arizona look favorably on candidates with an associate’s or bachelor’s degree, the chiefs also pointed out the unintended consequences of requiring college degrees for recruitment—namely, a shrinking applicant pool and inequity between larger, well-funded agencies and smaller, financially challenged ones.

Educating and training future law enforcement professionals requires balancing numerous factors. Organizations must juggle basic educational requirements, in-service training for quality improvement, and constraints of time, priorities, and budgets as they seek to build a highly qualified police force. A uniform approach to recruitment or minimum officer qualifications cannot address the disparate needs of Arizona’s diverse communities.

Arizona law enforcement leaders reached consensus that individual department strategies are required to improve and promote training and education for sworn law enforcement and civilian personnel alike.

Nationally, law enforcement leaders emphasize that current and future law enforcement professionals must develop new skills to function effectively in an environment of increased economic and societal pressures. Through leadership roundtables and other collaborative activities, leaders in criminal justice and higher education can develop innovative approaches to advancing the workforce of today and tomorrow.

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For more information about the roundtable, this report, and other workforce development initiatives, contact IndustryStrategy@phoenix.edu.

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