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WHICH WAY, C.J.?

Two John Jay scholars propose that Criminal Justice programs emphasize methodology

By *Julius (Jay) Wachtel*. Normally we avoid quoting at length, but in this case it seems appropriate to let [John Jay College's](#) Evan Mandery and David Kennedy have their uninterrupted say.

Students who seek careers as [criminal justice] practitioners must be familiar with the history and operation of the institutions they aim to serve. Aspiring policy makers must also be familiar with these institutions, but this knowledge is important not as an end in itself, but rather as a focal point to develop their analytical skills. For policy makers require a distinct skill set. They are increasingly demanded to have greater quantitative analytical capacity and, most importantly, to solve problems. Humanely educating aspiring police, correction and probation officers will always remain a core, and arguably the most important, function of criminal justice programs. But we believe in the coming decades, the burgeoning demand will be for critics, critical thinkers, original thinkers, problem solvers, innovators, curmudgeons, and reformers. Currently, this need is not met. (For the full article click [here](#).)

What the authors seek is a "new sort of undergraduate" whose preparation will emphasize analytical skills rather than factual knowledge. Thus "empowered to think beyond the status quo," students will sail forth to generate "original and ethical solutions to vexing social problems." John Jay apparently intends to meld this alternative vision of criminal justice education into a bachelor of arts program. It will be offered alongside the college's extant bachelor of science degree, which the authors describe as fulfilling the "historical mission of CJ education."

There is no question that criminal justice education has significantly evolved. Your blogger's undergraduate degree from Cal State Los Angeles, awarded in 1971, was in "Police Science and Administration." Although the coursework had academic components, policing and corrections were taught by retired practitioners with master's degrees. At a time when civil rights disputes and unrest over Vietnam threatened to unravel the social fabric, their preoccupation with the nuts-and-bolts of policing seemed beside the point. (For a remarkable 1969 report about conflicts between police and the public see "[Law and Order Reconsidered](#)")

Your blogger and other students petitioned for a change. Our grievances were well received by some faculty, and in time the curriculum was transformed. Similar changes were happening elsewhere. By the late 1970's baccalaureate criminal justice programs were abandoning narrow vocational orientations in favor of a more comprehensive, diagnostic approach. Students examined interactions within the criminal justice system and between the system and outside forces, studied the social, psychological and economic causes of crime, and explored the proper role of police in a democracy. Among the classic titles of the era are Herman Goldstein's *Policing a Free Society*, William Muir's *Police: Streetcorner Politicians*, and Peter Manning's *Police Work*. These deeply analytical works addressed policing from a variety of perspectives, offering observations that hold true to the present day.

In 2005, after years of debate, the [Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences](#), a national organization of criminal justice educators, established a [process for certifying criminal justice programs](#). Requirements were set out in six content areas:

- Administration of Justice: Contemporary criminal justice system, major systems of social control and their policies and practices; victimology; juvenile justice; comparative criminal justice
- Corrections: History, theory, practice and legal environment, development of correctional philosophy, incarceration, diversions, community-based corrections, treatment of offenders
- Criminological Theory: The nature and causes of crime, typologies, offenders, and victims
- Law Adjudication: Criminal law, criminal procedures, prosecution, defense, and court procedures and decision-making
- Law Enforcement: History, theory, practice and legal environment, police organization, discretion, and subculture
- Research and Analytic Methods: Quantitative - including statistics - and qualitative, methods for conducting and analyzing criminal justice research in a manner appropriate for undergraduate students

These guidelines and the accompanying standards purportedly represent the state of the art in criminal justice education. Yet they weren't mentioned in the article by Mandery and Kennedy, which appeared in a publication of the [American Society of Criminology](#), a competitor organization (Dr. Mandery has advised that he and Dr. Kennedy referred to and discussed the ACJS guidelines in detail but that the editors of *The Criminologist*, the ASC publication where the article appeared, unfortunately cut the material.) Your blogger, who referred to the ACJS standards while acting as outside reviewer of a local CJ program, found them clear, comprehensive and simple to articulate and defend. Actually, he had nowhere else to turn, as the ASC has not promulgated an equivalent.

To be sure, the ACJS guidelines do not articulate Mandery and Kennedy's vision in its entirety. For example, there is nothing in ACJS about "teaching skills and critical thinking rather than facts" or the need for "intellectual discovery." So what *does* ACJS favor? Here's standard B.9:

The purpose of undergraduate programs in criminal justice is to educate students to be critical thinkers who can communicate their thoughts effectively in oral and written form. Programs should familiarize students with facts and concepts and teach students to apply this knowledge to related problems and changing situations. Primary objectives of all criminal justice programs include the development of critical thinking; communication, technology, and computing skills; quantitative reasoning; ethical decision-making; and an understanding of diversity.

Well, that sounds pretty good. Actually, the one clear distinction between ACJS standards and John Jay's proposed baccalaureate is in the latter's overarching emphasis on crunching numbers. While ACJS calls for instruction in quantitative and qualitative research "in a manner appropriate for undergraduate students," Mandery and Kennedy emphasize the acquisition of statistical skills, with a capstone independent research project at the program's conclusion.

Mandery and Kennedy briskly track the evolution of police strategies during the past decades:

New York City's historic crime decline, and the perceived significance of its police force's new operational approaches, gave credence to the ideas that police could reduce crime and should be held accountable for doing so. CompStat drove responsibility for crime outcomes down to geographic commands and raised the salience of data. As other police agencies adopted these innovations, and the Department of Justice sought to enhance the mapping capacity of police departments, the importance of data analysis was raised further. Soon it became more practicable to address hot spots, refine officer deployment, and identify crime trends.

If advanced data analysis really is that crucial, the need for a new curriculum should be self-evident. Yet the evidence that Mandery and Kennedy offer is hardly compelling. Mentioning Compstat and hot-spots in the same breath as New York City's crime decline, part of a national trend for two decades, encourages the reader to assume that the former caused the latter. That's a fallacy that should be evident to anyone versed in basic methodology. What's more, crediting these "innovations" for bringing home the long-standing notion that police ought to be held accountable for crime is simply audacious.

As we said in [Too Much of a Good Thing?](#), it's not as though cops have been waiting for academics to come around to suggest the obvious. Once one peels away the rhetoric, "problem-oriented" and "hot spot" policing are nothing new. Open-air drug markets, street robberies ("muggings"), vehicle burglaries ("car clouts") and other types of location-based offending were being addressed by special squads, directed patrol and covert surveillance well before your blogger joined the law enforcement ranks in 1972. Using data is also old hat. Pin-maps, then IBM punch cards and, finally, personal computers have tracked the incidence and place of crime for decades.

Yes, it's become easier to collect, analyze and display information. But the benefits claimed by advocates of newfangled number-crunching techniques seem vastly overblown. "Putting a patrol car close to the action," as a [predictive policing](#) experiment in Minneapolis seeks to do, sounds like a great idea, at least until it [turns out in practice to mean within a mile](#) of the next predicted crime. Even if the accuracy is increased, the chances that a patrol car will be available at the right time and place are slight. Reporting isn't instantaneous, and unless a cop is perfectly situated offenders may be long gone. In cities of any size patrol officers already have a full plate. Beat cops constantly exchange information and are always on the lookout for known evildoers with whom to have a chat. Detectives, parole agents and probation officers also frequently pass down requests to watch for suspects, wanted persons and absconders from supervision.

Over-emphasizing numbers isn't just beside the point – it can be a really bad idea. In [Predictive Policing: Rhetoric or Reality?](#) we discussed complaints by NYPD officers that pressures to look good under Compstat transformed measures into goals, forcing cops to make needless stops and arrests on pain of keeping their jobs. As we pointed out in the text and updates section of [Liars Figure](#), a preoccupation with crime statistics reportedly led cops in various cities, including New York, Cleveland, Dallas, New Orleans, Baltimore and Nashville to not take reports or purposely downgrade offenses to make the numbers look good.

Since retiring from law enforcement your blogger has taught courses in research methods and policing. There is less crossover than one might think. Many pressing issues – misuse of force, lying to superiors, lying in reports and in court, mistaken arrests and other shoddy work, inadequate hiring standards, poor training, the lack of meaningful supervision, proliferation of guns, and so on – are not amenable to

quantification other than in its crudest form; for example, by counting the number of officers fired for misconduct or killed by assailants each year. Others, such as racial profiling, present methodological complexities that can make it impossible to draw firm conclusions. Where numbers inarguably help – describing the incidence of crime, allocating and deploying resources – usually involves rudimentary techniques that should be readily comprehended by any reasonably bright undergraduate.

Except in its most trivial manifestations, quantitative research into policing has proven far less useful than what its proponents claim. One reason, we're certain, is that researchers often fail to identify the proper variables or to develop accurate measures. "To cultivate creative and original thinking about one of the most challenging social problems of our time," to borrow Mandery and Kennedy's apt phrase, requires that everyone who wants to play in the sandbox – future practitioners and budding researchers alike – be exceptionally well informed about the environment of policing in its full, sausage-making complexity.

And where would this knowledge come from? As we mentioned in [R.I.P. Community Policing?](#), many scholars have published profound, illuminating descriptions of the police workplace. Alas, deeply probing, ethnographic research seems out of favor. (Yesterday I asked students in one of my classes whether anyone had read *Varieties of Police Behavior*. No one had.) Getting undergraduates to pore through the many great works sitting on library shelves may seem like a tall order. But if we're really serious about preparing future cops *and* researchers that may be the best approach.

p.s. Here are a few classic titles:

Egon Bittner, *Aspects of Police Work* and *The Functions of Police in Modern Society*

Anthony Bouza, *The Police Mystique*

Herman Goldstein, *Policing a Free Society*

Peter Manning, *The Narc's Game* and *Police Work*

John Van Mannen and Peter Manning, *Policing: A View From the Street*

Gary Marx, *Undercover*

William Ker Muir Jr., *Police: Streetcorner Politicians*

Albert Reiss, *The Police and the Public*

Larence Sherman, *Scandal and Reform*

James Q. Wilson, *The Investigators*, *Thinking About Crime* and *Varieties of Police Behavior*