Perceived Roles of Campus Law Enforcement: A Cognitive Review of Attitudes and Beliefs of Campus Constituents

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Constituent perceptions of the role of campus law enforcement agencies and their personnel are important in providing quality, professionalized services to these unique communities. Support for enhancements to professionalized services is tied indelibly to those perceptions. This article seeks to assess levels of support for further professionalizing campus law enforcement services by arming campus police officers and to assess the influence of race and gender on support for those services. The authors used a nine-question survey document to determine that significant levels of support exist both on campus and in the surrounding community for further professionalizing campus law enforcement through arming, and while women were not overwhelmingly in support, racial minorities do support arming campus law enforcement.

Key Words: Campus police • community perception • police-community relations • higher education • police contacts • arming issues

In no other environment are perceptions of the role of law enforcement officers and their authority as convoluted and contested as in the academic setting. Campus police officers are viewed as either a necessary evil or as a means of promoting positive relationships with campus constituents and coping proactively with the advancing spectre of campus crime (Grant, 1993). Constituent perceptions of the role of campus law enforcement agencies and their personnel are important in providing quality, professionalized services to these distinctly unique communities. And support for enhancements to professionalized services is tied indelibly to those perceptions.

Modern campus law enforcement agencies provide many of the same services, and more, that their traditional police counterparts do, albeit in a more microcosmic community. Most of these agencies incorporate the same community oriented policing concepts, provide escort services and student and faculty training sessions in both personal and community safety procedures, and interact directly with members of the campus community in both professional and social settings. As society becomes more complex and crime spreads to every facet of life, institutions across the nation have been
charged with the responsibility of providing a safe educational, working, and living environment on campus for employees, faculty, and students alike (Wilson & Wilson, 2001).

Campus police departments have a unique responsibility in the college setting to provide security services that meet both law enforcement and private security standards. Providing security for large numbers of students spread over expansive geographic areas is an inherently difficult task (Newman, 1996). Yet the legitimacy of campus law enforcement, its proper role in the academic setting, questions regarding police liability, and the issue of arming campus officers have remained major arguments in the effort to professionalize police services to the campus community.

Campus police officers are considered as first responders and bear the responsibility for the investigation and response to all campus-related criminal activities, ranging from disturbances to domestic arguments; suspicious persons and vehicles to fights in progress; stolen vehicles to sexual assaults; substance abuse issues to weapons offenses. However, where unarmed officers are called to respond to violence-prone issues, they are universally required to delay their response until assistance can be obtained from local armed law enforcement agencies.

Campus police officers are thrust into a variety of roles and responsibilities. Their roles as peace officers, security guards, policy enforcers, and public relations officers for the institution are intermingled and sometimes conflicting (Foster, 1986). Gone are the days of the custodial guard-type situations, which used to permeate the role of campus law enforcement. Drugs and alcohol abuse, sexual assaults, thefts, domestic violence, and homicides occur just as readily on the nation’s college campuses as they do in the roughest neighborhoods of the nation’s cities (Leaderman, 1994).

It is no wonder then that campus community members, including not only students, faculty, and staff, but parents, spouses, and residents of the surrounding neighborhoods, may today demand the same level of service from their campus departments as they do from their municipal law enforcement agencies (Atwell, 1988). Yet there is very limited prior research regarding community perceptions of campus police departments and their duties (Johnson & Bromley, 1999). This is particularly true where the issue of the use of firearms by campus law enforcement is concerned.

**Perceived Roles of Campus Law Enforcement**

Many are not aware of the requirements that have been set in place either by legislative fiat or agency policy for campus law enforcement. Virtually every state has imposed statutory language defining the position, authority, and powers granted to campus police officers at both public and private institutions, with the majority of these statutes covering publicly supported institutions of higher learning. And while the majority leave the issue of
establishing campus law enforcement agencies to college and university controlling agents (Board of Education, Trustees, or Campus President), very few provide strict limitations on allowing campus officers to be armed (RIGL, §16-52-2).

Police agencies, in general, have sought to become more professionalized since the days of the first night watchman. Studies using Hall's 1968 Professionalism Scale concluded that officers possess higher-than-average professionalism attitudes (Carlan & Lewis, 2009). College students aspiring to become law enforcement officers were found to view policing as more of a profession than just an employment source (Bumgarner, 2002), and these concepts of professionalism have expanded to the non-traditional venue of campus policing on a wide scale.

In response to both media attention and growing numbers of violent crimes on campuses, most large colleges and universities have systematically professionalized their public safety departments, so much so that they are now analogous to their local, county, and state counterparts in policing. This transformation has included formalized law enforcement training, the granting of arrest powers, and in most cases the permission to carry firearms while on duty.

**Attitudes of Women and Minorities Toward Police**

It would appear that the principal research regarding the relationships between women and the police has centered on the effect of survivor services for victims of domestic abuse and rape trauma. While there has been some indication that gender bias exists in the relationships between law enforcement officers and females during traffic stops (Blalock, DeVaro, Leventhal, & Simon, 2007), and police may be inclined to use race and gender as a determining factor when issuing traffic citations (Quintanar, 2009), little information has been presented regarding the perceptions or attitudes of females as they regard the police in other interactions.

As regards the disparate effect that arming campus police would have on students of color, both historical and empirical data have spoken to the lack of trust in police and the criminal justice system in communities of color. Surveys have shown that Blacks are less likely than Whites to trust the police and Whites are more favorably disposed toward law enforcement (Gallup, 1999; Harris, 1999; Jacob, 1971). Carr, Napolitano, and Keating (2007) indicate that variation exists along neighborhood context in terms of the likelihood of police using force: Police are more likely to use force on suspects or engage in misconduct in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Research has also demonstrated that cynicism is very high among residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods, showing that these residents can have a distinct intolerance for crime even while being negative toward police and the justice system in
general (Anderson, 1993; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998), and there are high levels of dissatisfaction with police among residents of poor neighborhoods (Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007; Huang, Wilson, & Vaughn, 1996; Smith, Graham, & Adams, 1991). Nearly 9 out of 10 Black residents questioned in previous surveys said they thought the police often engaged in brutality against Blacks, and almost two-thirds said police brutality against members of minority groups is widespread (Barry & Connelly, 1999).

**Campus Policing vs. Traditional Law Enforcement**

The precepts of campus law enforcement that dictate its differences from traditional policing are its ability to relate, specifically, to the atmosphere of trust, respect, and perceptually safe havens that our colleges and universities so carefully embrace and expose their communities to. This capacity is most glaringly identified through those specific and definitively non-law enforcement related activities campus police perform: working directly with student groups as advisors and mentors; participating in student-managed affairs and events; coordinating efforts with housing officials; and providing such quality-of-life services as assisting with student lock-outs, stalled or disabled vehicles, and so on. These service-type activities, not found in traditional law enforcement circles, are what clearly mark the community policing programs of campus law enforcement as more successful than those of their traditional counterparts. They are, in fact, the staples of campus policing without which no campus agency can truly operate or survive.

During the 2004–2005 school year, 74% of the 750 law enforcement agencies serving four-year universities and colleges with 2,500 or more students employed sworn law enforcement officers. These officers had full arrest powers granted by a state or local government. The remainder employed non-sworn security officers only. Nearly all public campuses (93%) used sworn officers compared with less than half of private campuses (42%). Two-thirds (67%) of campus law enforcement agencies surveyed used armed patrol officers during the 2004–2005 school year. Armed patrol officers were used at nearly 9 in 10 agencies that employed sworn officers and at nearly 1 in 10 agencies that relied on non-sworn officers only (Reaves, 2008).

Hiring policies for campus law enforcement officers directly mimic those in place for their municipal counterparts and in many cases exceed them. Generally, a higher percentage of campus police departments require a minimum two-year degree and previous full-time service in a position having authority for arrest, search and seizure, and protection of life and property when compared with their municipal counterparts (Bromley, 1998). Nearly all campus law enforcement agencies require extensive background checks and mandatory training programs that either meet or significantly exceed those of their public counterparts.
Likewise Sloan (1992) found that campus police entities have evolved to resemble their municipal counterparts in both structure and operation, with the size of many of today’s college campuses paralleling or surpassing that of many small municipalities.

About two-thirds (69%) of campus law enforcement agencies have incorporated community policing into their campus security policy. Most agencies (59%) assign patrol officers to specific geographic areas on campus. About half have upgraded technology to support community policing efforts (51%) and collaborated with citizen groups, using their feedback to support community policing strategies (47%). And nearly 57% of all campus agencies had some form of written policy pertaining to racial profiling (Reaves, 2005).

And so, how are these arbiters of campus justice and safety actually perceived by their constituents in terms of professionalization and the need to provide increased or better services? The alignment of campus police and university goals is paramount. This perspective must be maintained because the success and health of the college or university depends on the organization’s effectiveness in accomplishing goals aligned with an educational function (Striegel & Cox, 1994).

Literature Review

To date, while numerous items have been published regarding the issue of weapons on campus, several dealing specifically with the need to arm campus law enforcement officers (Connor, 2003; Harnisch, 2008; Jacobson, 1995; Jiao, 2001; Karp, 2001; Kopel, 2009; McBride, 2009; Miller, Hemenway, & Wechsler, 1999; Reaves, 2005; Siebel, 2008; Smith, 1989; Vanbenthuyzen, 1976; Waddington, 1988; Wilson & Wilson, 2001), little has been written concerning the perceptions of campus constituents regarding campus law enforcement services (Benedict, Brown, & Bower, 2000; Chackerian, 1974; Grant, 1993; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Miller & Pan, 1987; Shipman, 1994). The vast amount of literature written regarding weapons on campus has spoken to strong opposition to allowing students to have weapons, and almost all literature dealing with the issue of arming of campus law enforcement officers has dealt not with opposition to that level of professionalization but rather with those issues related to its implementation. In fact, it has been suggested that campus police have a legitimate need to carry weapons on duty in light of the increase in campus crime, especially that committed by off-campus persons (Vanbenthuyzen, 1976). Also, recent government-sponsored research has indicated that the percentage of campuses using armed personnel for patrol actually increased from 66% to 72% between 1995 and 2005, with two-thirds (67%) of all campuses surveyed having armed officers (Reeves, 2005).

Wada, Patten, and Candela (2010) indicate that no studies have determined whether a campus police officer and “mainstream” police officer’s perceived legitimacy levels
differ. Skogan (2005) found that although there are many determinants of people's attitudes and assessments of policing, none is more important for policy than the quality of service rendered.

A gap in the literature then appears to be information regarding the perceptions of campus constituents regarding the need to professionalize campus law enforcement and the services it provides and how these perceptions are viewed in terms of both the race and gender of the constituent. Only a few have investigated this issue as it pertains to race (Mbuba, 2010; Peek, Lowe, & Alston, 1981; Rusinko, Johnson, & Hornung, 1978; Waddington & Braddock, 1991) and fewer still as it pertains to gender.

Methods

The research for this article was conducted in the State of Rhode Island for its singular status of having the only public college campus law enforcement agencies in the nation that do not maintain armed campus police officers. The project was designed to elicit campus and community perceptions of the need to professionalize these agencies by granting them permission to carry weapons during the normal course of their duties. Specifically, the research was geared to determine whether campus and community constituents understood the duties and functions of campus police, levels of training required to perform those functions, and attitudes toward arming. The authors hypothesized that (1) the majority of campus constituents agree with efforts to professionalize campus law enforcement agencies further; (2) those who agree with the concepts of a formalized professional format for campus law enforcement also agree that campus police officers should be armed while on duty; (3) women, in general, agree that campus officers should be armed, and (4) racial minorities support the arming of campus law enforcement officers.

In the context of this study, campus community members comprised students, faculty, and staff as well as parents, spouses, and residents of the surrounding neighborhoods, as all are inherent stakeholders in campus safety.

Data Collection

A survey questionnaire was developed that elicited information regarding the respondents' gender, race, and response to questions pertaining to comparative issues between campus police and more traditional law enforcement agencies on such topics as power and authority, training, hiring procedures, performance of duties, access to standard police technology, and use of firearms on duty. The questionnaire in its final form was administered to 500 faculty, staff, and students at the three state education institutions. It was also placed on a donated Internet site, the location for which was published to an
email list of 1,500 Rhode Island residents, which included students, faculty, staff, parents, spouses, and community members, thus providing a total population of 2,000 possible respondents. Persons taking the written survey were not advised of the website location.

Participants were presented with nine questions. Two questions requested information pertaining to the participants’ race and sex, and six questions asked whether they agreed, disagreed, or had no specific opinion on variables regarding police power and authority, law enforcement training, hiring procedures, performance standards, access to technology, and the ability to carry firearms. A final question was presented for those persons who disagreed with the ability to carry firearms, allowing these respondents to provide a brief response as to the reason for their disagreement. Each of the first eight questions required a response to complete the survey, and participants were allowed only one attempt to respond. The online survey was made available for a period of 30 days. A final sample of 380 respondents was obtained, giving a 19% overall response rate.

Results

The predominant arguments against arming campus law enforcement officers were that (1) they do not have the requisite experience for this level of professionalism; (2) armed campus officers will ultimately have a disparate effect on students of color; (3) they do not perform in the same substantive manner as more traditionally employed law enforcement personnel; (4) they do not have the proper training for this level of enhancement; and (5) weapons are not needed on the college campus.

Each of these arguments may, and should, more appropriately be considered in terms of the methodology of hiring, training, and performance standards that are expected for campus law enforcement to achieve.

An analysis of the data collected indicates that campus constituents were in strong agreement that campus police officers should meet the same training (80.3%), hiring (84.2%), and performance standards (77.1%) as traditional law enforcement officers. Also, 61.1% of all respondents agreed that, if campus police officers are held to the same hiring, training, and performance standards as more traditionally employed law enforcement officers, they should be armed while in the normal course of their duties. This, therefore, is believed to prove the first two hypotheses of this study.

When considering the influence of gender on the issues of training, hiring, and performance, 81.4% of males and 78.3% of females agreed that campus police should receive the same training levels; 88% of males and 78% of females agreed they should meet the same hiring standards; and 83% of males and 68% of females agreed they should be held to the same performance standards as their more traditional counterparts.
Where race was considered on these same issues, it is notable that, where Blacks were concerned, 82% agreed they should meet the same training standards, 73.3% agreed they should meet the same hiring standards, and 73.3% agreed they should meet the same performance standards as their public counterparts. In fact, for non-white Hispanics, percentages were higher relating to training (83.3%) and hiring (90%) than for Blacks.

As regards the arming of campus police officers, 71.3% of males agreed they should be armed, while only 44.1% of females were in agreement. Racially, 64% of Whites, 57% of Blacks, and 53.3% of non-White Hispanics agreed that, as long as campus police met the same standards of training, hiring, and performance, they should be armed during the normal course of their duties.

Discussion

It appears clear that significant levels of support exist for enhancing the professional status of campus law enforcement officers and their agencies to include the arming of campus police. And while women and racial minorities both expressed support for the arming of campus law enforcement officers, the percentage of racial minorities supporting arming (57% for Blacks and 53.3% for non-white Hispanics) was significantly higher than for women in general (44.1%). Males generally were in significant support for the arming of campus law enforcement officers (71.3%).

The relationship between racial minorities and their support for arming seems also to be in direct contrast to their reported levels of trust for police in general. Nonetheless, the data appear to be clear that, provided campus law enforcement officers are held to the same professional standards of training, hiring, and performance as their more traditional counterparts, racial minorities support arming campus police. In fact, it may be significant to note that while Blacks were less likely to support arming than Whites, their level of support for arming (57%) was only slightly lower than the level of support for arming among the entire sample (61.1%).

Campus constituents today, regardless of their involvement with that community, recognize, desire, and deserve the same levels of professional acumen that is inherent in the standards accepted throughout the greater law enforcement community. Their perceived value of campus law enforcement and safety services appears no less stringent than that held for their public counterparts. Most notably, racial minorities and females appear to have strong levels of approval for the further professionalization of campus law enforcement personnel and services. And while females had much lower levels of acceptance of armed law enforcement officers on campus, racial minorities had much higher levels of acceptance for armed campus police officers than expected originally.
These findings illustrate the relevance of studies of perceptions of the role of campus law enforcement. Specifically, they demonstrate the value of such studies in terms of informing academic administrators and legislative leaders of the true concerns of campus constituents and the need to address these issues more appropriately and adequately. The use of sworn law enforcement personnel in the campus setting without the further enhancement of their training, procedures in hiring, and the establishment of clearly defined professional performance standards can lead only to costly litigation. Where campus law enforcement officers are empowered with statutory authority and responsibility, they become nothing more than a lawsuit waiting to be filed. And it must be accepted that the arming of campus law enforcement officers fits well within the concept of professional law enforcement standards in both training and performance.

Lastly, it must be noted that these findings add empirical support to the thesis that campus law enforcement officers should be armed during the normal course of their everyday duties, even while recognizing that each campus community has different needs and expectations of its campus safety forces. Conventional wisdom, however, holds that where these officers are expected to provide the same services and perform in the same manner as their more public counterparts, they should be provided with the same tools.

References


Rhode Island General Laws, § 16-52-2, Appointment of Campus Police.


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