



Transformative Police Reform: The Role of Education in Preparing Police Officers to Serve and Lead as Catalysts for Positive Change in our Communities

Open Letter from the Virginia Association of Criminal Justice Educators Board- June 25, 2020

Most of us who have taught criminal justice curriculum over the last several years, or who have worked within the criminal justice system, are not just saddened but repulsed by the recent (and historical) behavior of certain police officers. We are understandably seeing significant calls for Transformative Police Reforms that include many changes to policies that inform the manner in which police respond to calls for services in our communities. These calls for reform range from changes in police techniques, revising use of force policies, police accountability, reallocating or decreasing police budgets to address other social challenges (e.g., mental health, drug addiction, homelessness, etc.), and changes to police occupational culture. Even though it seems like we may have taken progressive steps forward over the years to realize and maintain enhanced levels of criminal justice professionalism, sadly, events as we have seen in Minneapolis move us many steps back. We are left with the question: what else can we do to be part of the solution to engage in effective Transformative Police Reform? As Dr. M.L. King, Jr. (*“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”*) advised us in 1963 *“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”* Much work remains to be done in our journey toward social and racial justice and harmony within our communities. The events in Minneapolis, and others, call all of us to renew our commitment to working for justice, including advancing cultural affirmation as well as developing respect, trust, and understanding. Transformative Police Reform must prepare police officers to effectively serve communities and be leaders toward positive change in order for all communities to achieve and experience equal justice under the law. Education can play a significant role in transforming training of police officers to more effectively serve and lead as community partners.

Transformative Police Reform must include strategies to increase educational access, options, and opportunities for law enforcement officers, so that they may serve and lead as catalysts for positive change. Increased education is an important tool to facilitate police agencies in delivering enhanced levels of public safety to the citizens they are sworn to serve and protect. Prior research establishes a direct link between higher education and policing in reducing the incidents of excessive force and police misconduct. This research suggests that increasing educational levels of police officers correlates with enhanced levels of police

professionalism, emotional and intellectual intelligence, and communication and human relations skills (including crisis intervention, de-escalation, conflict resolution, and problem-solving skills). As such, well-educated law enforcement agencies help to ensure safer, less violent, healthier, and more productive communities. Requiring more educational opportunities for police officers places agencies at the forefront of being able to better provide solutions-based responses to community conflict which are within “Best Policing Practices” concepts. Establishing and developing educational opportunities for police within a progressive, proactive, and futuristic pedagogical agenda, along with a mandate designed and developed to move police officers to provide “service excellence” in the communities in which they have taken an oath to serve and protect, can greatly benefit society. The educational mandate as an effective Transformative Police Reform instrument becomes even more essential and tantamount in today’s social conditions and circumstances. The role of educational institutions to empower police officers to make the right decisions and choices is even more important than ever, not just within a professional framework, but also within a humanistic context of demonstrating integrity, respect for others, compassion, empathy, ethics, fairness, and embracing and developing positive police-community relationships.

Widely enlightening and enabling officers through the formal educational process might seem daunting and insurmountable, particularly when we see some of the images and unfolding events in Minneapolis, the United States, and the world. Criminal justice education that provides police officers with exceptional, up-to-date, evidence-based, fact-based and progressive opportunities that embrace problem solving, crisis intervention, tactical communication and community centered application, can indeed make a difference in the profession of policing and consequently how communities are being served. Opportunities to educate police officers in subjects such as history, philosophy, sociology, and psychology within the context of our justice system can assist in broadening the viewpoints of officers that may in turn provide better outcomes within communities. Formal criminal justice education with a liberal arts focus can make an invaluable difference in preparing and developing police officers to become more empathetic community partners and leaders.

Transformative Police Reform through educational access and engagement mandates that we continue to work with all community partners to procure and maintain the trust within the communities served. As educators, we must be proactive in inspiring our police officers to take on significant leadership roles as community builders and community problem solvers. We must offer a “hand up” to demonstrate our commitments to community and increasing educational access, options, and opportunities for police officers to further professionalize the profession to better meet the many needs of our citizens. It is the “value” and “promise” of higher education that will provide the opportunity for significant police reform and development. Operationalizing and realizing educational options and providing opportunities for police officers to grow in critical thinking, cognitive skills, and problem solving will make our communities safer places for community members and police officers alike.

Police officers should support and embrace-community members who are working for racial and social justice in our communities. We want our police officers to feel empowered to stand up against all forms of injustices as well as administer justice by enforcing laws and maintaining order. We want our police officers to be agents of equal justice and to be practitioners of decency, dignity, justice, compassion, empathy, and respect consistent with the police oath of honor.

Although, recent and related historical events have become political issues, the call for Transformative Police Reform is, at its core, a human rights and social justice issue. Achieving justice for all is the duty and responsibility of all citizens, particularly police officers. Any level of systemic racism or social injustice has to be eradicated in all our communities. Doing nothing and staying silent is passively accepting the status quo of systemic racism and implicit bias by some within our criminal justice system. It is our social responsibility as criminal justice educators to speak up. Let us build from a position of strength and continue on a relentless pursuit for change, reform, and optimally enabling our police officers to work collaboratively with the communities they serve. We can be part of the solution by advocating for educational opportunities that will prepare our police officers to serve and lead as catalysts for positive change. Education is key in inspiring police officers to be self-motivated and to embrace compassion, dignity, empathy, and respect while understanding and appreciating the human existence and struggle. Criminal justice education can indeed, be part of the Transformative Police Reform solution by enriching and further enlightening police officers to provide exceptional policing services for the communities they serve.

In solidarity;

**The Virginia Association of Criminal Justice Educators Board
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Virginia Association of Criminal Justice Educators Mission and Purpose:

The mandate of the Virginia Association of Criminal Justice Educators is to facilitate and provide for an opportunity for a collective voice in reference to Criminal Justice Issues grounded from experience, expertise, and wisdom acquired from years of teaching and researching Criminal Justice within academia and training academies and/ or providing and applying Criminal Justice Services as a practitioner. The mission of the Virginia Association of Criminal Justice Educators is to:

- Advance, inspire, and promote the highest quality and practices of criminal justice education to students and practitioners in the community colleges, colleges, and universities within the Commonwealth of Virginia;
- Foster communication and support among all criminal justice educators in the Commonwealth of Virginia; inform the membership of pending (or possible) changes in criminal justice programs or agencies among the post-secondary educational institutions in Virginia;
- Articulate a unified voice for official communication with other educational agencies, organizations, and/or the Commonwealth of Virginia; and to enhance the quality of life-long educational experiences and opportunities for our criminal justice students.

The purpose of the Virginia Association of Criminal Justice Educators is to:

- Raise professional standards in Criminal Justice Education;
- Recruit more academically and professionally trained persons into the Criminal Justice field;
- Develop a Criminal Justice education curriculum at both the college and university levels, and also, in recognized professional training institutions, such as Police Training Academies, Correctional Training Academies, etc;
- Study the possibilities of full utilization of community resources in the Criminal Justice field;
- Search continually for new techniques and programs to assist Criminal Justice education in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

