Meeting the Academic and Practical Needs of a Criminal Justice DL Program

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INTRODUCTION

The criminal justice profession is increasing demands that university graduates have not only the requisite professional knowledge, but also the ability to apply that knowledge to working scenarios. With that increasing demand comes the challenge for educators to find new and engaging ways in which learners can incorporate what they have learned in practical applications.

One of the challenges for educators is stating the universal criminal justice learning objectives in a way that the objectives become performance indicators. This integration of academic and practical education can provide the learner with increased abilities to think like practicing professionals and use their criminal justice knowledge in ways that are directly related to scenario-based problem solving.

Learning technologies now enable educators to improve distance learning programs through the use of scenario-based software that allows learners to apply recently acquired knowledge to solving workplace scenarios.

BACKGROUND

The criminal justice discipline has a long tradition in higher education. Early efforts by colleges and universities focused primarily on criminal law and criminology. The driving force to expand criminal justice programs came with the efforts to professionalize the field in part due to the events of the 1960's and the subsequent Supreme Court rulings in response to police behavior. The 1960's were a time of transition for higher education criminal justice programs. The recommendations from President Johnson's Crime Commission and corresponding funding programs such as the Law Enforcement Education Program (LEEP) were behind many of the changes. Federal funding of programs provided an opportunity for large numbers of criminal justice students to attend college. To meet

this new student demand higher education institutions either created new programs or expanded already existing criminal justice curricula. Traditionally there has been a disconnect between what has been considered knowledge and training. A long-running struggle with the criminal justice educators has been making choices between the broader emphasis of the liberal education philosophy and that of the practical application aspect of the profession.

This is not to say that the development of criminal justice programs in higher education has not been successful. These programs have likely resulted in a vastly more informed community in terms of criminal justice concepts and issues as a result of the many learners who have enrolled in any criminal justice course as part of their educational experience. In the article in the Journal of Criminal Justice Education's "Higher education and law enforcement career paths: Is the road to success paved by degree?" it suggest that currently over fifty percent of the police officers in the United States have at least some post-secondary education (Polk & Armstrong, 2001).

It can be argued that the liberal education philosophy component of the criminal justice discipline has neglected to address that component of learning that addresses the ability to do or perform. This issue has not gone unrecognized by educators and government agencies that have a vested interest in the development of the criminal justice discipline in higher education. Increasingly, there has been more emphasis on assessing criminal justice programs and developing means by which program goals can be linked to the profession's performance objectives (Kuykendall, 1977). In 1994 the U.S. Department of Justice sponsored a publication aimed specifically at developing performance measures for criminal justice programs. The handbook was "designed to allow the program designer to move from the broadest and most universal criminal justice goals to the most narrow performance indicators" (Hatfield, 1994, pp. 4).

Criminal justice professionals must have a thorough knowledge of the laws, rules and other operating principles under which they must perform their duties. Training has traditionally addressed those "hands-on" skills which under ideal conditions would incorporate both academic and technical applications. What has been noted is that a majority of police training has relied on a lecture-based methodology which incorporates little or no time for using what was learned in practical applications (Schafer, Boyd & Youngs, 2006).

INTEGRATING PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICAL PERFORMANCE GOALS

The President of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences states "Fundamentally, all baccalaureate criminal justice programs should be structured to develop critical thinkers who have solid written and oral communication skills and a broad knowledge of the criminal justice system, can apply ethical behavior to situations within the criminal justice practice, and understand the complex nature and causes of crime and delinquency" (Southerland, 2002, pp. 599). By expanding that definition to include the integration of academic and technical education programs can provide learners with a more diverse learning experience. The integration of academic and technical education is one of the twelve funding priorities of the Minnesota's Technical College System and has been an additional influence on the design of the criminal justice program at Bemidji State University. The design of the program emphasizes both the assimilation of knowledge and application of that knowledge in a purposeful manner.

Educator and the department internship coordinators take special interest in what intern supervisors have to report regarding what the feel the needs of the agency are and how programs can adapt to meet those needs. Increasingly the requests are for the integration of the broader departmental learning objectives with performance objectives that are closely related to professional expertise. The vast majority of the feedback from criminal justice agencies (law enforcement, corrections and private sector business such as insurance companies and asset protection divisions of large retailers) encourages a program design that requires students to incorporate what they have learned in the traditional classroom setting with a better understanding of how

they can utilize their knowledge in practical ways. Supervisors consistently report that the students have the required knowledge, but interns may be lacking that ability to apply that knowledge in the workplace. (Herbert, personal communications).

In criminal justice there are many examples of how the practice of the profession requires the integration of knowledge into competencies. For example, it is one thing to understand the principles behind due process and the incorporated issues relating to search and seizure, and laws of arrest. The ability to correctly apply that knowledge in work scenarios can have a huge impact on those involved. There are serious consequences behind not having the ability to understand how the knowledge of due process is incorporated in decision making on the job ranging from civil law suits to criminal cases being dismissed (Travis, 1994;

In distance learning programs there are many opportunities for educators to be innovative in creating problem-based or scenario-based courses that will allow the assimilation of the broader concepts traditionally taught in the classroom into practical scenarios that involve problem solving. Keegan's (2002) comprehensive definition of distance education as "teaching and learning in which learning normally occurs in a different place from teaching" (p.20) defines a constraint of distance learning. A comprehensive definition of competency as "a knowledge, skill, or attitude that enables one to effectively perform the activities of a given occupation or function to the standards expected in employment" (p. 31) by the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction (IBSTPI) provides another dimension of the requirements. New performance objectives or competencies can be set in place which will allow assessment of outcomes of the scenario or problem.

To support the active participation of distance learners in their learning, the professor must be willing to shift from the perspective of a simple transfer of information from a faculty to student to a model in which the professor acts as a guide and/or facilitator in the learning process (Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, & Tickner, 2001). This model requires professors to shift a greater amount of responsibility for learning on the students (Barker, 2003; Gallant, 2000). Inserting a focus on performance objectives into the learning process generally encourages learners to be more fully engaged. The learner shifts from a focus on knowing

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