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The Pracademic and Academic in Criminal Justice Education: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Over the past several years, a few hundred colleagues involved in criminal justice education have participated in panel discussions and roundtables to discuss the trials and issues that have been observed by practitioners turned academics, or “pracademics.” Some complained of having difficulty breaking into academia. A debate has occurred in a number of colleges and universities over the benefit of having faculty with traditional academic credentials versus hiring non-traditional scholars with a blend of educational and practical experience. Similarly, there have been lively discussions over the appropriateness of a J.D. or professional doctorate as opposed to a Ph.D. in criminal justice. This debate started in an article in *ACJS Today* (2002) and continued in subsequent publications. It is believed that there is importance, benefit and relevance to incorporating practical experience on college and university campuses. In academic program after program, internships, externships, observation, and practicums have become essential in preparing students for the real world.

Introduction

This article discusses the make-up and hiring choices for faculty in criminal justice education. There are those who frown upon individuals with significant practical experience combined with an applied doctoral education as compared to faculty who have been schooled at traditional research universities, with high-level criminal justice research skills. This demarcation can cause distraction and divisiveness on campuses and in departments. There is a clear need for the skill

sets of both scholars and practitioners in the field of criminal justice. The applied nature of criminal justice in the realm of social science make the harmony between theory and practice all the more essential. Moreover, when scholarship and practical experience are combined in the same individual, more recently coined as a "pracademic," that individual can add value to any criminal justice program. It is believed that a diversity of thought, experience, and approach are helpful in the development of students, and can only improve the quality, rigor, and credibility of criminal justice programs.

Background

There are reports of distrust or disdain between the academic and the pracademic. At the same time, there are many opportunities for practitioners and academics to collaborate. There should be serious effort to break down the barriers that have existed because of a lack of understanding, jealousy or perceived threat. What are the issues or concerns? Traditional academics may be threatened by the experience, attitude, depth, breadth and practical application of the pracademic. In addition, some pracademics may be threatened by the established and substantial CVs of career academics. The door swings both ways!

This article is intended to spark a collegial discussion about the basis for this debate, possible reasons for the feelings and to explore the potential for a clearer understanding and improved communication. This article is intended to increase awareness and understanding of the academic versus pracademic issues in higher education. The Academy becomes stronger with membership from both. Diversity of thought and perspective are helpful in advancing research and in preparing students for future opportunities in the criminal justice field. The article also offers several prescriptions for improving communication.

Literature Review

In the seminal work *The Human Side of Enterprise*, McGregor (1960) said "theory and practice are inseparable." As applied to academic business departments, Iyer and Clark (1998) surveyed department chairs in accounting to rate the importance of factors in deciding when to invite applicants for interviews for an assistant professor position. They found that schools considered teaching skills of the candidate very important, weighing teaching evaluations highly, as well as teaching experience in the candidate's specialty area. Iyer and Clark also found support for a growing demand for imparting teaching skills to prospective faculty in doctoral curriculum. Four-year colleges considered research skills of the candidate fairly un-important in their recruiting decisions.

Morn (1995) reviewed the evolution of police education from the vocational to the academic, commencing with the University of California at Berkeley in the 1930s. Morn provided an historical review of criminal justice education, tracing the roots to sociology, other social sciences, and to August Vollmer in Berkeley, California. The work examined interviews of practitioners and others who struggled to improve police education and chronicled the difficulties of gaining acceptance as an academic undertaking rather than a professions approach to higher education for policing, police science and later criminal justice. Morn described the issues arising on academic politics both inside and outside colleges and universities surrounding police

studies and criminology programs. The struggles of the community colleges and 4-year institutions and the clashes for academic standing by the International Association of Police Professors, later renamed ACJS, were described in detail.

Ward and Webb (1984) looked at the efforts to improve quality in criminal justice education. Their study called for potential accreditation, funding for resources, and setting minimum standards. They discussed the importance of faculty selection for quality criminal justice programs. Ward and Webb, having served on the Joint Commission on Criminology and Criminal Justice Education and Standards, issued a report that was a predecessor to Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) certification standards. The report addressed several key areas, including institutional support, curriculum, faculty, research and students. These initial standards focused on minimum academic qualifications for faculty which included a law degree or master's degree for associate programs and faculty possessing doctorates for the baccalaureate and graduate programs. They also suggested that colleges and universities provide a program of support for faculty development and that full-time faculty should teach at least 75% of the courses offered by any institution.

In more recent years within criminal justice, the debate over the appropriateness of having a faculty member with a J.D. as opposed to a Ph.D. in criminal justice departments has been a robust one. This debate started in an article in *ACJS Today* (Deflem, 2002) and continued in subsequent issues. More recently the discussion was advanced in the *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* with articles by Hemmens & Hunter (2008) and Enriquez (2008) discussing faculty credentials and the appropriateness of the J.D. being treated as a terminal degree. Madden and Hartley (2011) continued the dialogue about the J.D. in criminal justice education, concluding that criminal justice programs should fill faculty vacancies with criminology or criminal justice Ph.D.s when possible.

del Carmen and Polk (2001) attempted to better understand the hiring preferences and interest in generalists or specialists. Reviewing job announcements, they attempted to identify what credentials and specialties were being sought in faculty candidates. The Ph.D. was overwhelmingly required. For example, 98% of job advertisements called for a Ph.D. for those seeking an assistant professor position, while 95% of the advertisements desired the Ph.D. for those seeking an associate professor position. Adams and DeFleur (2005) studied the acceptability of online doctorates when considering faculty candidates. The growth of online education, provided by for-profits and traditional private and public institutions, brings up a new set of considerations for potential faculty candidates that lies outside the purview of this article.

Just as there has been debate about the proper educational credentials for faculty in criminal justice programs, so too has there been debate about the value or necessity of practitioner experience (Morreale and McCabe, 2012). With a view toward raising the stature of criminal justice faculty, Clear (2001) and Hunter (2008) voiced their concerns regarding those with practical experience coupled with academic credentials and disparaged "cop shop" type faculty in the field. Conversely, Bensimon (2007) felt that practitioners in higher education provide significant assistance to students in understanding the field and help guide them into thinking about possible opportunities. In *A New Agenda for Higher Education*, Sullivan and Rosin (2008)

indicated there is a role for higher education in “shaping the life of a mind for practice.” Volpe and Chandler (2007) likewise described a bridging role of the “pracademic” in criminal justice education.

Many criminal justice students gravitate towards applied law enforcement topics and issues, Tewksbury and Vito (2012) conducted a study to assess the scholarly productivity of criminal justice faculty based on differences between those with practical policing experience and those without. The study found that scholars with a law enforcement background are not as productive in journal publications as traditional scholars, but show greater productivity in applied articles and textbooks (Tewksbury & Vito, 2012). They noted that law enforcement scholars were likely found to focus on the scholarship of teaching and application, while traditional faculty focus on the scholarship of discovery and integration. The authors argued that publication count should not be the only measure of contribution and effectiveness.

While there has been work to help determine the preferred level and type of degree of hired faculty in criminal justice, no literature was found that focused on the hiring preferences of criminal justice faculty relating to practical experience.

Method

The data set for the qualitative aspect of the study was taken from the comment section of the Survey on Pracademics and Academics in Criminal Justice Education (2012). Respondents were given the opportunity to reply, in open-ended fashion, to the following question:

Please take the time to enter any comments or thoughts or concerns you have relating to the academic/pracademic debate. Your comments are as important to us as your responses to the previous questions.

Of the total 446 number of survey respondents, 204 chose to comment to the above question. These respondent comments were coded using the open, axial and sequential coding techniques for creating grounded theory as detailed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and elaborated upon by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Each coding technique was performed separately.

The survey was distributed via e-mail to all active members of ACJS as of January 2012. The survey requested full-time ACJS member professors to consider completing the survey at a link leading to an electronic survey mediated through Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). An e-mail was sent to the ACJS membership (N = 1530). The rate of return was 30.06 percent, with 456 of the 1530 members responding with completed surveys. At a 95 percent confidence level, the confidence interval for this sample is +/- 3.82 percent. Although a higher response rate would have been preferred, the confidence level and confidence interval obtained indicate that the results are an appropriate representation of the ACJS membership.

Results

Open Coding

Reading through the comments, one of the researchers reviewed all of the entries looking for patterns and similarities and counted the most frequently occurring themes/terms. They are listed below as Table 1:

Table 1: Common Terms and Themes, Pracademic Survey, March 2012

<u>Theme</u>	<u># of Occurrences</u>
Drawbacks of practitioners as professors	24
Drawbacks of pure academics teaching	30
“War stories”	4
Lack of cooperation/is the “field” a discipline or a trade	30
Hiring for a well-balanced department	17
Problems with the “field” lacking theory	11

Axial Coding

Upon the second reading of the comments and themes, the same researcher identified several relationships that may exist between themes. As part of axial coding, the job of the researcher is to piece together themes in order to establish those relationships. The following represents the various ways in which some of the above themes fit together.

1. Need for defining the field.
2. There are concerns about “out of touch” career academics.
3. There are concerns about practitioners who lack classroom and scholarship “rigor.”
4. There is recognition by some regarding the need for departments to have balance.

Sequential Coding

The last round of coding identified both a model and possible narrative as to how each of these relationships and themes relate. The following, depicted as Figure 1, represents a model of how the themes/terms/relationships can be structured (see next page):

Figure 1: Themes from respondent feedback



The above model indicates that the genesis of the issue is the lack of clear direction of the field of criminal justice. The broad interpretation of purpose has led to two distinct sets of educators each with their own worldview. However, upon deeper examination there is significant headway that can be made towards closing the “gap.” The feedback gained from the questionnaire offers a view into the potential disconnection the field of criminal justice education. See below.

Open Coding Themes

- Positive value in practitioners as professors
- Hiring problems

- Need for Balance
- Drawbacks of practitioners as professors
- Drawbacks of pure academics teaching
- Lack of cooperation the fault of career academics
- Concern about “War stories” in the classroom
- Is the field a discipline or a trade?
- Problems with the field stem from a lack of theory

Relationship between Themes

- Can’t We All Just Get Along?
- Complementary opportunities for teaching and research
- Clash of Insecurities?
- Perceived threats?
- Traditional academics
- Threatened by experience, breadth, depth & practical application?
- Pracademics
- Threatened by theoretical foundation and substantial and established CV, publications and research?
- Need for a defining of the field-discipline or trade?
- Concerns regarding out of touch career academics.
- Concerns regarding practitioners who lack classroom rigor
- Good departments have balance

Discussion

The responses to the open-ended question clearly emphasized concerns that both those with practitioner-centered backgrounds and traditional academic-centered backgrounds held about one another. Each experience group had a clearly stated teaching preferences on what they felt should and should not be emphasized in the classroom. As might be expected, each group’s emphasis was interpreted by the other as a weakness. “Practitioners” downplayed the role and importance of theory and research. “Career academics” downplayed the practical aspects of criminal justice and career advising.

Outcomes of the orientation was a concept that came from each orientation stating the impact of “a” particular orientation. In other words, responses within this concept were both critical of the other orientation, but also contained responses that were reflective of their own orientation’s impact upon student learning. The result of the outcomes therefore reflects both what the opposing orientation is saying and also what the orientation is saying about itself. This self-reflection and personal perspective was not an uncommon theme.

Aside from orientation critiques, respondents offered some additional themes worthy of consideration. First, responses indicated that the academic field of criminal justice has suffered

from being poorly defined (in terms of an academic tradition or a trade). Generally speaking, respondents referred to this as a “core problem”--the results of which created a significant hurdle in pedagogy as well as a general lack of direction for the field overall.

Second, respondents identified the problems related to what they saw as the “purpose” of criminal justice education. Apparently, respondents felt that students and educators viewed the purpose (trade versus academic field) of criminal justice as “unclear.” Often the context of these comments were imbedded with or in close proximity to the orientation critiques.

Lastly, practitioner-oriented educators expressed the difficulty in obtaining a tenure-track position. Some stated that it was made clear to them that their “experience” was not what they would be judged on. This was affirmed by others who stated that the position of practitioner-oriented educators was to fill the role of adjuncts. There were several respondents who remarked the best departments have a balance of both orientations.

Not so long ago, the field of criminology was the domain of sociologists. Criminal justice as a discipline of study is a relative newcomer to the academy. Criminal justice and police science programs were generally taught by those with a sociological background. With the addition of doctorates in criminal justice and allied studies, many programs are interspersing.

Perhaps where one stands in the discussion of "academic vs. pracademic" in criminal justice education depends upon where one sits. What are the experience levels on each side? This will certainly inform opinions and views. Probably more important is to take the discussion to a higher level. In that discussion, many important questions emerge. What can we all do to enhance criminal justice education regardless of pedigree? What can be done to improve the academy, to keep it current and relevant? What can be done to help students gain a better grasp of the issues and prepare them to join the field or the classroom as future scholars and practitioners? How can the academy in criminal justice education maintain or increase standards? What should be done to expand the reach of criminal justice education?

There is room in the academy for both pracademics and academics. In fact, the combination may be helpful in bridging any perceived gap between the academy and practitioners. Whether teaching, conducting research or program evaluation, training or working with agencies to identify trends or issues, scholars can play an important role in advancing the discussion.

Preferred Degree for Criminal Justice Academia

In a study by Morreale and McCabe (2014) 71.5 percent of the respondents indicated that a having a Ph.D. was the primary requirement for a new hire, followed by record of scholarship as a distant second (23.3 percent), and with teaching experience ranked third (21.5 percent) and practical experience ranked last (17.2 percent).

Only 30 percent of respondents indicated they would LIKELY hire a person with a master’s degree in criminal justice with extensive field experience. Nearly 63 percent of respondents

indicated that they would NOT LIKELY hire full-time faculty members with these credentials or characteristics.

Seventy-five percent indicated they would LIKELY hire a person with the credentials or characteristics of a Ph.D. in criminal justice or related field, with no practical experience. Fifteen percent of respondents indicated that they would NOT LIKELY hire full-time faculty members with these credentials.

Nearly 55 percent of respondents indicated that they would NOT LIKELY hire full-time faculty members with a law degree. Only 29 percent indicated they would LIKELY hire a person with these credentials or characteristics.

Nearly 51 percent of respondents indicated that they would NOT LIKELY hire full-time faculty members with a doctorate that was not a Ph.D. Thirty-two percent indicated they would LIKELY hire a person with an Ed.D., D.P.A., or other terminal degree credential.

Criminal Justice Program Orientation

Ninety-six percent of respondents indicated they LIKELY agree that CJ programs should be involved in preparing students to be critical thinkers. Eighty-seven percent of respondents indicated they LIKELY agree that CJ programs should be involved in preparing students for careers in CJ agencies. Seventy percent of respondents indicated they LIKELY feel that CJ programs should be involved in preparing students as researchers in CJ.

Conclusion

This study reveals the divide that exists in the discipline of criminal justice programs. The roots of CJ programs emerged from sociology programs. Over the years, the discipline has evolved from law enforcement programs to criminal justice, criminology and criminalistics degrees. Universities began granting doctorates in criminal justice and criminology and those with criminal justice or criminology doctorates were considered for faculty positions. In recent years, many of those with terminal degrees have been hired to fill faculty positions in criminal justice programs, and serve as faculty alongside many holding sociology degrees.

The discipline may offer one of the more resilient and flexible programs on most campuses. In recent years while reacting to the needs of the field, there has been a new focus on homeland security and terrorism, security studies, victim services, fraud and cyber-security, intelligence and crime analysis, among others.

In sum, both qualitative and quantitative studies illustrate continuing significant disjuncture between traditional and practitioner oriented academics. The disjuncture is clearly seen in two areas. First, both groups differ in approach to criminal justice education core outcomes. Second, both groups identify their institutional roles (research or teaching centered) as having a significant influence on their overall approach.

Mirroring the above findings, we can clearly and explicitly see how these approaches are reinforced through institutional hiring practices. Many in the survey portion of the study indicated a relatively narrow set of criteria in their general hiring practices. The qualitative section of the study revealed the departments having usually little choice in the matter as the demands of the institution call for quite specific skillsets (i.e. research or teaching).

Several questions however arise out of this research. First, do these above practices lead the field to accurately reflect the diversity in the field? Given the demands, changes and expanding charge of the criminal justice system, should not the mission, education and research within this field reflect such diversity. In fact, does not both research and education benefit from intellectual diversity in this sense? One merely needs to see examples of organizations which must engage multivariate environments to see that drawing from only one perspective or background fails to address their respective needs. Presidential cabinets, multi-national corporations, and even many of the very criminal justice institutions we research and teach rely on the creation of organizations made up of people of multiple perspectives and backgrounds working towards a varied set of mission objectives.

Is our current approach sustainable? Does the field not suffer from a lack of flexibility that served as a knell of some fellow social sciences? The above research illustrates that in spite of the clear divide, there is common ground. The common ground is the need to identify the strengths inherent already in the field—intellectual diversity. From this diversity, from accompanying diverse backgrounds, it is hoped that the academy can forge a clearer mission and purpose to the field.

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