

## **Perspective transformation: a rural university's journey developing a criminal justice degree program**

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### Abstract:

A small university in rural Texas explored developing a criminal justice bachelor's degree curriculum through the lens of perspective transformation focusing on humanity courses, resulting in a paradigm shift away from a traditional criminal justice baccalaureate degree curriculum. This article addresses the university's journey in developing the new degree program and its value to students and future employers by incorporating humanities courses into the curriculum.

Keywords: perspective transformational learning, humanities, criminal justice



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## INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s colleges and universities responded to the nation's outcry of poor policing and community conflicts by utilizing federal government financial incentives to develop criminal justice curricula to enhance police professionalism through education. Criminal justice programs are now among the top 10 most popular college degree programs with over 60,000 Bachelor of Criminal Justice degrees awarded annually and continue to be more popular than many other social science disciplines (NICHE, 2023) (Sloan, 2019), (Murphy, 2020). The popularity of criminal justice programs would seem to indicate more young people are interested in pursuing a career in the law enforcement field, however, due to recent events over the last several years most notably the death of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin the mass exodus of police demonstrates the opposite.

Small cities across the United States are stressed to increase their police force as violent crime rates soar. The defund the police movement over the last few years has resulted in a devastating decline in police officers throughout the country. A lack of respect for law enforcement and low morale has increased the number of officers retiring or resigning causing a depletion of institutional knowledge and life/work experiences required in law enforcement agencies. According to the Police Executive Research Forum, a 45% increase in retirement rates and a 20% increase in resignations occurred in 2020-2021 (Westervelt, 2021) (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021). A shortage of officers can jeopardize the safety of the community and citizens they serve. Due to this perception policing is no longer a favorable career option which has caused great difficulty in recruiting quality candidates, especially in rural communities. At least 521 U.S. towns and cities with populations of 1,000 to 200,000 disbanded policing/police departments between 1972 and 2017 (Boylan, 2022). Police leaders see the reduction in the workforce to be a long-term problem and feel it will take a long time to catch up in terms of vacancies and the specialty knowledge lost. Police departments in less populated areas are wrestling with a solution to increase their staffing (Colton, 2021). In Texas, the Combined Law Enforcement Association (CLEAT) reports a statewide shortage of officers due to people leaving the force and people not interested in joining the force (Brnger, 2021). Local police departments in the United States employed about 473,000 full-time sworn officers and 126,000 full-time civilian personnel in 2020. Almost half (46%) of all local police departments employed fewer than 10 full-time-equivalent sworn officers (Goodison, 2022). The hiring process is extensive. Departments may get applications but as candidates move through the hiring process, they often don't pass the background checks. The quality and quantity have dropped off. Smaller Texas agencies have increased their salaries, offered a signing bonus, and will pay for the training academy to assist with recruitment. Candidates grapple with working for a small police department because there is a good chance your backup is miles away and you are required to take care of the situation by yourself, causing one to think about working for a small department. Communities may need to consider whether they want to maintain a police department. According to a study by Richard Boylan (2021), he found evidence suggesting a benefit of disbanding their police department. "When police departments are disbanded, law enforcement is provided by a higher level of government by outsourcing to another law enforcement agency often the sheriff's office. Municipalities that outsource have lower law enforcement expenditures, fewer reported crimes, fewer police-related deaths, and the same number of traffic fatalities" (p.11).

From an academic perspective, one must examine existing criminal justice curricula to ensure those entering the field of law enforcement have the necessary qualifications to be hired and sustain the challenges of a long career. Is it time for a paradigm shift away from traditional criminal justice curricula and focus on an integrated approach with the Humanities? Will restructuring popular criminal justice (CJ) curricula encourage CJ students to be more attracted to the law enforcement profession? Will infusing humanity courses create individuals who are better communicators, use less force, understand diverse populations, and build better community relationships? The timing to examine these questions was perfect for a university in rural Texas as they developed a new criminal justice program with an emphasis on the humanities. "Humanities are the stories, the ideas, and the words that help us understand our lives and our world" (What are the Humanities, 2013 p.1). The humanities include history, literature, languages, philosophy, ethics, religion, and jurisprudence which has a direct correlation to criminal justice. The humanities help us understand people better and decide what is important and what and how one might be able to make lives better. Humanities connect us with other people, what is ethical, and what is true in diversity. It is about an exchange of ideas that can apply to many disciplines specifically to the field of criminal justice.

The Hill Country of Texas has many small rural police agencies scattered amongst the rolling hills. It is a beautiful part of rural Texas; however, small police departments are concerned about the inability to recruit and retain police officers. It is not uncommon, after a year or two officers will leave for a larger agency which provides many more opportunities for specialty units, pay, benefits, and promotion. Due to the popularity of criminal justice degree programs a small private university in Kerr County Texas commenced developing a criminal justice bachelor's degree program focusing on the integration of humanities while building community involvement resulting in a paradigm shift from a traditional curriculum.

## **TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING**

Developing a degree program is challenging especially when the emphasis is on reframing how the curriculum can impact students' interest with a focus on pursuing careers in rural communities. Students entering a small rural college have specific goals and perceptions typically formed by their family, society, friends, and social media. They are seeking a learning environment where they enter with hope and leave with achievement. They want to build strong relationships with their peers as well as their faculty. They are content with social activities on campus rather than off-campus venues. They are more likely to come from smaller communities and often seek employment in a similar environment.

The literature on why students select criminal justice programs is sparse, however, Stringer and Murphy's (2020) study examined the role media, parents, race, and gender have on why a person may select a criminal justice degree program and enter law enforcement. Their study aligns with Mezirow's theory that perceptions formed in a person's early years influence their assumptions guiding their decisions on degree programs and potential career opportunities. According to Mezirow "Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience to guide future action" (1996, p. 162) (Tovar & Mischia, 2019). Transformational learning is often associated with adults who have gone through a significant event, however with the dramatic increase in significant events viewed on social media individuals are questioning prior assumptions earlier in life which can cause an interruption of new meaning toward potential change or action. There are

millions of images viewed on social media that can influence society as a whole through either a positive or negative lens.

Entering college can be a life-altering event after which students become “critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; of reforming these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (Mezirow and Associates, 1990, p.14) (Tovar & Misischia, 2019). McCay (2014) and Stringer & Murphy (2020) examine reasons why students select majors and how outside influences can have an impact on appropriate and realistic college major selections. “Selecting the right major regardless of the reasons can help the retention rate for the specific academic program as well as ensure matriculation of the student” (McCay, 2014, p. 18). Students often come into college with a preconceived idea of the criminal justice system based on what they have seen on TV shows or social media. They have a mental picture or image of what to expect in the major and the job opportunities based on viewed images. McCay (2014) addressed the discrepancy between expectations and reality. If there is a big gap the student tends to feel less satisfied with their selected major. It becomes confusing when expectations and reality do not align especially with the student’s identity (Balko, 2012) (McCay, 2014). The curriculum of a major should offer experiential learning opportunities that can provide a new or refined learning process directed toward social and environmental transformative potential (Breunig, 2014, Breunig, 2008a, Warren, 2002) (Tovar & Misischia, 2019). An instructor cannot guarantee transformation in a single course; however, it is the responsibility of the instructor to provide an environment in which transformation can exist (Stover, 2016) (Tovar & Misischia, 2019). The learning environment needs to be a setting where the student’s preconceived assumptions can be challenged and feel safe to express or disclose their reflections of alternative views based on their new perspectives. “Transformation is aimed at engaging the individual beyond the status quo” (Stover, 2016. 27). When students are placed in an environment that can “challenge their prejudices, prior experiences and assumptions” (p.17) they learn about themselves and can develop relationships within any community (Eyler & Giles 1999).

## **CRIMINAL JUSTICE MAJOR PARADIGM SHIFT**

Social media provides an individual the opportunity to learn vast amounts of information from around the world instantaneously and expand previously conceived ideas about cultures, geopolitical concerns, the environment, and potential career options. One such cultural event was the defund the police movement which underscored the discussion on the future of the criminal justice system and those who enforce the laws. Traditional criminal justice degree programs examine law enforcement, courts, and corrections. However, over the last twenty years, new courses have been added to the curriculum to align with an evolving society. The popularity of CSI and other law enforcement TV shows resulted in more college students seeking a forensic science degree or a combination of criminal justice with an emphasis on forensics. Students also appear to be more community-minded in their selection of criminal justice options. “Their attractiveness to a career is influenced by their desire to solve social problems and fight oppression” (Stringer & Murphy, 2020 p.7) (Gabbidon et al, 2003).

Creating a new degree program is an extensive process that can take a year to complete. New degree plans need to be approved by the regional accrediting body with a clear rationale for

success. The journey to establish a new degree program can be exciting and challenging. The first course of action normally would be to look at well-established criminal justice programs. Compare and contrast the common core courses. You might ask yourself why reinvent the wheel if there are successful and proven existing programs? However, you might also ask what are some of the features the program must have in place to stand out from other programs and what are the significant challenges.

In rural Texas, these challenges are exacerbated due to the unavailability of subject matter experts willing to teach face-to-face. However, this did not discourage the path to develop a criminal justice bachelor's degree program with a humanistic approach. Schreiner University is a liberal arts institution associated with the Presbyterian church committed to educating students holistically. It offers personalized, integrated education dedicated to nurturing learning that prepares students for successful careers, but equips them for purposeful lives and meaningful work in a changing global society. Schreiner University is located in the Hill Country of Texas and has been in existence for 100 years. It originally started as a military preparation institution in 1923. Over the years it continued to grow from an institution, to a college to a four-year university. Adding new degrees enhances sustainability and growth, therefore the university examined the possibility of adding a criminal justice degree. This particular degree specifically aligns with the Meaningful Work and Purposeful Lives component of the mission statement. The demand for criminal justice majors remains high even with the last few years of some cities defunding the police. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, jobs in criminal justice are growing faster than average, and are expected to grow by about 5% from 2019 to 2029 (Grace, 2023).

Developing new academic programs is an important part of growing enrollments, maintaining relevancy in the curriculum, and differentiating the institution. But too often proposals lack rigor, are too ambitious, too expensive, or take a traditional approach. To diminish a misstep the administration sought counsel from faculty from other disciplines. After reviewing ten criminal justice degree plans from various peer institutions and prominent programs a paradigm shift occurred. The shift focused on developing a program as a broad interdisciplinary major relying heavily on the Humanities as its guide. The new approach provides an alternative path to degree attainment for students interested in law, American politics, justice, and current social issues. Humanities faculty were tasked to reframe existing course(s) or seminar(s) and its connected relevance to the criminal justice field to supplement the more traditional criminal justice courses. The final proposed criminal justice major directly relates to the University's mission. Criminal Justice addresses both the purposeful lives and meaningful work aspect of the mission statement by giving students opportunities to work in a field that addresses the equitable application of laws and justice to a diverse constituent of the population. The unique approach to teaching criminal justice by incorporating courses such as Humanities and Criminal Justice, Conviction and Dissent, Crime and Punishment, or Criminal Justice and Social Diversity positions the graduating student to have a full range of human thought and creativity. "The humanities have always been and will continue to be the basis of human cultures and source of our perceptions of different cultures" (Permian Basin, 2023 p. 1). Humanities exposes students to diverse ideas which broadens their knowledge, and critical thinking and opens their minds to alternative perspectives. Now more than ever allowing for alternative or opposing ways of thinking is essential for law enforcement professionals. Careers in the criminal justice system allow for engagement with people from all walks of life, across philosophical and political perspectives. J. Irwin Miller a civil rights proponent spoke about the transformative nature of



the humanities stating, “The calling of the humanities is to make us truly human in the best sense of the word” (Miller, n.d.). Humanities provides the student the opportunity to go beyond rote knowledge and be able to imagine and innovate. A skill required when dealing with diverse personalities and cultural differences. Skills developed as a result of infusing humanities courses into the criminal justice curriculum include:

- Critical thinking: the ability to receive and analyze knowledge and to use creativity to develop innovative solutions to problems.
- Communication: the ability to form unique viewpoints and to express clearly and persuasively in both written and spoken forms.
- Empirical and Quantitative Reasoning: - the ability to comprehend and use numerical data to formulate and deliver educated decisions.
- Teamwork: the ability to understand and accept the viewpoints of others and to work collaboratively to achieve a common goal.
- Personal Responsibility: the ability to see the consequences of your actions and take responsibility for and justify the choices you make.
- Social Responsibility: the ability to see what’s best for society and the world as a whole and to act accordingly (Basin, 2023 p. 2-3).

Once regional approval for the Criminal Justice bachelor’s degree was granted in spring 2022, the next step was to ascertain a director who would be responsible for implementing the program. Due to the unique characteristics of the curriculum by incorporating humanities courses into the program, the emphasis was to offer face-to-face courses rather than an online program. During the pandemic, Schreiner University broke away from the traditional 15-week semester to an accelerated part 1 and 2 session semester rotation. This requires a student to attend classes four days a week over a 7.5-week semester. No classes are held on Wednesdays to allow for student/faculty conferences and advising. Students maintain 12-18 credit hours per semester, however, with the accelerated 7.5-week part 1 and 2 sessions, a student will typically take either 2 or 3 classes per session. The progressive rotation is working well because most of the students live on campus, however, it presents a problem in hiring instructors.

The philosophy of the director of the program was to hire practitioners/academics; those with real-life working experiences in the discipline and the credentials to teach. To require a practitioner to come to campus four days a week was a challenge that needed to be contemplated. This undertaking was accomplished by developing master course shells for every course to ensure learning objectives were met. Master course shells also guarantee the program will not collapse if a full-time professor or adjunct instructor is not available to teach on campus. If a face-to-face course cannot be provided there is an online course option that can be delivered. The sustainability of the program is guaranteed not to falter. Secondly, there continues to be a focus on hiring retired or active practitioners/academics. To accomplish this goal flexibility in scheduling is required. Schreiner University continues to be progressive in course offerings. Departments are allowed to offer courses in several different formats depending on the course requirements; 7.5-week, hybrid 7.5-week, 15 weeks, or online. Criminal Justice subject matter experts currently working in the field are offered the opportunity to either teach a hybrid course; 2 days on campus, 2 days online, or a 15-week semester teaching one day a week. The administration’s willingness to be flexible with course offerings has allowed the program to flourish.

The Criminal Justice (CJ) bachelor’s major launched in the fall of 2022 with the hope of ten students declaring criminal justice as a major. Twenty students selected CJ as their major.

The following fall an additional 20 students declared a CJ major. After only three full semesters the Criminal Justice major is currently the 4<sup>th</sup> most popular major on campus and the expectation of continued growth is encouraging. During recruitment, Schreiner University highlights the humanities courses along with several travel study courses and experiential learning opportunities associated with the program.

## **DISCOVERY**

It is clear with the quick success of the criminal justice program the paradigm shift in developing a non-traditional curriculum is working. Course evaluations indicate the student's appreciation for the humanities course taught by the Humanities faculty. Humanities faculty are excited about their new course offerings integrating their specialty into a different discipline. This new approach reflects police departments and non-profit organizations' belief that college graduates bring greater sensitivity to the job. Students exposed to a broader education will be more able to deal with the complex job of policing that faces them daily. A broader education equips the individual to handle more complex calls for service with a higher level of confidence (Burden, 1988) and to understand the unfolding societal issues, such as homelessness, poverty, and the growing mental illness problem in communities. Humanities courses allow future criminal justice professionals to develop an expansive view of the reasons for some current societal problems. A myopic view does not offer solutions to complex problems. Schreiner University is dedicated to encouraging its students who are often from small rural cities to understand complex societal issues, enter the workforce with dedication and commitment, and always have open minds for lifelong learning.

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