

“Undergraduate Criminal Justice Education:
Solidifying a Place in the University
Curriculum”

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COMMENTARY*

UNDERGRADUATE CRIMINAL JUSTICE EDUCATION:
SOLIDIFYING A PLACE IN A UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM

By

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During a luncheon discussion at a local criminal justice educators meeting a couple of years ago, I put the following questions to some of my colleagues. Why does criminal justice education need to take place in a college or university setting? If a particular state decided to set up a criminal justice academy to teach the kinds of things you teach on your criminal justice programs, would you as faculty members feel any differently about what you are doing? Does criminal justice education need the college or university setting and does the university or college need criminal justice?

The answers I received left me at a loss. Most felt that the academy concept was both a viable and an acceptable alternative to having criminal justice education in a college or university setting. They felt this was so for a number of reasons. Some felt "traditional" university departments looked down upon them for their more vocational orientation. These faculty felt they were preparing "pre-service" students for careers in criminal justice agencies. Their task, as they saw it, was to develop criminal justice practitioners who would be familiar with the state of the art practices of the criminal justice system components (see Kuykendall, 1977). This orientation was viewed as too narrow by their non-criminal justice colleagues who viewed criminal justice educators as opportunists attempting to achieve the status attached to university

*The commentary section is designed to allow authors to discuss current issues and to respond to Articles and commentary.

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participation without accepting the rigors demanded in providing education in college or university settings (See Felkenes, 1979: 104-105).

Another group of my criminal justice colleagues felt that they were preparing students to develop more effective answers to the problems of controlling criminal behavior (see Streib, 1977). These faculty focus on developing students with broad knowledge of social control mechanisms and of the criminal and non-criminal means of controlling behavior. These "social control" oriented colleagues were still vocationally oriented, though at the policy level. Their concerns, they felt, could be dealt with in an academy provided students had enough preparation in basic writing and mathematical skills. I felt uncomfortable with these answers and I began to think about why. How did my views of criminal justice education differ from theirs? First, I discovered that these faculty members felt greater allegiance to "criminal justice" than they did to the university or college environment in which they worked. Their focus on developing practitioners and policy makers, on pre-service and in-service students ignores the fact that there are a great many students at their institutions and in their classes who would never dream of becoming employed by a justice related agency (see Bok, 1974: 160 for a similar criticism of other academic programs). Indeed, there are also many who have thought about such employment but will never have the opportunity. Does criminal justice education have nothing to offer them? Is the field so sterile and self-centered that those with no desire to work in the system can gain no benefit from exposure to criminal justice offerings? I do not think this is so.

I believe that our field has a great deal to offer to the university community and to students who are not potential criminal justice system employees or even potential criminal justice majors. I believe that the range of perspectives, questions, and issues potentially available for teaching and studying in criminal justice are too important to keep them for "professional functionaries" employed by the criminal justice system. It should be our task to utilize the strengths of our field to reach the wider academic and public community. We should engage our students with knowledge and activities which give criminal justice its unique attractiveness. In doing so, we may begin to solidify a place for criminal justice in the university community.

Solidifying A Place in the University Community:

In addressing this problem I am making three assumptions: (1) that criminal justice education programs have been established in colleges and universities (I am limiting this discussion to bachelors

degree programs); (2) that these programs wish to remain in their college and university settings, i.e., that the criminal justice academy is not a viable alternative; and (3) that criminal justice programs wish to be integral parts of their colleges and universities, and not merely adjuncts to them. (See Felkenes, 1979: 104-105). If these assumptions are correct, then to begin the process of solidifying a place in the college or university setting we must assess what it is we do as college and university faculty in terms of (1) what the college or university has to offer us and (2) what we have to offer the college or university.

What the University Setting has to offer Criminal Justice:

Autonomy: During the 1960's and 1970's traditional academic programs were searching for relevancy and were beginning to be held "accountable." Often this meant that practical, applied, "real life" problems had to be dealt with by academics who previously enjoyed a sense of detachment or as some would characterize it "an ivory tower isolation." This isolation has not been a problem for criminal justice. Our field has suffered from a lack of autonomy. It is a field of study which by its very nature is ground in applied reality and too often we (faculty) have tried too hard to tie our programs to agency (e.g., manpower and efficiency) needs. What the university offers criminal justice faculty is the opportunity for a degree of autonomy in pursuing questions, discussion and alternatives unencumbered by the demands of agencies needing to respond to immediate crises. Autonomy, however, does not mean isolation from the real world, but rather describes a requirement for intellectual pursuits.

The very process of intellectual development has always required a certain detachment on the part of those who would learn and who would teach and who would add to the store of knowledge. This detachment has become so traditional that the university has come to think of its autonomy as an inherent right rather than a social requirement. (Perkins, 1974: 51).

Being in a university setting provides those involved with criminal justice issues with the opportunity to step back and look at the world in a more objective way. Autonomy allows those exploring a topic to control the academic programs in their field and thus quality of that exploration. These are essential values for any program in higher education (Myren, 1979: 117), and should be welcomed and enjoyed by criminal justice educators.

Diversity of Perspectives and Expertise: University settings provide criminal justice faculty with easy access to knowledge and developments in a wide variety of fields. These can be of great value in our teaching, research or community service functions as faculty. Colleagues in more traditional disciplines can provide us with substantive insights into such topics as social history or the dynamics of legislative reform and a variety of other issues. In addition, when we as faculty lack specialized training, our colleagues in other disciplines can provide expertise in "how to study" the problems we wish to study, or about which we wish to teach.

The theme of the 1983 American Society of Criminology meetings emphasized "Multidisciplinary Perspectives," and our present program (1984 Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences) stresses "The Politics of Crime and Criminal Justice." This recognition of the cross-disciplinary nature of the criminal justice enterprise demands that we take advantage of the university's resources and look beyond our own programs (and criminal justice agencies) to colleagues in history, philosophy and political science, psychology, literature and the arts to enhance our own and our students' understanding of the problems we explore in our criminal justice curricula.

Diversity of Students: Unlike training academies where students come to learn specific skills they can apply to specific tasks they have chosen to perform, universities contain students with diverse interests, backgrounds, experiences and opinions. This diversity offer a challenge to us in our teaching, and provides a wealth of information about the relationships of criminal justice to the public at large. Over time the changing values, concerns and needs of our students provide a certain freshness in what can become a rather depressing field of study. This freshness may force us to reevaluate our own perspectives and to strengthen our arguments to challenge or support changes in public opinion. Ours is a "value laden" subject; we cannot hide from that fact. New students constantly remind us of it.

The diversity of students also provides opportunities to influence the criminal justice system if this is our "applied" goal. In the university classroom we inform voters; shape attitudes and behaviors of those who interact with the criminal justice system, as well as instruct those who carry out its tasks. Through criminal justice education we can help develop in our students a sense of social and moral responsibility, one of the often stated goals of college education in general.

What Criminal Justice has to offer the University:

An Opportunity to Unite Liberal and Professional Learning:

In struggling to deal with the problem of providing increasingly relevant educational programs, meeting the occupational interests of students while maintaining the values of liberal education, universities have been attempting to create new general education programs and alternative structures for majors. Martin Meyerson describes this need as follows:

Education would be improved by a creative tension between the concrete and the theoretical, the rationalistic and the empirical. Especially in the academic world matters of theory should not be distant from those of practice, nor the practical far from its sources in theory. Seeing theoretical fields in juxtaposition with applied fields not only provides students and teachers with a laboratory in which to test theories, but also can put before them a constant reminder of the social and moral implications of their work. Professional education needs to be made more intellectual, reflective and liberal, by increasing theoretical understanding, by sharpening research and methodology, by questioning accepted practices, and by educating men and women to be flexible, civilized and responsible. If we enlarge a person's understanding of the nature and origins and purposes of his calling and of the society which he serves, not only can we help the engineer, the communication specialist, the teacher (and the criminal justice professional), to be prepared to function as a professional fifteen and more years from now, but we can help make him more responsive to the new tasks he is bound to be called upon to undertake. Only in this way can we provide for true utility (Meyerson, 1974: 175).

By providing criminal justice as a field of study a university provides an applied setting from which ethical, political and social issues emerge, and in which such issues can be explored, a place where this creative tension can be generated. Criminal justice can certainly teach students to tolerate ambiguity, to search for flexible responses, and to question accepted practices. (See Zalman, 1979: 14) If students eventually enter a criminal justice related profession, they will have been sensitized to the broader social implications of their careers. Even if they do not obtain criminal justice employment, the problems criminal justice addresses are not unique to crime - and "justice" as a broader phenomenon can be perceived in a variety of occupational settings.

A Mechanism for Meeting Newly Defined Purposes of Undergraduate Education:

Many commentators on contemporary higher education have observed that universities and academic departments usually avoid the task of clearly defining the goals of their various curricula.

Readings in the two volume series American Higher Education: Toward an Uncertain Future (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1974 and 1975) pointed to this problem in the mid-1970's. In the 1980's such works as Gaff's General Education Today (1983) and Winter, et.al.'s A New Case For the Liberal Arts (1982) have begun to propose some specific solutions to the problems of redefining the goals of undergraduate education. What nearly all of these commentators suggest is that undergraduate education should aim at developing general skills and not merely provide broad introductions to a variety of disciplines broadly defined (usually Humanities, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences). The general skills usually identified include: the ability to speak and write with clarity and style; to conduct carefully critical analysis, i.e., the ability to identify central issues in complex problems, to gather relevant information, to construct arguments on all sides of the question, to test contentions and to arrive at sound conclusions; and practical mathematical manipulation - especially statistics. (See Bok, 1974: 164). *By* drawing our attention to the skills, traditional disciplines become vehicles for teaching these skills, rather than ends in themselves. (E.G., In teaching a course in Introduction to the Criminal Justice System, our goals might be to teach the skills mentioned above using the criminal justice system as a vehicle to provide substantive issues to explore.)

As a field of study criminal justice is especially useful for this purpose. The problems it poses are many, the arguments on all sides, profuse; data are plentiful, if often questionable. The "habits of thought" and skills mentioned above should certainly be sought in any criminal justice student (see Zalman, 1979: 16 for a similar argument).

A Mechanism for Promoting Interdisciplinary Cooperation:

It is becoming increasingly recognized in some circles that the traditional boundaries which define academic disciplines are becoming blurred as we seek to develop our understanding of the complexity of human behavior and social problems (Myren, 1979: 113). Universities, recognizing this trend often seek to promote interdisciplinary efforts. The interdisciplinary nature of criminal justice studies provides opportunities to stimulate faculty in more traditional

academic disciplines to pursue new questions and interests. The substantive expertise of criminal justice faculty can provide colleagues interested in ethics, mass communications, literature, social history with motivation to broaden their own academic pursuits. This cross fertilization might result in grant research projects, new courses of interest to criminal justice students, or new perspectives for old courses. Criminal justice studies thus provide an applied setting or laboratory for colleagues in a wide variety of disciplines. (See Jenkins, 1983; Kania, 1983; Orsagh, 1983 for examples.)

Summary:

Faculty in criminal justice studies programs can begin the process of solidifying a place in the university community by shifting the focus of their attention from agencies of criminal justice to their scholarly surroundings. Criminal justice faculties should assess the ways in which their being in a university setting can contribute to strengthen their teaching research and community service functions. They should also explore ways in which they can more effectively contribute to the university's wider educational objectives. By overcoming some of our sometimes self-imposed isolation, criminal justice programs can and should make valuable contributions not only to criminal justice agencies, but also to the intellectual atmosphere of their academic settings.

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