

# CULTURAL COMPETENCE: A CRITICAL SKILL FOR TODAY'S POLICE OFFICERS



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The missions of higher education and policing differ, yet each occupies well-known and established community spaces. Much like higher education, policing nationwide continues to wrestle with unparalleled demographic shifts, persistent public scrutiny, and questionable legitimacy. Together, higher education and policing can be effective partners to frame cultural competence education and training to better serve diverse populations.

Fundamentally, the police are responsible for understanding the culture, history, and issues affecting the communities they serve. Every day new police officers are challenged by interacting with cultures different from their own. As noted by Dennis (2020), community colleges in the U.S. are uniquely positioned to bring about social change, particularly in police reform and race relations, as they are primarily responsible for the police academies that educate and train U.S. police officers.

Higher education and professional policing can be perceived as mutually exclusive endeavors, an odd dichotomy given that police officers are community members and students first. Police academies are the gateway to cultural competence, allowing recruits to gain an understanding of cultural perspectives. Recruits develop cognitive skills that facilitate trust, legitimacy, and policing practices. Cultural competence education and training offered at

community colleges' police academies are essential to prepare new officers to communicate across cultures. However, according to Getty (2014), new police officers also require real-world experience to reinforce academy education and training.

Cultural competence is imperative because some people care more about how they are treated by the police than they do about crime rates. However, values such as cultural appreciation and equity-minded decision-making often elude officers who interact daily with people from diverse backgrounds. The social repercussions of police officers lacking cultural competence are a detriment to effective law enforcement.

## **POLICE OFFICER CULTURAL COMPETENCE**

Cultural competence education and training is relatively new to policing. While the early cultural competence research occurred in health and human services, effective policing also necessitates relating to people, earning trust, and being culturally competent. Culture represents the thoughts, beliefs, actions, and values within certain cultural groups. Competence is the ability to effectively deliver services. Cultural competence is attained when an individual or organization effectively delivers culturally competent services to community members (Cross et al., 1989).

Previous research documents var-

ious dimensions of police officer performance aligned with cultural competence. However, limited research exists determining what police academy-learned cultural competencies are valued by new officers in the field. Noting that gap, Neil (2024) conducted research into the thoughts, actions, beliefs, values, and experiences of new police officers in the West and Southwest regions of the U.S. Findings from the study support that demographic changes experienced by officers exemplify the value of cultural competence education and training. For example, police officers with less than three years of experience in central Arizona (Southwest) and southern California (West) saw cultural competence education and training as very important organizationally. Additionally, these officers believed that cultural competence was a learned skill that they used every day on the job.

### **MOST APPLIED CULTURAL COMPETENCE LEARNED IN THE POLICE ACADEMY**

New police officers in the studied regions identified four prominent cultural competencies that were applied most in field situations:

1. Understanding cultural differences and families
2. Knowledge of Hispanic culture and language
3. Positive engagement with community members
4. Understanding behavioral health needs and communication

Unanimously, officers identified understanding cultural differences and families as the most applied cultural competence. Regardless of geographic service area, what was obvious was that new officers saw

the ability to differentiate among cultures and families as essential to effective field performance.

The cultural competence to work in Hispanic communities, communicate, and interact effectively also resonated with officers in the study. Surprisingly, understanding behavioral health needs and communication was identified, but sparsely. This was an unexpected finding given the public awareness directed toward mental health behavior and treatment. This finding is most likely related to the limited experiences of officers with less than three years in the field.

Pointedly, new police officers also said the police academy did not prepare them enough for what they encountered in the field. Some officers believed the police academy fell short by not delivering a community history curriculum related to their eventual field assignments. These findings are similar to an earlier study of police academy graduates in Oakland, California, that found only 34% of officers believed they were prepared for field deployment (Sedevic, 2012). Together, community colleges and professional policing lead the way for new police officers' cultural competence.

### **PREPARING NEW OFFICERS TO SUCCEED IN DIVERSE COMMUNITIES**

Based on the insights gleaned from the study, the following recommendations are made that are designed to enhance police academy cultural competence education and training:

1. Champion national standards for police academy cultural competence education and training to better prepare officers for deployment in diverse commu-

nities.

2. Embed cultural competence policy knowledge in new police officer orientation and agency acculturation.
3. Articulate cultural competence education and training requirements for law enforcement leadership.
4. Expand mental health and behavior training to prepare officers for handling community members in crises.

A robust police academy cultural competence curriculum informing recruits of community history, culture, and linguistic knowledge will provide a greater understanding of diverse populations. If new officers are to be successful in our communities, they must be properly equipped with cultural competence.



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