

Through a Practitioner's Eyes: Education on the Frontlines

by Kathleen Kiernan
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There was a time in law enforcement in which education was not valued; in fact, the possession of a high school degree was optional, and the attainment of a college degree was suspect. Suspect because there was a belief that the only real education came from the streets, and suspect perhaps because the opportunity for many young men, many of them first generation immigrants, was merely a dream. It would be a generation before women, particularly those with an education, would be admitted to the ranks and more time still before they would be accepted within them.

Standards slowly accelerated but the idea of advanced degrees was still suspect and viewed as threatening to the established order and traditions within departments – and perhaps even intimidating to those at the helm. There was a perception – often unstated – that new ideas, particularly those that originated in universities, were unrealistic, perhaps even unmanly, instilled by those who had never been in harm's way nor ever really dirtied their hands with manual labor.

In the last issue of *CJJ* we explored the nexus between education and leadership in the context of homeland security, proferring that there was a tremendous and underutilized resource hidden in plain sight within the ranks of law enforcement officers across the country. These individuals are, in fact, uniquely positioned to understand, observe and react to situations before they escalate, but as importantly, to routinely collect information and intelligence integral to homeland security and homeland defense. That said, a partnership between academia and law enforcement seems to be natural – and good for the Country.

A graduation ceremony was recently held with all the anticipation and excitement inherent in the emotions of achievement, completion, change, excitement, and the mystery of the ceremony itself, a rite of passage in many ways. In August, a group of very special senior-level law enforcement professionals walked across the stage to receive a Master's Degree, signaling to the world in a quiet way the pursuit of leadership and the willingness to engage in self development while working full-time and raising families. They began their advanced formal education in a world irrevocably changed as a result of terrorist attacks on domestic soil, and

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they contributed immeasurably to the educational process as a result of their informal education on the frontlines of protecting this Nation. Einstein once opined that the only source of knowledge is experience, and these individuals exemplified that construct in a number of ways, the most important of which was seeing the world through the eyes of a practitioner. I watched with quiet wonder as each explored the depth of their accumulated learning in a new context far from where it was collected.

That view provides a different perspective, often visceral, tinged with the realities of human behavior in the extreme, influenced by the imposition of an entirely new set of requirements to prepare for and respond to an ill-defined threat by an unidentified enemy. It is not found in general orders or SOPs, and it will not be codified in any particular educational text, but rather through the process of experiencing and understanding, both catalysts for action.

An educational process which is inflexible and fails to heed that view is not only shortsighted but fails to develop the leadership skills demanded in our changed world. Finding a means to provide not only the forum but the voice for the concerns of these first responders as Sam Houston State University has done so well has contributed to building better leaders, but there is more. What has also happened in the process is that the education has helped to transform these professionals as the profession itself is transforming. They have refined their critical thinking skills, developed confidence in public speaking, delved below the obvious to question the basis for national strategies through disciplined research, and become excellent writers. I observed the powerful impact on other students and the exchanges that became normal between domestic and international law enforcement practitioners at Sam Houston.

The way in which they view the world has also changed for the better: academics are no longer as suspect and the aperture has widened to include additional sources of knowledge. Street savvy will never be replaced by strictly book-learning, and it should never be. The combination, however, is a powerful one. My thanks go to the Chiefs, Sheriffs and Chief Probation Officers who have the vision to understand the value of education and who encourage their officers to excel. A special thanks for the individual law enforcement officers who, in the mantra of author Jim Collins, continually strive to move from good to great, role models for their colleagues and the next generation of leaders. 🌐

