

The Impact of Applied Learning in Criminal Justice: How Does Visiting an Actual CJ Agency Affect A Student's Career Plan?

DAVID MARBLE

Missouri Western State University

Keywords: criminal justice, law enforcement, career preparation, internships, college majors

Abstract

The final project/paper for the students of the Introduction to Criminal Justice class at Missouri Western State University is an applied learning activity intended to have students visit the actual worksite of a criminal justice agency to not only learn about the agency and their functions, but to also help them come to know if they really want to major in and pursue a career in criminal justice. Using qualitative content analysis of direct quotes from dozens of these papers over the past ten years, we come to the conclusion that this applied learning visit is very helpful in assisting students to know whether or not a job in law enforcement is something they really want to do.

Introduction

We live in a world where law enforcement is not seen as respectable of a career as it used to be. Stories of police brutality and corresponding images in the news and on social media have increased criticism of police officers. Combining this criticism with efforts in recent years by some city governments to reduce funding for the police agencies has created less appealing career prospects for potential police officers. According to a 2023 report by the Bureau of Justice Assistance and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, recruitment and retention of police officers is a serious obstacle facing law enforcement administrators today.

A number of states have found that at least twenty-five percent of police officers leave their department within the first eighteen to thirty-six months of employment. Supervisors or field training officers frequently hear the departing officer say “this job is not what I thought it was” (Orrick, 2008, p. 8). Another study of police officer attrition found that, “recruits who self-initiated resignation experienced a conflict between the version of policing embodied in their ideal and the reality of policing in practice” (Haarr, 2005, p. 431).

Undoubtedly, the popularity of police drama shows on television have something to do with the development of these idealized views of policing. Furthermore, police department recruiters, in an attempt to recruit more officers, too often “focus all of their attention on the positive, sensational, or exciting aspects of law enforcement” (Orrick, 2008, p. 10). A 2023 report by the Bureau of Justice Assistance and Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, found that, “these depictions of policing, coupled with the sensationalized portrayals in film and television, do not accurately characterize the realities of a law enforcement career and may attract incompatible candidates or lead to disillusionment of new recruits” (p. 31). The loss of a trained officer is costly to the department both in terms of money and time. Estimates of the cost of losing one qualified and trained officer range from one to five times the yearly salary of the officer (Hilal & Litsey, 2020). Those costs include, “background checks, uniforms and equipment, psychological assessments, medical assessments, overtime, training and administrative costs” (Hilal & Litsey, 2020, p. 73).

Notwithstanding inaccurate portrayals of the work of law enforcement in entertainment media or that can be given by recruitment officers, universities that offer criminal justice degree programs should help potential police officers pursuing a justice related degree develop more realistic expectations of the job of law enforcement. These degree programs should help their students understand better the realities of the job. While there may be varied definitions of applied learning in higher education (Jach & Trolian, 2019), helping criminal justice students have realistic expectations of what the job of a police officer involves is an important aspect of applied learning in these degree programs. At Missouri Western State University (MWSU) the Criminal Justice Department has created an opportunity for students in their first semester of college to visit the worksite of a criminal justice agency to get a little taste of what the real job entails and thus gives each student an early opportunity to know if working in

the field is really what they want to do. Student responses indicate that this early opportunity to visit these criminal justice worksites is valuable in helping them decide whether to pursue a criminal justice major before they have invested too much time and/or money in schooling.

Literature Review

Internships tend to be a preferred vehicle for students to apply and bridge their academic learning to their career. In their study, Ross and Elechi (2002) surveyed 154 students to ask about the value of internships. The students reported overwhelmingly that undergraduates benefit from participating in an internship to better prepare them for the real world of criminal justice. Stone and McLaren (1999) found that students working in an internship with a criminal justice agency provides a clearer view of what the job is really like and provides students better networking opportunities and improved employment options. Other researchers found that an internship provided students an important bridge between academic study and criminal justice careers (Parilla & Smith-Cunnien, 1997). Rothschild and Rothschild reported that students who participated in applied learning-based internships “reported higher levels of cultural competency, a greater understanding of their field, and increased confidence in their preparedness for entering the workforce...” (2020, p. 2). Another study found that internships were particularly helpful to those college graduates that were entering the workforce (Budesheim, Khanna, Klanecky Earl, & Guenther, 2023). Another researcher that focused on the value of internships for college students intending to pursue a career in law-enforcement, argued that internships are vital for these college students because “nothing in their education or skills training exposed them to actual field incidents or afforded them the opportunity to deal with the wide array of emotions and behaviors demonstrated by the citizens with whom they must come into contact” (Dale, 1996, p. 22). Other researchers argued that social work students would also benefit from exposure to the criminal justice system as many of them would find themselves working in that field (Scheyett, Pettus-Davis, McCarter, & Brigham, 2012).

Internships tend to be completed by students who are close to the end of their degree and not too long before they graduate and begin their career (Stichman & Farkas, 2005). These same researchers found, through their survey of 99 academic programs that offered internships in criminal justice, that the great strength of internships was that it gave students the knowledge that they had picked the right career for them or that it became clear to them that it was not the right career. Dale also concluded that an internship program gives college students intending to pursue a career in law enforcement a more accurate picture of the profession of policing, stating that “participants who do not like what they see can refocus their career plans without devoting a great deal of time and energy to a career in which they ultimately would not be happy” (1996, p. 24). Other researchers found that not every student who completes an internship in law enforcement will want to work in or build a career in that field

(Assur, Goldberg, & Ross, 1999). While it is true that college students completing an internship with a law enforcement agency in their final year of college, that get turned off with the realities of the job of law enforcement, could still change their career plans at this point, they would still have in-effect, wasted much money and four years of academic study. How deflating it must be to come to the end of an arduous four years of college and realize that they are not going into the career that they had planned to enter. Would it have not been better to have realized their unsuitability to a law enforcement career much earlier in their college years so that they could have chosen a different major?

Student's exposure to the real world of criminal justice during college does not have to wait until an internship in their senior year. Breck and Martin (2000) found that criminal justice students tended to start out with a distorted view of the criminal justice system due to media influences and that instructors should help students dispel these myths by creating real world experiences for their students. Such "real world experiences" do not have to be a formal internship that takes place at the end of their college study. Fichter (1987) found that as students were exposed to the real world of law enforcement, their attitudes changed—they became more sympathetic of criminal justice officials and less sympathetic of criminals. Such a realization would benefit students early in their college experience. Thus, their exposure to the real world of law enforcement should not have to wait until a formal internship. Other researchers found that a surprising number of students reached their junior year of study with "only vague ideas of what occupation they wish to pursue after graduation" (Sgroi & Ryniker, 2002). A formal opportunity much earlier in their years of college to experience the real world of criminal justice certainly would benefit these students. Bowling (2023), who had professional experience both in law enforcement and in education, argued for more opportunities for young people who are thinking about working in law enforcement to job-shadow or otherwise visit with or interact with law enforcement personnel outside the formal structure of an internship.

Context of Current Research

At Missouri Western State University students interested in majoring in criminal justice have to successfully complete two introductory classes before being able to declare the major. In one of these classes, the Introduction to Criminal Justice class, students have a final project/paper where they make a visit to a criminal justice worksite of their choice and then write a report on their visit. Students are encouraged to think of what job they see themselves doing in the field and then making arrangements to visit an agency that does that particular work. Many students are interested in law enforcement and so many students visit a local police department or do a ride-along with a police officer or sheriff's deputy. One of the questions that they have to answer in their report is what is the impact of this visit on their future career plans. One of the primary purposes of this project/paper is to have the students get a realistic, although very brief, experience in the job they are thinking about. If students have never

previously worked in or experienced real law enforcement, then this visit gives them just a glimpse of what it is really like, as opposed to how it is depicted in the media. The expectation is that this little taste of the real world of criminal justice is important for these students to have before they officially declare their major in criminal justice.

Method

This research is a qualitative content analysis study of the reports of hundreds of students that have completed this project/paper in my Introduction to Criminal Justice classes over many years. For the past 10 years I have been collecting from their reports, student responses to the question regarding the impact of the visit on their future career plans. The document containing the exact quotations of students in answering this question does not contain any identifying information of the students who wrote the answers. Thus, the students are anonymous and no one is able to identify what student wrote which answer. Student responses were selected based on their having provided a clear answer to the research question of “in what way does the assignment to visit a real criminal justice worksite help students know better whether they really want to work in the field of law enforcement?” Every student who clearly answered this question in their report was selected for this study.

Content analysis is defined as “a research method for systematically analyzing and making inferences from text” (Bachman & Schutt, 2017, p. 293). Bachman and Schutt (2017) further explain that “the goal of content analysis is to develop inferences from text” (p. 293) and that it can be a form of qualitative data analysis, “because it involves coding and categorizing text” (p. 294). Babbie (2007) describes coding as the key process in qualitative analysis and that in “open coding, the codes are suggested by the researchers’ examination and questioning of the data” (p. 385). The open coding used by this researcher in the following examples of students’ quotes was how the student found the criminal justice site visit helpful in their future career plans whether or not to pursue a criminal justice degree.

The three open coding schemes are as follows: “helpful in confirming their decision to go into law enforcement,” “helpful in causing them to more seriously consider going into law enforcement,” and “helpful in causing them to decide to not go into law enforcement.” In each of the following quotes, the key words that were used for coding purposes are underlined.

Findings

Student responses range from those who stated that the visit solidified their desire to work in law enforcement to those who stated that the visit showed them that they do not really want to work in law enforcement. In this qualitative study, I found a number of student responses that represented each of the three coding positions indicated above. As part of presenting the findings, I have included the actual words of these students as they answered this question.

There were a number of students who were greatly encouraged from their visit to continue their plans to work in law enforcement. These visits were made to local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. As you can read from their responses, the visit to a law enforcement agency gave them greater confidence in declaring criminal justice as their major and in pursuing a career in policing. The student statements listed below were coded as “the visit was helpful for confirming their desire to go into law enforcement.”

- “I believe that my ride-along further solidified my interests in pursuing a career in law enforcement. I learned a lot just from speaking with a seasoned law enforcement officer that made me want to learn more. I think that along with the material learned in class, this visit to a criminal justice entity gets me excited for my calling in law enforcement.”
- “My time spent at DEA has made me want to strive for my goal even harder than before. I have now become more interested in working in the law enforcement field and learning more about laws. I saw the agents working nonstop on the cases they were working on. This dedication has made me realize working hard will bring you success. It was amazing to see the agents focused on whatever task they were working on.”
- “After being able to do this ride-along, I have not been more excited to go into law enforcement. Even though both of the troopers told me that it was a slower night for them, it was still one of the most interesting and entertaining things that I have ever done. My mindset before the ride-along was to go into law enforcement, and now after being able to see what it is like, it is one of my biggest goals in life. I plan to go on many more ride-along with the **** State Highway Patrol and I also plan to do ride-along with other agencies.”
- “At the end of the visit, I can say firmly without a doubt that I have chosen the right career to pursue. Law enforcement has always been so interesting to me and after the visit it has only become more attractive as a career. Their jobs, the courts, everything just seemed so interesting to me. After talking with Sheriff ****, I’ve become extremely interested in becoming a sheriff myself and plan on pursuing that path to it. I am very glad I was able to learn from people who work in the field, and the experience is one that I will definitely not forget anytime soon.”
- “My overall experience of the ride along was amazing. I know now that this is the job I want to have in the future. I know now that I just can’t have an office job where everything is the same, I need a job where I am always on the edge of my seat not knowing what is going to happen next. I am now sure that a profession in law enforcement is for me. And I have Officer **** and this project to thank for that.”

- “After my ride along, I realized something very important about my choice in becoming a police officer. I realized that 60% of being a police officer is paperwork and 40% of being a police officer is actually being in the field. After a day of being a cop, or at least doing police officer work, I still want to be a cop because after that domestic dispute call, I had a knot in my stomach. The only thing I wanted to do was catch the coward who beat up on a 5’0” female. I still feel like being a police officer is my priority to prevent heinous crimes from happening.”
- “Although it wasn’t an extremely busy shift, it still exposed me to what it’s like to be a patrol officer. I was able to learn many different things, and I was able to experience exactly how different officers handle different situations, as well as the writing of reports and booking. The ride along didn’t deter me at all from wanting to become a law enforcement officer, but it did give me an idea of what some shifts will be like when I get there. I am certainly still interested in working in law enforcement, and thanks to this ride along, I better understand many facets of the job.”
- “There was a lot more stuff that went on than what I intended when I thought of being a state trooper. You must be really focused at all times and let nothing distract you. But even though it always requires high concentration, I still want to be a state trooper soon. I have always wanted to find a job that followed under the lines of helping and protecting others and I think being a state trooper would be a perfect job for that. Also, as I stated before, the family of officers and deputies there is such an amazing atmosphere. I would say, especially this ride along, made me way more interested into this career. The reason being is that I really enjoyed the atmosphere, the department, and just the whole experience.”
- “The long-term impact of the experience [ride-along] made me more excited to start my career. Seeing Officer **** doing what he loves made it very inspirational for me as I took notes and learned from him as an officer. It was a great experience for me. It made me more interested to start my career in Law Enforcement.”

Some students had, previous to the assignment, been unsure whether they would pursue a career in law enforcement, but after the visit, they were more encouraged to pursue it. The student statements listed below were coded as “the visit was helpful for causing them to consider more seriously about going into law enforcement.”

- “This ride along really made an impact on what I want to do for my future career and how I see law enforcement as the enforcers, not the bad guys. I know that because of this ride along I am leaning towards going for the Highway Patrol for my future career. I say this because everything Trooper

***** and I did that night really caused a spark for what I want to do. I loved every moment of the ride along and the experiences I got to be involved in. It also made me appreciate the officers that put their lives on the line every day to make Missouri better and safer.”

- “Doing this ride along has sort of made what the police do every day more real, instead of just the dramatization that I see on the television screen. It’s given me a lot more respect for them because they don’t always know what they are walking into, even with the information they got from the dispatcher. Sometimes they can relax and have fun, but most of the time they’ve got to be on their toes. Doing this has strengthened my want (sic) to go further into criminal justice. Maybe not as a patrol officer, but somewhere in this field where I can feel like I’m helping to make the streets a little bit safer, and helping others to make their lives a little bit better.”
- “These ride-alongs were great in helping me with my decision on whether I want to be a cop or not. I have decided that I want to become a police officer, even if I do not become a K9 officer (although my ultimate goal is to be a K9 officer). I know a ride-along is not similar to being an actual cop. On the other hand, I got to see what it’s like from the passenger/back seat. I have started getting ready to become a police officer and plan on doing many more ride-alongs.”
- “I learned that police officers don’t just pull people over and give people tickets or arrest people, they also do nicer things like drive older ladies home after their car has broken down just to help them out. I know I witnessed some sad and not so good things, but I also got to see some good and happy things as well. I feel like overall this was a really great experience and I’m really glad I took part in it. I am now more interested in not just criminal justice as a whole, but in the job of being a police officer specifically. I am glad I got to have this experience to look back on and tell stories about. I feel like it has helped me confirm choosing criminal justice as one of my minors for college.”
- “I chose to do this ride along with a patrol officer because I’ve been debating whether or not I want to approach my forensic science degree from a criminal justice standpoint or chemistry standpoint. My two options are to either major in Forensic Biochemistry and work with DNA and other evidence in a laboratory or Forensic Crime Scene Investigation, which would be more hands-on and criminal justice oriented. This experience has helped me decide that I want to pursue Crime Scene Investigation because I loved being on the crime scene and observing what goes on at a crime scene from a police officer’s perspective. Overall, this ride along was a good experience and I plan on going on more ride alongs again in the future.”
- “After doing the ride along, I am definitely more interested in the police officer side of things. Before doing this, I was a little nervous about going to school for this, but this made me realize that it is a good job to have and a good thing to do, especially if you like helping people. So, I think this

swayed my opinion more in going into this field after I graduate.”

- “Overall, my experience while touring the ***** Police Department was one I will never forget. I was able to learn many new things and determine whether or not a career in law enforcement was exactly what I was looking for. I used to be unsure because I have always had a connection with animals, but after seeing the canine team my mind was made up. It just so happens that the team made me want to pursue a career as a police officer even more. I could work with an animal while protecting the community; two things I have always wanted to accomplish in my life.”
- “I am actually more interested in becoming a police officer now, than I ever was, because the building was really cool. If I do become a police officer, I would like to be a media relations PIO. The media relations officers stay in the building, most of the time. When Officer **** told me what he does, it actually made me think of different fields in the police field. I think it would be really fun to be a media relations PIO.”
- “The long-term impact of my experience at the ***** Police Department is that it made me much more interested in wanting to be a part of the criminal justice system as a forensic scientist. Seeing the behind the scenes of the police department and how everything works made me want to work at a police station or for the government to help solve crimes and help people get the justice they deserve.”
- “This visit of the **** police station made me more interested in being an officer. It helped me realize and imagine how a day could be for an officer. I personally do not want to be trapped in an office all day long. I would find that boring. Yes, there will be times where I will be in an office typing reports up and that could be one of my shifts, but at least I know another one of my shifts will be outside an office.”
- “After getting a tour and going on a ride-along with the department, I think I am more interested in a criminal justice career. I thought it was a good thing to go on an almost dead night because it kind of broke that, “it’s going to be one call after another” thinking. It was great to see how the department is in real life compared to TV. I definitely think it’s cool all the kind of stuff they get to deal with and all the stories they get to tell. In the long term, I think this definitely helped me decide I want to work in a small-town police department.”
- “Overall, I think that this visit raised my interest in the criminal justice field as a potential career. It was very interesting to talk to some of the people that work there [county sheriff’s office] and hear them talk about their job and their experiences. All of them seemed to like their job and everyone I actually talked to said that they felt like they were doing something worthwhile. I think that this is a career field that I can really see myself pursuing a career in someday.”
- “This experience has definitely made me think about a possible career in

highway patrol. I really enjoyed the community between the officers and how exhilarating it was to protect people from their own actions and to have hopefully prevented something bad from happening. After going 140+ miles per hour down the highway, I will from then on out be going the speed limit everywhere I drive.”

Not all students doing the visit came away with a desire to pursue a career in law enforcement. Some students got enough of a taste of the real world of policing and decided that such a career was not for them. The student statements listed below were coded as “the visit was helpful for causing them to decide to not go into law enforcement.”

- “I did a partial ride along with **** giving me an experience that was very eye opening. I took this class because of my interest in this field and my love of crime shows, but I learned that the television dramatized version is very different than the real world. While I'd like to think that it only takes an hour to investigate and arrest the criminal, it doesn't really work like that. While taking this class I am also enrolled in accounting and have learned that accounting is what I really want to do. Even though I found this class so interesting I know that I have some qualities that wouldn't make me very susceptible to this line of work. Yet the basic knowledge that I have taken away from this class I think everyone should know about the law and the criminal justice system.”
- “The long-term impact the experience had on me was that working in a police station is hard and has detailed work. They must deal with so much paper work, investigations, and the progress of detectives plus the other duties they have as an officer. The paper work is too much for me to handle and I couldn't imagine how I could even get through an entire work day. I really enjoyed the tour and ride along because I really got to see how police officers live and work.”
- “The long-term impact of the experience for me is that I respect what the brave men and women do to protect our communities but not sure it is the job for me. I'm not less or more interested in a career in the criminal justice system but just want to keep my job options open besides criminal justice. I loved taking this class, as it was very informative and interesting, and enjoyed learning the different parts of our criminal justice system. Most likely I will not be perusing (sic) a job in the criminal justice but have the utmost respect for the people in the field and it was a pleasure to talk and learn about this field.”
- “The long-term takeaway for me was that I do not think criminal justice is a job for me, for this simple fact, I think I would opt for a career where there are not so many uncertainties. I would not have to worry about being falsely accused of something in the public eye that could potentially end my career for no particular reason.”
- “This assignment with the interview has made me reconsider my choice in

majoring in this field. In the beginning of the semester this was something I really wanted to do and was passionate about but as it got more into detail, I have changed my mind. I fully believe that this is not for me. I feel I do not have a stable emotional state to do this. I feel I would get attached to the people I am helping and I don't want to have a job where I have to take it home and worry if this person is going to be okay tonight, what else could I have done to have helped that person more. This assignment and semester have shown me to give more respect to those that are protecting me and others.”

- “I have a new appreciation for the sacrifices our criminal justice officials make to keep us safe. I will continue to pursue a career in legal studies but not as an active member of any police force, instead I would like to be some kind of family lawyer. If I had been considering a career as a Police Officer, this experience would definitely make me reevaluate to make sure I am certain that I'm ready to risk my life and mental well- being for the safety of others.”
- “Honestly this [visit of small-town police department] made me less interested in criminal justice because of the chaos it seemed to be in that building, too much for me to handle.”
- “Initially, the ride-along made me more interested in a law enforcement career, as I was impressed with the friendliness of the department and the interesting nature of police work. That was somewhat reinforced by the conversations that I had with Officer ****, one of which included the subject of work-life balance. He said he maintains his work- life balance by not picking up much overtime, which sounded nice. Upon further reflection, though, I cannot reconcile the twelve-hour shifts, working holidays, and the dayshift/nightshift rotation aspect of the career. All of that simply sounds like it would take too much of a toll on my goal of starting a family because it would mean that I would have a harder time being available for my kids as much as I want to. However, I have great respect for law enforcement personnel and found the ride-along to be a pleasant and informative experience.”
- “The impact this project had on me was to confirm that I would not want to become a police officer and that I have no interest in the criminal justice field. **** said, “Interviews, follow ups, interrogations and death scenes does take a very heavy toll on all officers, but detectives deal with the worst of the worst.” I do not believe I am mentally or physically capable of performing such a job. The men and women who do this job have my utmost respect and admiration.”
- “It was interesting to talk to Sheriff **** and to hear about what goes on in the department, but I do not think I would want to have the responsibility of a police officer. I do not think I will go into criminal justice at all its just not my thing. Plus, some of the situations you would be in would not be fun and

I am not quick with decision-making. I respect the people in the field and what they do for us, it's just not for me.

Discussion

If the research question for this study was, in what way does this assignment to visit a real criminal justice worksite helps students know better whether they really want to work in the field of law enforcement, then it is very evident from these many student quotations, that the visit did help them know better whether or not they should pursue a major and a career in law enforcement. For many students, the visit solidified their previous desire to pursue a degree and career in law enforcement. For many others who were not really sure, it gave them the confidence to move forward to declare a criminal justice major and prepare for a career in law enforcement. For another group of students, the visit made clear to them that law enforcement was not for them. Considering the investment of time and resources that policing agencies put into recruiting and training officers, having these students come to this understanding about themselves and their future while still early in their college studies was invaluable. These students, undoubtedly changed their plans to major in criminal justice and instead found another major to pursue. In this sense, these are probably the students that benefitted the most from the assignment to visit a law enforcement agency.

Conclusion and Limitations

Students who desire to major in criminal justice with the goal of entering a career of law enforcement benefit from visiting a law enforcement agency early on in their college career so that they can get a taste of the real world of policing. Based on the reading of student reports of their visit, having students make such visits in their first criminal justice class at Missouri Western State University was very helpful in causing them to decide whether or not they really wanted to become a police officer. Students who decided that they did not want to become police officers were able to change their plans and major in a different field before they had invested much time or money in what would be a fruitless major for them. By analyzing student responses, this researcher was able to determine that the assigned visit was very helpful to the students whether they decided that law enforcement was the career for them or not. This research is helpful to college instructors and administrators teaching criminal justice to know that creating a similar visit early in their curriculum would be beneficial. Many college programs utilize internships to introduce their students to the field, but internships are usually done at the end of their time in college (Stichman & Farkas, 2005), so that those students who get turned off by the work have wasted much time and money towards a career that they will not pursue.

There are limitations to this qualitative based content analysis study. The visit that the students made was brief and still probably gave them a somewhat idealized view of law enforcement. The officers that took them on the ride-along or gave them tours of police departments probably focused on the more positive aspects of the job. Such a short visit could not give them a realistic experience of the most challenging, dangerous, or negative aspects of the job as a police

officer. However, what they did experience was more realistic than what is depicted through the media, and in some cases, the officers did at least talk about some of the not-so-pleasant aspects of the job. A further limitation is that by its nature a qualitative study does not usually lend itself to quantitative analysis. A good idea for a follow- up study would be to track many more individuals completing the visit to see who actually went on to declare criminal justice as a major and then went on to both enter into and then stay with a career in law enforcement. Such data would lend itself to quantitative analysis that would be interesting to explore.