



MEMORANDUM

To: Mr. Wesley Pierson, City Manager
From: Paul Spencer, Chief of Police
Mike Vincent, Support Operations Captain
Date: June 22, 2016
Subject: College Degree Waiver for Prior Military/Law Enforcement Applicants

Summary

For the past ten years, the Addison Police Department has required all Police Officer applicants to possess a Bachelor's Degree or better from an accredited institution. Although this policy was put forth with the best of intentions, we have seen little payoff, and actually increased obstacles to hiring the best police officers. The department proposes we adapt our policy to the changing dynamics of our profession and allow for applicants with military and/or law enforcement experience to be granted a waiver to the degree requirement.

Proposed policy:

Applicants applying for entry-level positions in the Police Department shall have a baccalaureate degree from a college or university accredited by the United States Department of Education or Council for High Education Accreditation at the time of their start date with the Police Department. Applicants possessing at least three (3) years active duty prior military service or two (2) years full-time, paid sworn law enforcement experience shall have, in lieu of a baccalaureate degree, a minimum of sixty (60) semester hours credit from a college or university accredited by the United States Department of Education or Council for High Education Accreditation at the time of their start date with the Police Department.

All other existing hiring requirements would remain in effect.

The service time requirements were selected based on several factors. In reviewing current industry standards (other local agencies employing similar hiring policies), we found that most agencies utilize the same or very similar service requirements (two years law enforcement or three years military). Those times are also generally viewed as adequate to establish a reliable sense of the applicant's work history, performance, and maturity. Applicants with law enforcement experience have a slightly shorter service requirement, because the work experience directly correlates to the law enforcement job they are seeking with Addison, and their performance and history are more easily translatable during background investigations.

Background

Over the past several years, the department experienced the negative, yet unintended effects of our degree-requirement hiring philosophy. Since only a minority percentage of police applicants possess a Bachelor's Degree, we have eliminated over half of the prospective applicants. (FBI Study: *Higher Education & Law Enforcement*, 2013). This has led to an ongoing problem with recruiting and hiring the *best possible* applicants. While a college degree can be indicative of several positive traits, there are many more qualities that a college degree does not represent. Traits such as work ethic, maturity, professionalism, problem-solving, and decision-making cannot always be attributed to a college graduate, however, these traits are critical to the success of a police officer. Allowing more applicants to participate in the hiring process will allow our staff to evaluate applicants more competitively on these traits, and others, which in turn will produce a much higher quality output of new officers.

It is common for us to have many more positions available than candidates applying; if we had the ability to compare multiple candidates for a position, we would be able to rank them according to quality, and not simply "pass" them through because they have not failed any portion of the process. There is a distinct difference between a candidate who performs well in the hiring process and a candidate who simply does not "fail" out of the process. *Ironically, by raising our educational requirements we have, in many cases, lowered functional hiring standards due to lack of competition.*

We also feel the impact the external environment has had on our profession, and on those that might pursue a career in law enforcement. In 2008, following the housing crisis and recession, we saw a slight increase in police applicants who had degrees, but were simply out of work and needed a job and benefits. Although these applicants were "qualified" per our standards, they had no real desire to pursue a career in law enforcement, and the few we hired from this group have mostly left to return to their original industries. Conversely, as the economy has recovered in recent years, the Dallas/Fort Worth area has experienced even higher growth than other parts of the state and country, which has created more opportunities in industries other than law enforcement. This has contributed to a significant decline in the total number of police applicants in our region and elsewhere.

In addition to economic fluctuations, the past few years has seen a shift in public sentiment towards the police profession. While Addison strives to maintain a good reputation and relationship with our community, this is not always the case nationwide. Anti-police rhetoric is often most vocal on college campuses, where the vast majority of our current potential applicants originate. This college-level and nationwide shift in public opinion of law enforcement is another driving factor in the shrinking applicant pool. As the economy rebounds, and more traditional careers are available at similar or better salaries, the average college graduate is no longer considering a career in law enforcement.

Compensation comes into play when realizing the average college graduate in America now enters the work force with nearly \$29,000 in student loan debt (Huffington Post: *Average Student Debt Rises in 2014*, Oct. 27, 2015). This drives college graduates towards more lucrative careers or higher paying police agencies, because they are starting out behind the financial curve. Hiring someone with *some college* can be advantageous for both the agency and the employee because they are able to earn a living and begin repaying debt. Studies also show that many officers work towards and complete their degrees while working (FBI Study: *Higher Education & Law Enforcement*, 2013).

The shrinking applicant pool is clearly the result of several complex issues, and in response to this diminishing market, other police agencies have become much more competitive in their recruiting, salary/benefits, etc. Nearly every agency in D/FW has multiple openings, and is fighting for the same pool of applicants. In order to adapt and adjust to this market, we need to cast a wider net and pursue applicants who have professional and/or life experience, rather than simply those with college degrees. Years ago, many police professionals pointed to a small number of studies that showed police officers with degrees were less likely to violate policy, more likely to promote, etc. In recent years, even more thorough research has been conducted and has shown that there are numerous factors that impact a police officer's success, and a college degree is one of the least impactful indicators. A recent study conducted by the University of Texas – Dallas endeavored to measure the correlation between police officer education levels and number of sustained complaints (Richard Hernandez & Dr. Nadine Connell, *Higher Education & Police Performance*, UTD 2016). Their analysis of the data showed no correlation between sustained complaints and education level of officers. More in-depth research was conducted by the St. Paul, Minnesota Police Department, on behalf of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), which showed years of experience was a better indicator of officer performance than the education level (Mathew Bostrom, *The Influence of Higher Education on Police Officer Work Habits*, IACP 2005). In fact, their study showed that officers with Master's Degrees performed at comparable levels as those officers with high school diplomas (*Note: it was determined that the Master Degree and High School diploma officers tended to be older and more experienced*).

Conclusion

The department respectfully requests the Town grant this waiver and increase our applicant pool to include prior law enforcement and military applicants with 60 college hours. In doing so, we are not lowering our standards, but rather redefining our hiring requirements to acknowledge that some traits and experiences cannot be measured by someone's education level. In this time of industry tension and transition, we need to pursue police officers who demonstrate high levels of professionalism, maturity, work ethic, and independent decision-making. While many of these qualities are found in college degree applicants, there are many more applicants that possess these qualities but simply lack a four-year college degree. If we do not adjust to the job market, we will find ourselves being forced to hire people who do not truly meet our standards because there is no one left to hire. In 2015, we had a total of 10 applicants for the position of police officer that was open for the entire calendar year. Our hiring process typically disqualifies 70-80% of applicants, which means we can project to hire only 2-3 people out of a group of 10. By comparison, Plano typically hires about 14% of their applicants, because they have a larger applicant pool and can be more selective. So far in 2016, we have had only seven applicants, and all but one have been disqualified (We currently have zero pending police applications).

Attachments