

Problem-Based Learning at the Basic Law Enforcement Academy – Discipline Standards

In this article we'll look at how the police academy atmosphere has adjusted to provide the modern learning environment expected from institutions of higher learning, while remaining true to our roots in teaching the traditions and customs of police work. As adult learning methods and Problem-Based Learning methodology are fully embraced in our new curriculum, we are striving to strike a reasonable balance between a "military" style and a "college" style environment.

Teaching new recruits to be aware of their surroundings at all times is an officer safety issue and an important part of the police academy training. Law enforcement officers must be in a constant state of awareness about who is near. This is not a normal behavior for regular citizens, *and it must be learned*. The awareness and discipline expectations at the academy are in place to build this skill during the five-month class session. These expectations are not employed for TAC Officer's egos, or to "mess with" recruits. These expectations serve a specific purpose that is directly relevant to a career in police work.

Certain learning and discipline standards will be used for training recruits, in keeping with a few general themes:

1. ***Recruits are responsible for learning the basics of patrol work.*** The staff will provide the learning environment, but it is up to each recruit to make use of that environment, to study, practice, and be able to perform the basic skills at an acceptable level.
2. The classroom will be a more relaxed, "safe" environment for recruits to share information, express themselves, and fully participate in learning. (Think of how an officer can relax his guard a bit in the report writing room at the police station.)
3. ***TAC Officers are responsible for teaching recruits the discipline required for police work.*** TAC Officers are charged with preparing recruits for the actual working conditions they will encounter. This means that when recruits graduate the academy, they will be accustomed to basic military-style formations, police traditions, drill and ceremonies, courtesy and respect for supervisors, wearing the uniform, and military-style bearing (emotional control and Officer Presence).
4. Areas of the campus outside the classroom (hallways, outside, Mock City, etc.) will be run with more paramilitary discipline with specific expectations for customs, courtesy, and behavior. (Think of how an officer must be more aware and act more disciplined and professional once outside the station on patrol.)
5. Recruits are expected to follow all directions from the staff while attending and/or assigned to the academy.

“General Courtesy” will be expected at all times while recruits are assigned at the academy. General Courtesy is required at the academy because it mirrors what is expected of new officers when they arrive at their agencies. This is the same level of respect an officer would be expected to pay to his/her chief as the chief walked by in the hallway of the police station.

General Courtesy means that recruits will treat TAC Officers, outside instructors, WSCJTC staff, and guests of the WSCJTC with respect and humility. Recruits will not argue or act in a manner which may be perceived as disrespectful.

A reasonable amount of physical punishment, such as push-ups, is a necessary part of the academy atmosphere. This sort of discipline serves two purposes. First, it is unpleasant and acts as a deterrent to unacceptable behavior or performance. Second, it builds strength and fitness, which is an integral part of good law enforcement.

Group punishment is also used at times in the academy for one main reason. It reinforces the lesson that law enforcement is a “team sport.” On patrol, the actions of one officer will significantly impact other officers, the entire department, and the community. At the academy, when one recruit exhibits unacceptable behavior or performance, he/she has impacted the rest of the team (his/her class). Group punishment also creates peer pressure which motivates recruits to behave and perform at acceptable levels.

People often wonder if a switch to Problem-Based Learning means giving up on the customs, professionalism, and discipline so vital to law enforcement. It does not. While we decrease the military strictness in the classroom allowing recruits to make mistakes and learn; we will continue to train them in the basics of police work and provide them with a solid understanding of the Chain of Command and behavior expectations.

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