



The criminal justice degree and policing: conceptual development or occupational primer?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to assess the value that police officers with criminal justice degrees place on their personal educational experiences, while also comparing those perceptions with officers educated in other academic disciplines. Its focus also rests on the degree's contribution to conceptual and managerial skills, as opposed to mere occupational expertise. Disagreement between the academic and law enforcement communities concerning the value of criminal justice education creates an imbalance eroding potential benefits. Recent studies highlight this division as even pre-service majors regard the degree as unrelated to most policing functions.

Design/methodology/approach – Police departments with 50 or more sworn officers from across the State of Alabama (United States) were the data collection sites ($n = 21$). In total, 16 departments participated and 1,114 officers (57 percent) responded to a mail survey (2002).

Findings – The paper finds that officers with criminal justice degrees ($n = 299$) reported that the degree substantially improved their knowledge and abilities on a wide range of areas from the criminal justice system to conceptual and managerial skills. Responses did not differ significantly from officers educated in non-criminal justice academic disciplines.

Practical implications – The paper demonstrates that college-educated police officers regard the criminal justice degree as more than mere occupational training.

Originality/value – The paper equips police managers with tangible findings that police officers with criminal justice college degrees value its mental and conceptual contributions.

Keywords Police, Education, Attitudes, Skills

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Criminal justice academic programs have increased exponentially since the mid-1960s. Some estimates now surpass 900 baccalaureate programs (Newman, 1993), while others compute more conservative counts (Morn, 1995; Southerland, 2002). Regardless of the accounting system, it is evident that academic criminal justice has permeated the collegiate establishment for the duration (Clear, 2001). It is equally evident that criminal justice programs have made numerous contributions to the field of law enforcement (Remington, 1990), yet many law enforcement administrators still express reluctance to embrace the educational movement (and particularly the criminal justice degree). Despite the continued resistance, however, the recruitment of college-educated officers has intensified (Breci, 1997; Johnston *et al.*, 2002) as a byproduct of the mounting number of college-educated law enforcement administrators (Roberg and Bonn, 2004).

Shenkman (1974, p. 68) once cautioned educational institutions that “the onus of responsibility” for persuading the law enforcement community to the value of education is on the educational system. Since that time, most criminal justice programs



have abandoned the vocational models advocated in the police science era and now promote intellectual environments comparable to those of more traditional disciplines (Pearson *et al.*, 1980). As a result of this evolving orientation, criminal justice has enhanced its academic standing and is now the degree of choice for most aspiring practitioners (Birzer and Palmiotto, 2002). Critics still abound, though, and choose instead to interpret the growing popularity as (Flanagan, 2000, p. 2) “*prima facie* evidence of the willingness of higher education to surrender to market demands for relevant, practical courses that provide credentials”. In light of these persistent criticisms, and recognizing the very strong resistance of many police officers, it is imperative that police managers be equipped with more than esoteric rhetoric to successfully defend policies favoring a college education. Hersey and Blanchard’s (1977) “situational leadership model” demonstrates this managerial necessity. Simply stated, the “high task” requirements of college degree programs coupled with the “high relationship” context of the police structure require managers to “sell” the desired educational goal. Of course, it is difficult for police managers to “sell” college-education benefits with little more than intuition or personal experience in environments that abound with anti-education dispositions.

Criticisms of academic criminal justice

From the inception of academic criminal justice, law enforcement personnel (administrators and officers) have espoused skepticism toward the practical value of a college education (Bell, 1979; Regoli, 1976). The dual concerns focused on the necessity of a college education for the performance of routine police operations (Buracker, 1977), and a perceived lack of educational quality. Even the National Advisory Commission on Higher Education for Police Officers (1978, p. 65) reported that “much police education today is intellectually shallow and conceptually narrow”. And even though a growing portion of contemporary law enforcement are accepting the merits of criminal justice education (Roberg and Bonn, 2004; Tafoya, 1991), the credibility of criminal justice programs continues to struggle for respect within the hallowed halls of collegiate communities as a whole.

Criminal justice has always been and continues to be the red-headed stepchild of academia (Owen, 2005). Webb and Hoffman (1978, p. 348) captured the essence of this relationship when stating that “criminal justice has been given a frigid welcome to the academic community” and that the “traditional disciplines have felt that their own status might become tainted by contact with criminal justice”. Fabianic (1980) long ago pointed out the narrow focus of academic criminal justice, while Ward and Webb (1984) noted that criminal justice programs were inadequate as a direct result of haphazard creation and development. Although a quarter century has passed since those observations, it remains clear that academic criminal justice continues to struggle for acceptance from the college community (Clear, 2001; Farrell and Koch, 1995; Farrell and Thomas, 1997; Flanagan, 2000; Hale, 1998; Marenin and Worrall, 1998).

One of the most scathing indictments of criminal justice academia claims that criminal justice programs sold out to the professional law enforcement community to protect their financial interests. Many argue that to gain and maintain the necessary acceptance of the law enforcement community, criminal justice programs compromised integrity for fear of losing agency support. Farrell and Koch (1995) contend that criminal justice departments “became captives of the criminal justice industry” (p. 59) and must handle law enforcement in a “noncritical fashion” (p. 56). As

a result of this accommodation, Farrell and Koch (1995) further regard criminal justice instructors as “unthinking defenders of the system” and the “epitome of anti-intellectualism” (pp. 53-54).

Owen (2005, p. 10) points out that we are in the midst of “the imminent death of academic criminal justice” because we continue to be theoretically impoverished. Williams and Robinson (2004) support that premise by asserting that criminal justice lacks integrity because its educators limit themselves to merely describing the structure and function of criminal justice systems. Sullivan (1994) also purports that criminal justice academicians possess little perspective on the system and seldom raise philosophical questions.

Academic criminal justice and law enforcement management

The disagreement between the academic and professional communities concerning the value of a criminal justice education creates an imbalance that impedes potential contributions from the academic discipline. Bufkin (2004) blames the absence of minimum standards as the greatest factor contributing to the negative reputation of academic criminal justice. Owen (2005, p. 11) states that “the potential for academic criminal justice to positively shape the intellectual (and policy) landscape is great, if only we knew who and what we were”. Southerland (2002, p. 591) echoes this sentiment by arguing that there is a tremendous amount of “false advertising” in contemporary criminal justice curricula.

Criminal justice educational programs have historically focused on the vocational nature of the police role, opting to avoid the conceptual dimensions essential to future managers (Farnworth *et al.*, 1998). As a consequence of that orientation, criminal justice departments are often viewed as “displacing the goal of graduating liberally educated persons” (Flanagan, 2000, p. 2). It must be noted, though, that the attitudes of police administrators regarding the most important areas of a formal education are quite consistent with the goals of academicians. Johnston *et al.* (2002) surveyed 100 law enforcement administrators and found that most value education focused on report writing, ethics, legal aspects, and police procedures. Chronister *et al.* (1982) surveyed 353 law enforcement agencies and found similar themes – mind improvement, learning about law enforcement, leadership acquisition and an appreciation of the complexity of social problems – emerged as the most valued educational components. Barry (1978) surveyed 624 police officers and found that they believed that the criminal justice degree definitely improved (67 percent) or somewhat improved (25 percent) their ability to perform police functions. Those with associate degrees rated the degree as most appropriate for police work (80 percent), followed by those with bachelor’s (65 percent) and master’s degrees (37 percent). Additionally, nearly two-thirds of the police agencies reported that the quality of the educational offerings were good or very good.

Southerland (2002, p. 599) believes that “baccalaureate criminal justice programs should be structured to develop critical thinkers who have solid written and oral communication skills and a broad knowledge of the criminal justice system ...” The result of that curricular assessment, however, revealed that the focus of several essential areas – computer methods, US Government, ethics, writing, public speaking, logic, social problems, human behavior, and policy – are diminishing among current criminal justice curricula.

Theoretical background

This study was undertaken to examine the attitudes of college-educated police officers (associate, bachelors and masters degrees) concerning the value of their criminal justice degrees to the law enforcement occupation. Recent studies reveal that the majority of criminal justice majors aspire for law enforcement employment (Courtwright and Mackey, 2004; Krimmel and Tartaro, 1999); and although majors affirm the interesting nature of criminal justice programs, they do not regard the degree as highly relevant to policing duties (Krimmel and Tartaro, 1999). The graduates do, however, regard the degree's subject matter as relevant to the real world, and this is important because it tends to refute the long-standing accusations of academic purists that criminal justice education is nothing more than a "cop shop" (Farrell and Koch, 1995).

One could argue that most degree-seeking majors are unaware of law enforcement realities, and are therefore unqualified to espouse valid assessments. Conversely, though, law enforcement officers with a criminal justice degree should be qualified to assess such associations, and with experience become ideally situated to assess whether their educational experiences were of a "Mickey Mouse" quality (Shenkman, 1974, p. 68). This study aims to measure the value placed on criminal justice education by experienced police officers in possession of college degrees. An empirical examination will test four hypotheses. First, it is anticipated that police officers will recognize the value of their criminal justice degrees. Second, it is expected that police officers with degrees in criminal justice will value its contribution to policing activities substantially more than police officers with degrees in other academic disciplines. Third, it is expected that the value associated with the educational experience in criminal justice will increase as educational level increases. Fourth, it is anticipated that the value associated with the criminal justice educational experience will be independent of demographics (other than educational level).

Method

Municipal police departments across the State of Alabama (USA) serve as the population for this study. Of particular importance is a comparison of degree impact along educational lines; and so the sampling frame was formed to ensure that college-educated officers would be accessed. With that objective in mind, police departments with fifty or more sworn officers were selected as data collection sites ($n = 21$). Based on departmental information extracted from the state law enforcement directory, a box with an adequate number of questionnaires was mailed to police chiefs with a request to distribute the instrument to all personnel (including patrol officers at roll call). The survey instruments were then to be collected and returned to the researcher in a self-addressed, postage-paid box. This data-collection strategy produced cooperation from 16 police chiefs. Ranging from 10 to 78 percent, the overall response rate from participating departments was 57 percent (1,114 officers). In total, 80 percent of the responses originated from eight departments (all with a minimum of 51 responses), and department representation ranged from ten to 379 officers. Of the five non-participating police departments, three were among the largest in the state.

For the current study, police respondents possessing a criminal justice degree (associate, bachelors or masters degree) were retained for primary analysis ($n = 299$), but police respondents possessing a college degree in a non-criminal justice academic discipline ($n = 230$) and those without college degrees ($n = 552$) also were examined. For the criminal justice degree respondents, all 16 departments were represented (ranging from 1 to 111); and similar to the overall profile, 84 percent of criminal

justice-degreed officers originated from eight departments (all with a minimum of 14 officers).

The survey instrument used a four-point scale (no improvement to definite improvement) to measure police officer attitudes regarding the contributions of their criminal justice degree(s) to employment-related areas. Respondents also reported professional and personal demographics, including but not limited to: education, experience, employment duties, age, gender, and race. Correlation coefficients and analysis of variance were used to analyze the survey results. All findings were accepted at the 0.05 level of statistical significance.

Analysis and results

Criminal justice-degreed officers in this study differed somewhat from other responding officers. The two officer groups did not differ on race or gender, as all officers were overwhelmingly White and male, but officers with criminal justice degrees did possess more experience, with 52 percent reporting more than ten years of police service (compared to 41 percent for all other officers). Meanwhile, officers with criminal justice degrees tended to be younger, as 51 percent had attained the age of 37 (compared to 59 percent). The officer groups also differed significantly regarding job position, with 56 percent of criminal justice officers occupying entry-level positions compared to a much higher 76 percent for all other officers. Lastly, a comparison of officers with criminal justice degrees and those holding degrees in other disciplines reveals that criminal justice degreed officers are much more likely to have a bachelor's or master's degree (75 percent compared to 29 percent) (see Table I).

Table II details officer responses toward the value of their criminal justice degree. Those educated officers perceived that the criminal justice degree greatly enhanced understanding of the law and of the criminal justice system. More specifically, 92 percent reported reasonable knowledge levels pertaining to understanding of the law, while 83 percent expressed similar feelings toward an overall understanding of the criminal justice system. The remaining categories (in order of mean rankings) were communication skills, critical thinking skills, administrative skills, human relations skills, and patrol and investigation procedures. All of these areas (with the exception of patrol and investigation procedures) received at least one-third support for definite improvement, while also receiving at least three-fourths support for some improvement or more. Thus, the first hypothesis that experienced officers would regard their criminal justice degrees as valuable is supported.

A basic comparison (see Table III) of the criminal justice degreed officers with officers educated in other academic disciplines clarifies the value of the criminal justice degree to policing. Three areas in this study, however, were not comparable because data collection would have had no merit. In short, it should not be expected that non-criminal justice degree programs would enhance a student's overall understanding of the criminal justice system, understanding of the law, or patrol and investigation procedures; therefore, these questions were not posed to officers who earned degrees in non-criminal justice disciplines. The remaining four areas are pertinent to all academic disciplines, and therefore were compared to isolate a more clear influence of the criminal justice degree. Several analysis of variance computations revealed that masters-masters, bachelors-bachelors and associate-associate comparisons between criminal justice and non-criminal justice officer samples produced no significant differences for any of the four areas examined: human relations skills, communication skills, administrative skills, and critical-thinking skills. Thus, the second hypothesis

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	<i>P</i>	Criminal justice degree and policing
Education (<i>n</i> = 299)			
Associates	77	26	
Bachelor's	178	60	
Master's	44	15	
Job position (<i>n</i> = 296)			
Administration/mid-management	74	25	
First-line supervision	56	19	
Officer	166	56	
Years of service (<i>n</i> = 297)			
Less than 6	92	31	
6-10	49	17	
11-20	93	31	
21 +	63	21	
Gender (<i>n</i> = 296)			
Male	265	90	
Female	31	11	
Race (<i>n</i> = 298)			
White	246	83	
Black	39	13	
Other	13	4	
Age (<i>n</i> = 296)			
21-28	56	19	
29-36	90	30	
37-44	82	28	
45 +	68	23	

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Table I.
Demographics of police officers with criminal justice degrees

Note: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number

Degree impact	DI	SI	LI	NI	\bar{x}
Overall understanding of the CJ system	46	37	15	2	3.27
Patrol and investigation procedures	26	39	27	8	2.83
Human relations skills	33	44	19	4	3.05
Communication skills	42	45	10	4	3.25
Understanding of law	53	39	7	1	3.43
Administrative skills	40	40	16	5	3.15
Critical thinking skills (problem solving)	42	39	16	3	3.20

Table II.
Police attitudes concerning the value of criminal justice degrees

Notes: DI (4) = Definite improvement; SI (3) = Some improvement; LI (2) = Little improvement; NI (1) = No improvement; \bar{x} = Mean (1-4); Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number

that police officers with degrees in criminal justice will value its contribution to policing activities substantially more than police officers with degrees in other academic disciplines is unsupported. Based on this finding, the remaining examinations are restricted to the primary focus of the study, that of police officers with college degrees in criminal justice.

The correlation coefficients embedded in Table IV illustrate certain patterns with respect to the criminal justice degree earned. Essentially, officers with higher levels of

Table III.
Police attitudes
concerning the value of
college degrees by
education and academic
discipline

Degree impact	Master's		Bachelor's		Associates	
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)
Human relations skills						
CJ	3.42	(0.66)	3.05	(0.81)	2.83	(0.91)
Non-CJ	3.31	(0.63)	3.02	(0.80)	2.88	(0.93)
Communication skills						
CJ	3.60	(0.58)	3.25	(0.74)	3.02	(0.89)
Non-CJ	3.55	(0.52)	3.27	(0.77)	2.95	(0.91)
Administrative skills						
CJ	3.65	(0.65)	3.11	(0.85)	2.94	(0.86)
Non-CJ	3.50	(0.62)	2.98	(0.82)	2.93	(0.88)
Critical thinking skills						
CJ	3.60	(0.66)	3.17	(0.81)	3.00	(0.85)
Non-CJ	3.74	(0.69)	3.20	(0.81)	2.98	(0.83)

Notes: Means based on: 1 (no improvement); 2 (some improvement); 3 (little improvement); 4 (definite improvement); *t*-test comparisons (12 total) produced no significant differences

criminal justice education (graduate and bachelor versus associate) tend to occupy higher ranks ($r = 0.29, p < 0.01$) and reflect more positive attitudes toward the acquisition of administrative skills ($r = 0.24, p < 0.01$), communication skills ($r = 0.23, p < 0.01$), critical thinking skills ($r = 0.22, p < 0.01$), overall understanding of the criminal justice system ($r = 0.22, p < 0.01$), and human relations skills ($r = 0.21, p < 0.01$). Thus, the third hypothesis that more highly-educated officers would place more value on their criminal justice degree also is supported.

The fourth hypothesis is also supported. Gender, race, age and years of service are not highly correlated with educational level. Gender and race essentially exhibit no differences among any of the defined value categories; and age, years of service, and job position are only minimally associated with four categories. Table V outlines analysis of variance results for degree value by educational level. There is an increase across educational level for every variable, and all variables differ significantly as educational level increases. A more detailed inspection reveals that bachelor and associate degree officers do not differ significantly (or much), but both degree-holding groups value their degrees significantly less than those with master's degrees (and once again on every variable).

The significantly lower values attributed to the degree by associate and bachelor's holders become understandable when examining those perceptions from the perceived orientations of the respective curriculums. Additional exploration revealed some very interesting findings. First, 68 percent acknowledged that criminal justice courses taught them valuable information not offered in the police academy, while only nine percent thought otherwise. Analysis of variance ($F = 5.63, p < 0.01$) revealed that a significant difference existed among the educational levels. A Bonferroni post-hoc comparison revealed significant differences between master's and associates' ($p < 0.01$) holders and bachelor's and associates' holders ($p < 0.05$), meaning that master's and bachelor's recipients tend to agree significantly more that their degrees did not focus on training issues reminiscent of the police academy. Second, overall support for criminal justice courses devoting time to "explain human behavior and social issues" was very weak, and the responses were unchanging along educational

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Education	1.00												
Job position	0.29**	1.00											
Years of service	0.12*	0.68**	1.00										
Gender	-0.01	0.06	0.16**	1.00									
Race	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.09	1.00								
Age	0.13*	0.62**	0.85**	0.00	0.10	1.00							
CJ system	0.22**	0.10	0.05	0.01	0.03	0.01	1.00						
Procedures	0.17**	0.17**	0.13*	0.01	-0.09	0.16**	0.60**	1.00					
Human relations	0.21**	0.21**	0.18*	0.04	0.03	0.20**	0.50**	0.57**	1.00				
Communication	0.23**	0.22**	0.15*	0.02	0.03	0.16**	0.45**	0.46**	0.69**	1.00			
Law	0.16**	0.10	0.08	0.07	-0.11	0.11	0.59**	0.51**	0.49**	0.49**	1.00		
Administrative	0.24**	0.22**	0.21**	0.05	-0.06	0.21**	0.42**	0.41**	0.58**	0.60**	0.56**	1.00	
Critical thinking	0.22**	0.14*	0.10	0.08	0.04	0.11	0.53**	0.50**	0.61**	0.64**	0.59**	0.65**	1.00

Notes. All non-demographic variables (7-13) are coded from least support to highest support; CJ System (Overall Understanding of the Criminal Justice System); Procedures (Patrol and Investigative Procedures); Law (Understanding of the Law); * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$

Coding: Education (Master's = 2, Bachelor's = 1, Associates = 0); Years of service (21+ = 3, 11-20 = 2, 6-10 = 1, Less than 6 = 0); Job position (administration/management = 2, front-line supervision = 1, officer = 0); gender (male = 1, female = 0); Race (white = 2, black = 1, other = 0); age (45+ = 3, 37-44 = 2, 29-36 = 1, 21-28 = 0)

Table IV. Intercorrelation matrix for police attitudes and the value of criminal justice degrees

Table V.
Police attitudes
concerning the value of
criminal justice degrees
by education

Degree impact	Master's		Bachelor's		Associates		<i>F</i>
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	M	(SD)	
Criminal justice system	3.63	(0.66)	3.26	(0.78)	3.06	(0.80)	7.20**
Procedures	3.28	(0.73)	2.76	(0.89)	2.72	(0.99)	6.48**
Human relations skills	3.42	(0.66)	3.05	(0.81)	2.83	(0.91)	6.80**
Communication skills	3.60	(0.58)	3.25	(0.74)	3.02	(0.89)	7.89**
Understanding of law	3.70	(0.51)	3.41	(0.69)	3.32	(0.73)	4.25*
Administrative skills	3.65	(0.65)	3.11	(0.85)	2.94	(0.86)	10.29**
Critical thinking skills	3.60	(0.66)	3.17	(0.81)	3.00	(0.85)	7.72**

Notes: Means based on: 1 (No improvement); 2 (Some improvement); 3 (Little improvement); 4 (Definite improvement); ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

lines ($F = 2.49, p > 0.05$). Less than one percent reported that “all” courses incorporated such discussions, while only 14 percent said that “most did”. The most common response was that “one-half” of the courses devoted time to those issues (54 percent), while nearly one-third noted that there was “no or very little” commitment to social dynamics. Third, officers overwhelmingly favored criminal justice instructors with field experience. Ninety-one percent stated that criminal justice instructors with practical work experience in the criminal justice system provide a better education. With only four percent disagreeing with this practical experience necessity, and with no significant differences emerging along educational lines ($F = 2.05, p > 0.05$), it is apparent that experienced police officers from all educational levels prefer former professionals in the classroom.

Discussion and conclusion

Criminal justice educators are accused of operating “cop shops” or “advanced training academies”, yet few efforts test these stereotypes against the experiences of police consumers. Once officers gain employment experience, they should be capable of judging educational value. In this study, police officers ($n = 299$) with varying levels of experience and criminal justice education revealed positive attitudes concerning the degree’s value with regard to conceptual development for employment purposes. The positive assertions of the officers in this study reflect well on the ability of criminal justice programs to prepare its clientele for meaningful employment challenges. The officers, at all educational levels, expressed great support for the degree’s ability to improve not only legal and justice system understanding, but more importantly their ability to communicate, analyze, administrate, and engage in human relations. The findings of this study demonstrate that police officers with experience harbor favorable attitudes toward the value of their criminal justice education. The officers purport that their educational experiences significantly enhanced their abilities to perform policing roles beyond mere technical exercises. The greatest amount of support emerged within the areas most promoted by humanities (or liberal arts) advocates, and therefore the results of this study do not support the often asserted criticism that criminal justice is “undermining the goals of liberal education” (Flanagan, 2000, p. 7). And as expected, master’s degree holders were more favorable than bachelor’s recipients, and likewise for the associate degree.

These results somewhat refute the strong presumptions of some that “the purpose of criminal justice is to credential, not to educate” (Farrell and Koch, 1995, p. 54). However, officers did not perceive their programs as highly committed to social problems or human behavior, and this does tend to highlight the very real possibility that criminal justice programs are often not supporting the major goals of conceptual development. Apparently, the criminal justice programs instrumental to producing the police officers in this study were oriented somewhere along the middle of a continuum ranging from liberal arts to vocational/professional.

Krimmel and Tartaro (1999, p. 288) state that “criminal justice educators must let police departments know that colleges and universities are educating bright, enthusiastic, well-informed, career-minded men and women of all races and ethnic backgrounds”. Is the criminal justice degree an intellectual compromise with professional law enforcement? In practice, is it merely an occupational primer? The present findings do not completely exonerate criminal justice programs against these accusations, but do represent a modest beginning to equipping police managers with tangible evidence that questions such broad claims. The findings did reflect, however, that officers with degrees in other academic disciplines possessed attitudinal values equal to those expressed by officers with degrees in the criminal justice discipline. Therefore, it reasonably can be argued that all college-educated police officers value the educational experience regardless of the academic focus.

Two major limitations exist in this study, and caution should therefore be instituted with any effort to generalize the findings to all police officers with college degrees in criminal justice. One limitation is geographic restriction within the State of Alabama. It is possible that Alabama officers differ from other officers around the nation, or as probable, the nature and quality of the criminal justice programs educating Alabama officers could differ substantially. A second limitation relates to the possibility of memory lag. Can officers accurately remember the details of their educational experiences with the passage of time? If not, one could argue that the value attributed to the criminal justice degree reflects little more than an emotional blindness that protects an officer from mental anguish that surely would accompany the realization that the time, effort and financial investments were a waste of resources.

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