



# Perceptions of Undergraduate Students on Criminology and Criminal Justice Education in the United States: An Empirical Analysis

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## Abstract

*Since the first criminology program for police officers was founded in 1916 at the University of California at Berkeley in the United States, experts have debated whether baccalaureate degrees in criminology/criminal justice (C&CJ) programs are necessary for individuals to become police officers, correctional officers, or probation/parole officers. This study examines how students currently enrolled in C&CJ programs in the U.S. perceive their programs, drawing on data collected through self-administered questionnaires and completed by 256 C&CJ undergraduates. The study finds that over all, students have positive perceptions on C&CJ education. It also finds that students' career focus (law enforcement vs. correction) affects their perceptions about C&CJ education.*

Keywords: Education, Criminology, Criminal Justice, Perceptions.

## Introduction

The first criminology program for police officers was founded in 1916 at the University of California at Berkeley in the U.S. (Birzer & Palmiotto, 2002). Since then, the number of colleges and universities offering criminology or criminal justice (hereafter C&CJ) or closely related programs has increased nationwide, especially during the 1970s after the passage of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 (Eigenberg & Baro, 1992). According to the most recent statistics from the Department of Education, in 2006 and 2007, 39,206 students earned bachelor's degrees in the field of security and protective services, including corrections, criminal justice and law enforcement administration, and corrections administration (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2009, p. 237).

However, a debate whether college education is necessary for criminal justice practitioners continues. Carlan (2006) wrote that "Criminal Justice educators are [still] accused of operating 'cop shops' or 'advanced training academies,' yet few efforts test these stereotypes against the experiences of police consumers" (p. 616). Along with the debate, studies have been conducted to examine the impact of college education on officers' job performance (e.g. Paoline & Terrill, 1997; Wimshurst & Ransley, 2007) or on their increased job satisfaction (e.g., Dantzker, 1994; Zhaoa, Thurmanb & He, 1999). The

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evaluation or assessment of C&CJ programs in higher education has been a popular topic in the literature since the 1970s. One way to evaluate programs is to incorporate student input by examining student opinions of program quality. However, little research specifically focuses on how C&CJ undergraduates perceive their C&CJ programs. The main goal of this study is to examine those perceptions. More specifically, the present study answers the following questions:

- How do students perceive C&CJ higher education in relation to their jobs and careers?
- What is students' main reason for pursuing a four-year college degree in C&CJ?
- What is C&CJ students' main obstacle to pursuing a four-year college degree?
- How are students' demographic and social variables related to their perception of their C&CJ program?

Due to the fact that few studies have examined how C&CJ majors perceive their program in higher education, this study is exploratory in nature. Learning about C&CJ programs from students' perspectives can yield many benefits. For example, as Benekos and his associates point out, "Data regarding student perceptions can help faculty develop teaching strategies that will better educate students about critical issues in the system" (Benekos, Merlo, Cook & Bagley, 2002, p. 203).

### **Literature review**

College education and career seem to be closely related. After all, all college students will have to decide on a career path (Mobley, 2000). Some scholars (Blocher & Rapoza, 1981; Laanan, 2000; Payne & Sumter, 2005) have pointed out that career preparation has been recognized as a crucial mission of higher education. Although career preparation is one of the most important missions of higher education, some scholars (e.g., Birzer & Palmiotto, 2002) caution that the inclusion of technical and vocational classes in academic C&CJ programs may lower these programs' learning standards as well as the general perception of the degree program.

C&CJ programs in higher education have been the object of great concern among many scholars since the 1970s, and as such they have been consistently evaluated and criticized. Some of these scholars have focused on curriculum descriptions from various programs (e.g., Adams, 1976; Bennett, & Marshall, 1979; Birzer & Palmiotto, 2002; Fabianic, 1979a; Kuykendall, 1977; Lytle & Travis, 2008; Mijares & Blackburn, 1990; Pelfrey, 1982; Southerland, 1991, 2002). Other researchers have specifically analyzed the descriptions, quality, prestige, and evaluation mechanisms of C&CJ doctoral programs (e.g., Fabianic, 1979b; Frost & Clear, 2007; Langworthy & Latessa, 1989; Pelfrey, 1982; Thomas & Bronick, 1984; Steiner & Schwartz, 2007; Thomas, 1987; Travis, 1987). Still others have focused on scholarly productivity among C&CJ faculty (e.g., Clear, 2001), faculty members' scholarly influence in major American C&CJ journals (e.g., Cohn & Farrington, 2007), and academic standards and accreditation in criminal justice education (e.g., Southerland, Merlo, Robinson, Benekos & Albanese, 2007).

Some studies have examined the individual educational experience among graduates from C&CJ programs (e.g., Carlan, 2006; Wimshurst & Allard, 2007). For example, surveying 1,114 police officers in the State of Alabama, Carlan (2006) found that the 299 officers with a degree from a C&CJ program felt that the degree had considerably "improved their knowledge and abilities on a wide range of areas from the criminal justice system to conceptual and managerial skills" (p. 608).

Students' perceptions of higher education are complex to investigate, because students' demographic and social characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, and academically related characteristics (e.g., GPA, class standing, major) may affect their perceptions. This seems to be especially true for C&CJ majors, as they come from "diverse and often nontraditional family/educational backgrounds" (Wimshurst & Allard, 2007, p. 233). Some researchers (e.g., Buckley, 1986; Courtright & Mackey, 2004; Gabbidon, Penn, & Richards, 2003; Golden, 1982; Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999; Tartaro & Krimmel, 2003; Yim, 2009) have examined C&CJ programs from students' perspectives. However, most of these studies investigated students' career choices and goals in light of their gender or race/ethnicity.

A few studies have examined C&CJ majors' perceptions of C&CJ programs. Using several survey questions (e.g., "College education in criminology is essential to my career goal"), Yim (2001) found a significant relationship between students' gender and race/ethnicity and their perceptions about their C&CJ programs. More specifically, Yim found that male students were significantly more likely to view their program favorably than female students were, and that White students held more favorable perceptions than racial/ethnic minority students did (Schanz, 2012; Yim, 2001). Surveying 141 C&CJ undergraduates, Tontodonato (2006) found that approximately 85% of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with their C&CJ program.

## Methods

### *Participants*

The current study is unique in two ways from previous studies of students' perceptions of C&CJ programs in terms of student population. First, unlike most colleges and universities offering a general C&CJ program, the particular university from which the sample was drawn offers two distinctive major programs: criminal justice and law enforcement. According to the school's undergraduate catalogue, students finishing the criminal justice major (hereafter CJU) will be "well-prepared for employment and career advancement in a range of criminal justice occupations including juvenile justice, probation and parole, courts and corrections." The curriculum that CJU majors are required to complete includes courses on constitutional law, corrections, juvenile justice, the criminal court system, introductory security management, the dynamics of criminal sexual assault, women and crime, applied criminology, and gangs. The catalogue describes the law enforcement major (LE, hereafter) as a program that "helps individuals develop the knowledge, perspectives and skills for successful law enforcement careers in state, county and municipal law enforcement agencies." LE majors are required to complete courses on topics such as legal and critical issues in law enforcement, patrol operations, community-oriented policing, criminal procedure and investigation, and police culture, as well as a practicum on law enforcement skills.

Second, the student body of this particular university has a large percentage of nontraditional students. Although the literature offers no consistent definition of "nontraditional" students, it seems reasonable to define them as students who are 23 years old and older (e.g., Bell-Scriber, 2008). The majority of students in the university tend to be older and to have job and family responsibilities, although the number of traditional students has been increasing in the last several years. When the study was conducted, the average age of the students in both the CJU and LE programs was approximately 28 years,

and 33% of students in the programs were already working in the criminal justice field as police officers, correctional officers, or probation/parole officers.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Sample and Coding**

Variables	Descriptions (Coding)	N (%)
<i>GEN</i>	<i>Gender</i>	
	Male (0)	133 (52.0%) (224)*
	Female (1)	122 (47.7%) (145)*
	Missing (999)	1 (.4%) (UK)*
<i>RACE</i>	<i>Race</i>	
	White (0)	194 (75.8%) (261)*
	Hispanic or Latino (1)	4 (1.6%) (13)*
	Black or African American (2)	26 (10.2%) (38)*
	American Indian or Alaska Native (3)	5 (2.0%) (3)*
	Asian (4)	15 (5.9%) (21)*
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (5)	1 (.4%) (2)*
	Other (6)	11 (4.3%) (UK)*
<i>DRACE</i>	<i>Race (Dichotomous)</i>	
	White (0)	194 (75.8%) (261)*
	Non-white (1)	62 (24.2%) (77)*
<i>AGE</i>	Age (Number of age)	26.5344 (M) (28.5)* 6.48872 (SD) 18 (min), 50 (max) Missing: 9 (3.5%)
<i>STAU</i>	<i>Academic Standing</i>	
	Freshman (0)	14 (5.5%)
	Sophomore (1)	35 (13.7%)
	Junior (2)	90 (35.2%)
	Senior (3)	111 (43.4%)
	Other (4)	4 (1.6%)
	Missing (999)	2 (.8%)
<i>MAJ</i>	<i>Major/program</i>	
	Law Enforcement (LE, 0)	115 (44.9%)
	Criminal Justice (CJU, 1)	132 (51.6%)
	Other (2)**	9 (3.5%)
<i>GPA</i>	<i>GPA</i>	3.2910 (mean) .41650 (SD) 2.10 (min), 4.00(max) Missing: 27 (10.5%)
<i>FIRSTG</i>	<i>First generation to go to a college</i>	
	Yes (0)	101 (39.5%)
	No (1)	151 (59.0%)
	Missing (999)	4 (1.6%)

<i>EMPLY</i>	<i>Current Employed in CJ</i>	
	Yes (0)	85 (33.2%)
	No (1)	170 (66.4%)
	Missing (999)	1 (.4%)
<i>MARST</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	
	Never married (0)	187 (73%)
	Married (1)	52 (20.3%)
	Widowed (2)	1 (.4%)
	Divorced (3)	11 (4.3%)
	Separated (4)	2 (.8%)
	Missing (999)	3(1.2%)
<i>DMARST</i>	<i>Martial Status ((Dichotomous)</i>	
	Married (0)	52 (20.3%)
	Not married (1)	201 (78.5%)
	Missing (999)	3(1.2%)
<i>FAED</i>	<i>Father's highest education level</i>	
	Less than high school (0)	22 (8.6%)
	High school diploma (or GED) (1)	80 (31.3%)
	Some College, but no degree (2)	42 (16.4%)
	Associate (3)	30 (11.7%)
	Bachelor (4)	41 (16.0%)
	Master's degree or JD (5)	15 (5.9%)
	Doctoral Degree or MD (6)	8 (3.1%)
	Other (9999)	7 (2.7%)
Missing (999)	11 (4.3%)	
<i>MAED</i>	<i>Mother's highest education level</i>	
	Less than high school (0)	15 (5.9%)
	High school diploma (or GED) (1)	72 (28.1%)
	Some College (2)	46 (18%)
	Associate (3)	50 (19.5%)
	Bachelor (4)	46 (18%)
	Master's degree or JD (5)	12 (4.7%)
	Doctoral Degree or MD (6)	3 (1.2%)
	Other (9999)	3 (1.2%)
Missing (999)	9 (3.5%)	

\* denotes students' characteristics for the study population. The data were obtained by the department's advisee's report for spring 2006. Only three variables (gender, race & age) of study population were available when the study was conducted; \*\* Dual majors; UK (Unknown)

To obtain a high representation of the student population, this study initially recruited participants from all students enrolled in courses offered in CJU and LE programs during the spring of 2006. The data analysis included 256 surveys after excluding 50 surveys filled out by non-majors. Also, seven surveys were excluded due to a large amount of missing

data. Approximately 68% of the study population participated in the study. Table 1 depicts the characteristics of the sample population.

Table 1 shows that 52% of the respondents (N=133) were male and 47.7% (N=122) were female. The majority of the respondents (N=194, 75.8%) were White, and 62 respondents (24.2%) were non-White. The mean age among the sample was approximately 27 years. One third of the students (33.2%) in the sample said that they were currently employed in the criminal justice system. Almost 45% of the students were LE majors, and 52% of the students were CJU majors. Table 1 also shows that the study sample represents the study population relatively well in regard to gender, race, and age.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected during the first three weeks of January 2012. The researcher contacted course instructors to recruit potential study participants. Instructors received basic information regarding the research (e.g., purpose of the study, data collection method, and human subject protections) along with the survey questionnaire and were asked to participate in the study. Once an instructor decided to participate in the study, he or she distributed the survey to students in the class. Instructors asked students to read a consent form attached to the survey before participating in the survey. This consent form gave students several pieces of information, including the purpose of the study, the data collection method and procedure, the time it would take to fill out the survey, human subject issues, and the researcher's contact information. Those students who decided to participate in the study completed the survey. Students who had already filled out the survey were instructed not to fill it out again. Once the participants completed the surveys, instructors collected the surveys and returned them to the researcher.

### **Measures of Variables**

Perception of college education in C&CJ was measured using five items: P1 ("College education in CJ is essential for my career goal"), P2 ("College education in CJ is essential for my current/future job"), P3 ("College education in CJ will help me perform my job better"), P4 ("College education in CJ will help me receive a high salary"), and P5 ("College education in CJ will help me get promotions"). The survey asked respondents to respond to each statement on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 10 means "strongly agree." Also, students' overall perception of college education in C&CJ was measured by the average scores among the five items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .847$ ).

## **Results**

### **Perceptions of C&CJ Education**

This study found that students' overall perceptions of CJ education were relatively favorable. As shown in Table 2, the overall average score for the five survey items was 8.2906, indicating students' tendency to strongly agree that their college education in C&CJ is essential to their career goal and to their current or future job. The highest score was found for item 1 ("College education in CJ is essential for my career goal") ( $\bar{X} = 8.5630$ ), and the lowest score was found for item 4 ("College education in CJ will help me receive a high salary") ( $\bar{X} = 7.9255$ ). Interestingly, the lowest standard deviation was found for item 1 (2.17468), indicating a lack of variability among students' answers when it comes to their belief that higher education is essential to their career goal.

**Table 2. Overall Perceptions of CJ Education**

Item	N	$\bar{X}$ (Mean)	Mode	S. D.	Range
P1	254	8.5630	10.00	2.17468	9.00
P2	255	8.2392	10.00	2.62664	9.00
P3	255	8.4510	10.00	2.30126	9.00
P4	255	7.9255	10.00	2.29479	9.00
P5	255	8.1882	10.00	2.20858	9.00
P	254	8.2906	10.00	1.81382	8.00

P1 (College education in CJ is essential for my career goal); P2 (College education in CJ is essential for my current/future job; P3 (College education in CJ will help me perform my job better.); P4 (College education in CJ will help me receive a high salary.) and; P5 (College education in CJ will help me get promotions.); P (overall perceptions: Average scores among five items).

**Perceptions of C&CJ Education & Selected Variables**

Table 3 presents the bivariate Pearson’s correlations among students’ perceptions of CJ education and selected variables, along with their probability levels.

**Table 3. Correlation: Perceptions of CJ Education & Selected Variables**

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P	MAJ	STAU	GEN	DRACE	AGE	GPA	FIRSTG	EMPTY	FAED	MAED	MARST
P1	1.00	.683*** .000	.573*** .000	.410*** .000	.432*** .000	.786*** .000	-.132* .035	-.057 .366	-.051 .420	-.023 .719	-.033 .608	.115 .084	-.022 .724	.016 .805	.118 .069	-.016 .799	.008 .902
P2		1.00	.637*** .000	.396*** .000	.413*** .000	.816*** .000	-.151* .016	-.091 .148	-.022 .727	.026 .680	-.100 .119	.096 .923	.010 .879	-.029 .641	.072 .265	-.038 .552	-.083 .188
P3			1.00	.463*** .000	.515*** .000	.803*** .000	-.059 .352	-.069 .275	-.008 .902	.062 .324	-.036 .575	.030 .657	-.065 .306	-.019 .765	.072 .632	-.100 .119	-.034 .587
P4				1.00	.780*** .000	.758*** .000	-.039 .531	-.006 .919	.017 .781	.123 .051	-.124 .052	-.056 .398	-.070 .270	-.131* .037	.076 .246	-.097 .131	-.036 .574
P5					1.00	.779*** .000	-.111 .076	.056 .374	-.090 .154	0.36 .572	-.086 .179	-.026 .700	-.099 .116	-.138* .027	.048 .461	-.124 .054	-.128* .042
P						1.00	-.138* .028	-.070 .270	-.047 .454	.052 .406	-.089 .165	.017 .796	-.053 .401	-.070 .268	.112 .087	-.077 .230	-.064 .314
MAJ							1.00	.048 .446	.403*** .000	.141* .024	.144* .024	-.031 .645	-.226*** .000	.158* .011	-.136* .035	-.101 .117	.095 .131
STAU								1.00	.037 .558	-.046 .470	.176** .006	.060 .370	-.022 .734	-.088 .165	.028 .664	.063 .329	.037 .564
GEN									1.00	.043 .497	.090 .161	.097 .146	-.103 .105	0.58 .354	-.021 .743	.002 .972	.080 .208
DRACE										1.00	.230*** .000	-.182** .006	-.218*** .000	.085 .179	-.187** .004	-.214** .001	.049 .438
AGE											1.00	.050 .462	-.218** .001	-.066 .300	-.197** .003	-.198** .002	.492** .000
GPA												1.00	.031 .641	-.024 .719	-.036 .598	.017 .803	.116 .081
FIRSTG													1.00	-.105 .097	.556*** .000	.576*** .000	-.144* .023
EMPTY														1.00	-.142* .029	-.159* .013	0.22 .726
FAED															1.00	.528*** .000	-.138* .034
MAED																1.00	-.171** .008
MARST																	1.00

Pearson’s values are presented in base font, *p* values are italicized; \**p*<.05, \*\**p*<.01, \*\*\**p*<.001; P is a scale of five items; MAJ (Major), STAU (Class Standing), GEN (Gender), DRACE (Race: Dichotomized), FIRSTG (First Generation to go to college), EMPTY (Employment Status), FAED (Father’s Educational Level), MAED (Mother’s Educational Level), MARST (Marital Status)

As Table 3 shows, students' demographic variables, such as gender, race/ethnicity, and age, were not significantly related to their perceptions of C&CJ education. Similarly, students' academically related variables (e.g., class standing and GPA), along with several other variables including their parents' educational level and the first generation in their family to go a four-year college, did not seem to be significantly related to students' perceptions. Only three variables were found to be significantly related to students' perceptions: academic major, employment status, and marital status. Independent samples t-tests were performed to determine how specifically these variables relate to student's perceptions (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Perceptions of C & CJ Education**

Item	N	$\bar{X}$ (Mean)	S. D.	t-value	df	p (Sig.)
<u>Majors &amp; Perceptions of CJ Education</u>						
P1	LE(n=114)	8.8860	1.94053	2.121	242.851	.035*
	CJU(n=131)	8.3130	2.28737			
P2	LE(n=115)	8.6435	2.32527	2.103	243.617	.037*
	CJU(n=131)	7.9618	2.75794			
P3	LE(n=115)	8.6087	2.31962	.978	244	.329
	CJU(n=131)	8.3206	2.29135			
P4	LE(n=115)	7.9913	2.32641	.286	244	.775
	CJU(n=131)	7.9084	2.22036			
P5	LE(n=115)	8.4870	2.06629	1.981	244	.049*
	CJU(n=131)	7.9313	2.30114			
P	LE(n=114)	8.5632	1.69780	2.079	243	.039*
	CJU(n=131)	8.0870	1.86302			
<u>Employment in CJ &amp; Perceptions of CJ Education</u>						
P1	Yes (n=85)	8.85176	2.40838	-.247	251	.805
	No (n=169)	8.5893	2.05997			
P2	Yes (n=85)	8.3412	2.64374	.28675	.467	252
	No (n=169)	8.1775	2.62846			
P3	Yes (n=85)	8.5059	2.23939	.299	252	.765
	No (n=169)	8.4142	2.34141			
P4	Yes (n=85)	8.3412	2.11318	2.101	252	.037*
	No (n=169)	7.7041	2.35939			
P5	Yes (n=85)	8.6118	1.92164	2.360	198.638	.019*
	No (n=169)	7.9645	2.31685			
P	Yes (n=85)	8.4635	1.69121	1.111	251	.268
	No (n=169)	8.1952	1.87373			

\*P<.05



As shown in Table 4, overall, LE majors ( $\bar{x}=8.5632$ ) were significantly more likely to have favorable perceptions of C&CJ higher education than CJU majors were ( $\bar{x}=8.0870$ ,  $p>.05$ ). In fact, compared to CJU majors, LE majors tended to strongly agree with all five items (P1 through P5). However, statistical differences between these two groups were found among three items (P1, P2, and P5,  $p>.05$ ).

When asked whether they were currently employed in the criminal justice system or related agencies, 85 students said yes and 169 students said no. Students who were employed in the CJ system showed slightly more favorable perceptions than their counterparts in their overall program perception (P). However, an independent t-test showed that these two groups' perceptions did not differ significantly. When each item was separately examined, it emerged that students who were currently employed in CJ agencies were significantly more likely to believe that CJ education will help them to earn a higher salary (P4) and to get promotions (P5) ( $p>.05$ ).

### ***Decision to Go to College and Obstacles***

When students were asked about their main reason for pursuing a four-year degree, the majority of respondents (33%; N=85) answered that they anticipated it to be "personally satisfying." The second most common reason was "to advance career" (28.5% of respondents; N=73), and the third reason was "a job requirement" (almost 12% of respondents; n=30). Only 12 respondents (4.7%) said that they wanted to change their careers. The two least desirable reasons to pursue higher education were "for salary purpose" and "for promotion in job." Interestingly, Pearson's chi-square (20.370,  $df=6$ ) shows that males and females differed significantly in terms of why they chose to pursue a four-year degree ( $p<.05$ ). The most common reason among females (46.8%) was personal satisfaction, whereas it was career advancement among males (35.5%). Also, the least desirable reason among females (1.8%) was "for promotion," whereas it was "for salary" among males (0.8%).

When students were asked what their main obstacle was to pursuing a four-year degree, the two most predominant answers were "conflict with work schedules" (29.3%; N=75) and "finances" (28.5%; N=75). Family obligations were identified as an obstacle by 24 students (9.4%). Twenty-nine students (11.3%) said they did not have any obstacles. Lack of motivation and course availability were found to be the least common obstacles among respondents. When the relationship between race/ethnicity and obstacles was re-examined, it was found that the most common obstacle among non-Whites (39.3%) was "finances," whereas "work schedule" was the most common obstacle among Whites (36.2%). However, the result of chi-square test shows no significant difference between White and non-White students.

### ***Other Findings***

Several interesting results from the present study are worth mentioning. In Table 3, correlation analysis shows a close relationship between a student's gender or race/ethnicity and his or her major. Among 115 LE majors, there were 90 males and 25 females, whereas there were 37 males and 94 females among 131 CJU majors (for details, see Yim, 2009). In fact, t-tests showed that male students were more likely to choose law enforcement programs than female students were ( $p<.001$ ). In the same way, among 115 LE majors, there were 97 Whites and only 18 non-Whites, whereas there were 89 Whites and 43

non-Whites among 131 CJU majors. Further t-tests also showed that White students were more likely to choose LE programs than non-White students were ( $p < .05$ ) (for details, see Schanz, 2012).

As Table 3 shows, this study found an association between students' race/ethnicity and whether they are the first generation in their family to go to college (*FIRSTG*). When students were asked whether they were the first generation in their family to go to college, 39.5% ( $n=101$ ) responded yes and 59% ( $n=151$ ) responded no. Among the "yes" respondents, 64.4% of students ( $n=65$ ) were White and 35.6% ( $n=36$ ) were non-White. However, among the "no" respondents, 83.4% of respondents were White and only 16.6% of respondents were non-White. In fact, a Pearson's chi-square shows that non-White students were significantly more likely to be the first generation in their family to go to college than White students were ( $p < .01$ ). When examining the relationship between students' major and *FIRSTG*, this study found that only 28% of LE majors but almost 50% of CJU majors said that they were the first generation in their family going to college. In fact, a chi-square shows that these two groups were significantly different ( $df=2$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

When examining the age factor in relation to students' major, this study found that almost 47% of LE majors and 68% of CJU majors were nontraditional students (age 23 or older). A chi-square shows that CJU majors were significantly more likely to be nontraditional students than LE majors were ( $df=2$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Interestingly, a student's age was found to be inversely but significantly related to his or her parents' educational level ( $p < .01$ ). When a bivariate regression was performed to predict students' age when starting college based on their parents' educational level, beta ( $\beta$ ) was found to be -0.124 for the father's educational level and -0.129 for the mother's educational level. This particular result indicates that the higher the parent's educational level was, the earlier students started their college education. This result also indicates that the mother's educational level has a slightly higher impact on a student's college education than the father's educational level does. The R-square was found to be 0.49, indicating a relatively strong relationship between students' college-entry age and parental educational level.

Parental education level is also a very important variable to predict students' perceptions of CJ education. When a regression analysis was performed using the backward method, several independent variables were added to the model, including gender, GPA, race/ethnicity, age, marital status, first generation in the family going to college, mother's education level, and father's educational level. Interestingly, only two variables, the father's education level and the mother's educational level, were included in the final model ( $p < .05$ ). This result indicates that when we predict students' overall perception of C&CJ education, their parental educational level is the only variable significantly related to it. It was also found that the higher their father's educational level ( $\beta=0.220$ ), the higher students' perception of their C&CJ education was, and the lower their mother's educational level ( $\beta=-0.185$ ), the higher students' perception of their C&CJ education was. In other words, a student whose father has a higher education level tends to perceive their program more favorably than a student whose father has a lower educational level does. However, a student whose mother has a higher education level will likely have a less favorable perception of their program than a student whose mother has a lower educational level does.

## Discussion

Overall, in the present study, CJ majors had a highly favorable perception of their C&CJ higher education. More specifically, LE majors were more likely than CJU majors to believe that higher education in C&CJ was essential for their career goals as well as for their current or future jobs. This study cannot provide any theoretical explanations for this finding. However, as far as their careers or jobs were concerned, LE majors seemed to appreciate the importance of college education more than CJU majors did. In the future, studies should be designed that can offer theoretical explanations about the relationship between majors (LE vs. CJU) and perceptions of college education.

Students already employed in CJ-related fields were significantly more likely than their counterparts to believe that CJ education would help them to earn higher salaries and get promotions. However, when a chi-square was performed to examine whether a student's current employment status in the CJ system is related to his or her decision to pursue a four-year degree, it found no significant relationship between these two variables. Additional studies should be conducted to examine further how or whether these two variables are related.

Students' gender, race/ethnicity, and GPA were not significantly related to their perception of CJ education. However, it should be mentioned that non-Whites seemed to have more favorable perceptions toward CJ education than their counterparts. Although the present study cannot determine why non-Whites hold more favorable attitudes than Whites do, one can speculate that for some reason, non-White students seem to appreciate the importance of their higher education more than White students do. Surveying 400 CJ students from 12 four-year colleges and universities, Krimmel and Tartaro (1999) found that "non-whites believe that finding a job would not be easy" for them due to their race/ethnicity (p. 286). That attitude could lead them to look for other resources to help them in their job search, such as seeking a college degree.

Although males' perception of CJ education did not differ significantly from that of females, males gave higher scores than females did to all the items except item 4 ("College education in CJ will help me receive a high salary"). The literature shows mixed results regarding whether gender is directly related to students' perceptions of their C&CJ programs. Surveying 147 graduates from a CJ program in Australia, Wimshurst and Allard (2007) reported that gender was not significantly related to either a student's educational experience (e.g., "the [CJ] degree gave me a good knowledge of the criminal justice system") or a student's employment outcomes (e.g., "Every day at work I encounter situations that my degree helped prepare me for"). On the contrary, Yim (2001) found that male students were significantly more likely to favorably perceive their programs than female students were. Surveying 411 recent graduates of eight criminal justice program in Louisiana, Winfree and Evans (1984) found that females regarded C&CJ education as "less meaningful, career-wise," than males did (p. 75). The relationship between gender and students' perceptions of higher education in C&CJ programs should be carefully and thoroughly examined in the near future.

## Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to examine how C&CJ undergraduates perceive their higher education. Despite several limitations mentioned above, the current study has added important findings to C&CJ literature. It found that overall; C&CJ majors from this particular sample hold favorable perceptions of their higher education. It also found that

students who seek a career in the LE area are significantly more likely to hold favorable perceptions of their program than students who seek work in a non-LE area (e.g., corrections). Understanding C&CJ students' perception of their program is important for C&CJ educators because, as stated earlier, this type of data can eventually help faculty better educate students (Benekos, et al., 2002).

The data from the current study provide great news for *us* as educators, since at least *we* know that our students think that we offer them something of value as far as their career goes. This is also great news for our students, because at least *they* do not think that pursuing a college degree in C&CJ is a waste of their time or money. Whether *our* students are much different from *other* students in the U.S. is outside scope of this paper, but at least as far as our students are concerned, this study found that they believe their college education in C&CJ to be very important for their careers in the CJ system.

More than 20 years ago, Joan Petersilia (1991) said in her presidential address celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the American Society of Criminology, "Criminology is *now* a respected academic field, rigorous in research, discriminating in its hiring and advancement criteria, and highly productive" (p. 2, emphasis added). However, some scholars were cautious. Examining program size and matriculation numbers, Todd Clear wrote in his 2001 American Criminal Justice Sciences presidential address that "criminal justice is certainly large enough to matter in the broad scheme of higher education. But it is also true that the *nature* of the criminal justice degree matters even more than its *frequency*" (p. 723). After all, as Courtright and Mackey (2004) pointed out, it seems that the "jury is still out regarding the importance and efficiency of higher education in CJ, particularly law enforcement" (p. 313). Perhaps it is *our* job to convince the jury of the importance and efficiency of higher education in C&CJ in the U.S. As Braswell and Whitehead pointed out, we need to let the world know that "we are not just teaching our students about criminal justice and criminology, we are also teaching them ... about their potential for making a difference in the world around them" (p. 220).

### **Limitations**

For several reasons, this study's findings should not be generalized. First, although its sample size is good at over 250 participants, and 68% of the study population participated in the study, it recruited its research participants using a convenience sampling. Also, the current findings may be limited by the fact that the data were collected from one institution in the Midwest. To further examine students' career goals and their perceptions of careers, future studies should collect data from several geographical locations and from samples more representative of populations in terms of gender and race/ethnicity.

It may be argued that the present study's results are also limited in that it examined only currently enrolled students, rather than graduates working in the field. However, over 33% of study participants were currently employed in the CJ field when the study was conducted. Also, as mentioned earlier, a t-test found no significant difference between students who were employed in the CJ field and their counterparts in terms of their perception of their C&CJ program. However, future researchers are advised to examine how graduates' perceptions are different from those of non-graduates, if in fact they do differ.

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