

2020

# Austin Police Department Training Academy Curriculum Review

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## Austin Police Department Training Academy Curriculum Review

On April 9, 2020 the City of Austin entered into a consulting contract with Dr. Miguel Ferguson, founder and owner of an educational curriculum development company (OfCourse!), to conduct a thorough review of specific Austin Police Department (APD) training Academy courses. The contractor's responsibilities include reviews of specific course material (to include lesson plans, handouts, PowerPoint slides, assigned work, videos, and other materials) in the following courses:

Cultural Diversity

History of Policing

Professionalism and Ethics

Fair and Impartial Policing

Services for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired

Multiculturalism and Human Relations

Spanish

Transgender

LGBTQ

Racial Profiling

The review is also to include up to three hours of course observations, the provision of appropriate assessment tools, and recommendations intended to enhance and strengthen the content and pedagogy of each course as a means to "optimize teaching effectiveness and long-term retention of information being taught at the academy." *The purview of this evaluation is thus limited to the content and teaching methodologies used in these specific courses.*

Though the original intention was to observe classes on-site at the academy, due to the risks of Covid-19 infections among instructors and cadets, shortly after the contract was signed a decision was made to transition the courses being evaluated to online delivery using Microsoft Teams software. The instructors and cadets at the Training Academy are to be commended for the flexibility needed to rapidly transition coursework to an online, synchronous format. Fortunately, the Microsoft Teams system allows for sessions to be taped. Therefore, in lieu of class observations taking place on-site at the academy, all courses were viewed online asynchronously or synchronously if the schedule allowed.

### **Information Sources for the Evaluation**

- **Class observation.** At the beginning of the current cadet class classes were held in Academy training center classrooms. In April as a response to Covid-19 all classes were transitioned to an online setting. Class observations conducted as part of this evaluation were completed in real-time online or viewed as part of class recordings in Microsoft Teams.

- **Austin Police Department Cadet Course Review** packets for each topic listed above. Each packet contains a lesson plan cover sheet identifying the instructors, individuals who prepared the lesson plan, instructional/examination methods, reference materials, learning objectives, PowerPoint slides/handouts, and all written and video-based content covered in the course.
- **141st and 142nd End of Academy Critiques.** A total of 56 surveys were completed at the end of the 141<sup>st</sup> and 142<sup>nd</sup> Academy training courses. The surveys provide space to comment on each individual instructor and asked questions about most and least favorite courses, subjects that could be added/removed or shortened/expanded, areas of particular competence as a result of the training, overall likes/dislikes of the Academy experience, and recommendations from the cadets on how to make the Academy better. For purposes of this evaluation, attention was paid to responses that were directly related to those courses outlined above, and to responses that directly related to teaching methods and effectiveness.
- **Instructor Surveys.** At the beginning of the evaluation, and in conjunction with the Organizational and Training Manager at APD, a brief survey instrument was developed and shared with current instructors. The survey included elements related to background demographic information for each instructor (ethnicity and gender), education levels attained, Academy teaching experience, learning theories employed, additional trainings/certificates obtained, and personal and professional benefits associated with teaching at the APD Academy.
- **Best Practices Research.** The evaluator spent 2-3 hours on each course topic to identify best practices, evidence-based research assessments, new pedagogical techniques, and current resources that could improve teaching effectiveness and retention of information.

### Notes on the Evaluation

An independent or peer review of teaching methods and classroom effectiveness is a routine practice in higher education. Peer review typically includes class observation, a review of learning materials, lesson plans and assignments, and discussions with the instructor about learning objectives, teaching strategies, techniques, assignments and preliminary student feedback. A good peer or independent evaluation can help clarify teaching standards for a department or school and provide an important complement to student evaluations. The first phase of a teaching evaluation should also be *formative* in nature; that is, dedicated to nurturing the development of an instructor (Chism, 2007). However, because this evaluation began after a training academy had already commenced, and due to restrictions related to the Covid-19 outbreak and the desire to have an evaluation completed in as timely a manner as possible, it is best to think of this evaluation as *quasi-formative* in nature.

### Background and Context

This evaluation originated in response to Austin [City Council Resolution 66](#), which requires a review of specific courses offered at the Austin Police Department Training Academy (outlined in the beginning of this report). The evaluation was prompted by concerns among community groups of alleged racist comments made and tacitly sanctioned by upper administration within APD (Sanders, 2019) and systemic racism within decision-making structures at APD (Sanders, 2019). This evaluation also takes place within the context of protests in hundreds of municipalities (including Austin) that occurred in the

wake of the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. It should also be noted that the recent deaths of Michael Ramos and Javier Ambler at the hands of local police authorities have renewed calls for reforms in the APD training academy (Austin-Statesman, 2020). Prior to these events, however, there were calls to reform the training of police cadets to include psychological, emotional, and cultural factors as a means to augment personal well-being, professional behavior, and enhanced decision-making abilities among police academy graduates (Blumberg, 2019; Lum, Koper & Gill, 2016). Finally, the evaluation is being conducted in conjunction with the Organizational Development and Training Manager at APD.

The following sections provide brief and preliminary summaries of the evaluation components noted above. The final section of the report describes four general recommendations to reform training methods at the Academy that are tiered in relation to costs and ease of implementation.

### **Class Observations**

Immediately prior to the beginning of this evaluation Academy courses had transitioned to an online format using Microsoft Teams (“Teams”). Teams provides a digital hub that connects instructors and students in real time in a live meeting. Within Teams instructors can converse with students or facilitate discussion between students, share slides, files, and videos, and record classroom sessions. Regarding course materials, it is understood that cadets are given a flash drive with information slides, handouts etc. at the beginning of the Academy. Though there is some variation, in general the observed courses proceed as follows:

- Prior to class, cadets are required to cover limited amounts of information about the upcoming topic.
- In class, APD instructors introduce the material using handouts, PowerPoint slides and film/video segments. The material is given in sequential order, typically interspersed with examples from the instructor’s experience. Students are also asked to read parts of the material and individually comment, provide their own examples, answer questions prompted by the instructor, or ask specific questions related to the topic being covered. Occasionally there are pop quizzes to ascertain knowledge and retention of material previously covered.
- In general, APD instructors exercise a tight framing of the issues being covered and there is a rigid formality to the classroom environment. Instructors refer to cadets as “Cadet (Last Name),” and instructors are referred to as “Sir” and “Ma’am.” Cadets refer to their cadet numbers when responding to queries or asking questions. This provides a para-military ambience to the classroom environment.
- A survey of course packets used by APD instructors indicates that courses are highly structured and emphasize a breadth of material rather than depth. This means that cadets are exposed to a significant amount of new learning but given limited time to process the information, explore ambiguities that may be present, question previous assumptions or beliefs, or extend and apply their knowledge in new ways.

### **Instructor Surveys**

Early in the evaluation the consultant and the Organizational and Training Manager devised a short survey instrument for current instructors of the courses under study to complete. The survey includes demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity, and highest education level attained and background variables related to teaching experience, years spent as a police officer and APD instructor, additional

training received, learning theories employed in classes, and personal and professional benefits of being an instructor at APD. It should be noted that all instructors at APD are recruited from among the ranks of current officers. At this writing surveys from eight of the fifteen instructors have been received. Survey results are discussed below.

- Among the eight surveys returned from current instructors six are male and two are female. Six identify as White/Non-Hispanic and two identify as members of ethnic minority groups (Asian and Hispanic). No African Americans are employed at APD as instructors in courses related to diversity and inclusion.
- Education levels among the APD instructors surveyed vary. Four of the instructors have earned a bachelor's degree, one has an Associate of Arts (AA) degree, and three have high school diplomas. Teaching experience at APD also varies. Two of the instructors have taught at the Academy for nine or more years and five have been instructors for two or fewer years.
- The surveys asked instructors if they employed specific learning theories as part of their classes. Most did not indicate knowledge or use of a particular theory, but instead described activities they employed in classes (role play, experiential examples, pop quizzes, film and video snippets, random questions directed at individual cadets, and physical exercise). One instructor identified their learning strategies as applied "behaviorism, constructivism, and humanism." Another instructor indicated that the Organizational and Training Manager had provided valuable insight about how best to teach adult learners.
- Instructors at the Academy teach multiple classes throughout the Academy curriculum and appear to engage in a significant amount of additional training. Indeed, two of the instructors identified the ability to access additional training as a professional benefit to being an instructor at APD. Respondents indicated training took place as part of formal certificate programs, webinars, and conferences. One instructor spent two days shadowing an experienced counterpart in another city.
- Respondents were asked about personal and professional benefits associated with being an instructor at APD. Responses indicate there are few if any professional benefits in terms of pay, prestige, or promotion. Indeed, several instructors noted that they took pay cuts to serve as instructors. Professional benefits that were noted include "good schedules," "access to training opportunities" (noted above), and the "satisfaction of teaching future officers." Personal benefits included the joy of teaching, the ability to make new friendships, and access to exercise facilities at the Academy.

### **End of Academy Critiques**

A total of 56 end of training critiques were completed in January 2020 by cadets from the 141<sup>st</sup> - 142<sup>nd</sup> class (for clarity, the cadet class that immediately preceded the class currently being evaluated). Survey items asked cadets to identify most and least favorite courses, subjects that could be added/removed or shortened/expanded, areas of particular competence as a result of the training, overall likes/dislikes of the Academy experience, and recommendations to make the Academy better. Attention was paid to only those responses that directly relate to the ten courses included as part of this evaluation and responses that mentioned teaching methods, classroom effectiveness or course content.

- In answer to the question *Which classes taught during the academy were the most useful?*, among the ten courses under review as part of this evaluation only Spanish was mentioned (n=6). A sample of

comments from cadets include: *“Spanish was incredibly helpful; Spanish was an amazing week and I had a lot of fun; As someone who only spoke English I now feel confident in my ability to communicate in Spanish. One cadet noted “It would be nice to have a second week before CLRP;” another suggested that Spanish should be integrated into more of the coursework when possible.*

● Revealingly, many classes within the purview of this study were included in answer to the question *Which classes taught during the academy were the least useful?* The chart below indicates the specific course and the number of times it was mentioned as being one of the least useful.

Community Engagement	5	LGBT	3
Diversity	4	Spanish	4
Ethics	2	Transgender	2

As is evident, the comments include references to the length and substance of the courses and the gender, ethnicity, and attitudes of the instructors:

*“Full week of LGBTQ too much”*

*“Too many courses on multiculturalism”*

*“Way too many classes on diversity”*

*“All of the multicultural relations classes that were taught by white males”*

*“None of these classes were taught by minorities and the instructors always downplayed discrimination”*

*“Any of the multicultural classes that were not taken seriously by any of the academy staff”*

*“Cultural Diversity being taught by a white man; Too much cultural awareness classes”*

*“Ethics was repetitive; could have been shortened”*

*“Remove some of the multicultural engagement classes.”*

Because cadets had much to say about this question, two of the more extensive answers are included in their entirety:

- *“Create one block of instruction that focuses on the real discrimination throughout law enforcement and have it taught by men and women with different skin colors, sexual orientations, religions, and so on.”*
- *“I was quite disgusted by the amount of city-mandated propaganda that we had shoved down our throat (Transgender/LGBT, Cultural Diversity, & almost every Community Engagement presentation).”*

Similarly, when asked *“What subjects should be expanded and what subjects do you believe should be shortened?”* six cadets indicated that classes on LGBT topics and multiculturalism should be shortened or removed: *“The majority of the cultural diversity and LGBT+ classes could be removed;” “LGBTQ week could be shortened; LGBT is redundant.”*

● In answer to the question *“In your opinion, how can we make the Academy better?”* there were more references to diversity, inclusivity, and redundancy in instruction: *“Include more females”; “Cultural Diversity should be taught by someone of a culturally diverse background;” “Take away a lot of the*

*cultural classes.” Without a doubt, the most in-depth and prescient response offered to any question on the survey is included below in its entirety:*

*- “It should be impossible to ignore that a major issue facing policing concerns the topic of race. It is such a profound issue that even established police departments like APD can make national news concerning matters (of) race and racial discrimination at the highest levels of administration. Every single cadet who graduates and becomes a police officer will undoubtedly come in contact with a person who believes, whether accurately or inaccurately, that the contact or the officer's behavior during the contact is a direct result of their race. With all of this in mind, I believe the academy's inability to honestly deal with the issue of race is a missed opportunity. To put this in perspective, we had 2 separate academic blocks about the LGBT community (including the Transgender class- which was amazing and very informative), both classes were taught by a member of the LGBT community, and the information they provided us was testable and contributed to our overall academic grade. Interestingly enough, there was a slide in the LGBT presentation addressing the difficulties of being both a minority and a member of the LGBT community but that instructor just glossed over any difficulties and continued talking about the community as a whole. Meanwhile, Intermediate Cultural Diversity was taught by a white male who, by his own admission, had never really experienced any discrimination. While the instructor for that class was a super chill dude who usually goes out of his way to make his classes as entertaining as possible (which is always appreciated), the whole issue of race/culture in policing seemed overly minimized.*

*Not every department is the same caliber as APD and people still have negative interactions with the police (not necessarily use of force interactions, but negative nonetheless). And Austin is still listed as the fastest growing city in America so that means there are a lot of people are coming into town with assorted views/experiences with police, and those views (in addition to what comes from media and social media) can influence their interactions with us. Officer safety should never be compromised, but in the same way the LGBT instructors wanted us to be aware of why someone in that community might have a certain reaction to the police, similar consideration should be taken in regards to racial diversity especially those that a historically negative and/or publicized association with the police and especially for those cadets who have never had an intellectual conversation with someone outside of their own race. We have watched the 1991 Rodney King video three times (if not 4 times) in the academy, which leans to the idea that issues with race are solely a thing of the past. Having a class taught about the current issues about racial diversity taught by a more qualified instructor (ex: district representative, a minority officer- maybe even a black officer since we never had a black officer teach our cadet class) would be a benefit because understanding why someone might mistrust your uniform is important to effective policing.”*

● At the end of the survey, cadets were asked the following: “Any other comments concerning the academy, adjunct instructors, or administrative staff that you would like to comment on?” Answers that related to teaching and classroom techniques often mentioned the uninspired nature of the teaching practices, redundancy in content, the need for more time devoted to meaningful role plays, better test questions and feedback on test scores, and improved behavior on the part of instructors. See comments below:

*- “Too much reading from slides; instructor will just read what is on the slide – very unhelpful;” “Provide reviews for major tests; better test questions (clarity); tests should be proofread for grammar, spelling and accuracy;” “Scenarios help us learn more; I did not like death by PP;” “Redundant aspects of courses*

*could be removed to either shorten the academy or allow more time for PT, DT, firearms, role plays, etc.”*  
*“Try to make the scenarios/role play more realistic;”* *“Helpful when guest speakers or specialized units came in to teach a class on their topic matter;”* *“Incorporating Spanish throughout the academy would be helpful rather than going through a week of Spanish to then forget it due to lack of use;”* *“I did not like that ICs talk to cadets in a degrading manner;”* *“The yelling and berating by ICs did more damage than help;”* *“Incorporate Spanish speaking scenarios into CLRP;”* *“More hands on rather than PowerPoints;”* *“more hands-on training and less classroom time.”*

## **Summary**

Instructor Surveys: As noted, the evaluator received completed surveys from approximately half of the instructors currently listed as teaching in one of the ten courses related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Though there appear to be financial penalties and few professional benefits associated with being an instructor at the APD Academy, all of the instructors volunteered to teach at the Academy as a means to contribute to APD and influence the conduct and training of new officers. Each instructor indicated personal reasons they enjoyed teaching, and a willingness to participate in extensive outside training to improve their knowledge base. The surveys (and class observations) also reveal extensive police officer experience on the part of instructors but limited educational attainment and teaching experience, and a limited theoretical knowledge base related to successful adult education and training. These concerns are addressed in every level of the recommendations that follow.

End of Academy Critiques: An old rule of thumb in survey research is that if it is important enough to conduct a survey it should be equally important to evaluate and act upon the responses. A total of 56 End of Academy survey responses were evaluated for connections to the ten diversity, equity, and inclusion courses and for statements related to curriculum and teaching methodology in those courses. Responses indicate that only one of the courses (Spanish) was viewed as being among the most useful and a plethora (Community Engagement, Diversity, Ethics, LGBT, Spanish, and Transgender) were viewed as being the least useful or in need of being cut or shortened. Some of these comments were the result of opposition to the content and others as a commentary on the lack of diversity, expertise, and inspired methodology among the instructors.

With regard to curriculum and classroom pedagogy, a comment from one of the cadets on the classroom experience (“Death by PowerPoint”) is telling. Numerous comments focused on the redundancy of information and the ubiquitous use of slides and handouts. On the other hand, the ability to work through real-life scenarios and engage in role play was viewed positively. These comments provide support for the Academy to develop curriculum and teaching methodologies that are based on Adult Learning Theory and an Active Learning Model targeted towards the training of adult learners.

## **Recommendations**

This preliminary report provides general recommendations that can be applied in varying degrees across all of the course domains as a means to strengthen content, teaching effectiveness, and long-term retention of information learned in the Academy. For the sake of clarity, the recommendations have been organized into four levels on the basis of costs and ease of implementation. Level I recommendations can be implemented by the Academy and its instructors relatively quickly and with minimal costs. Level IV recommendations would require a significant outlay of resources, funds,

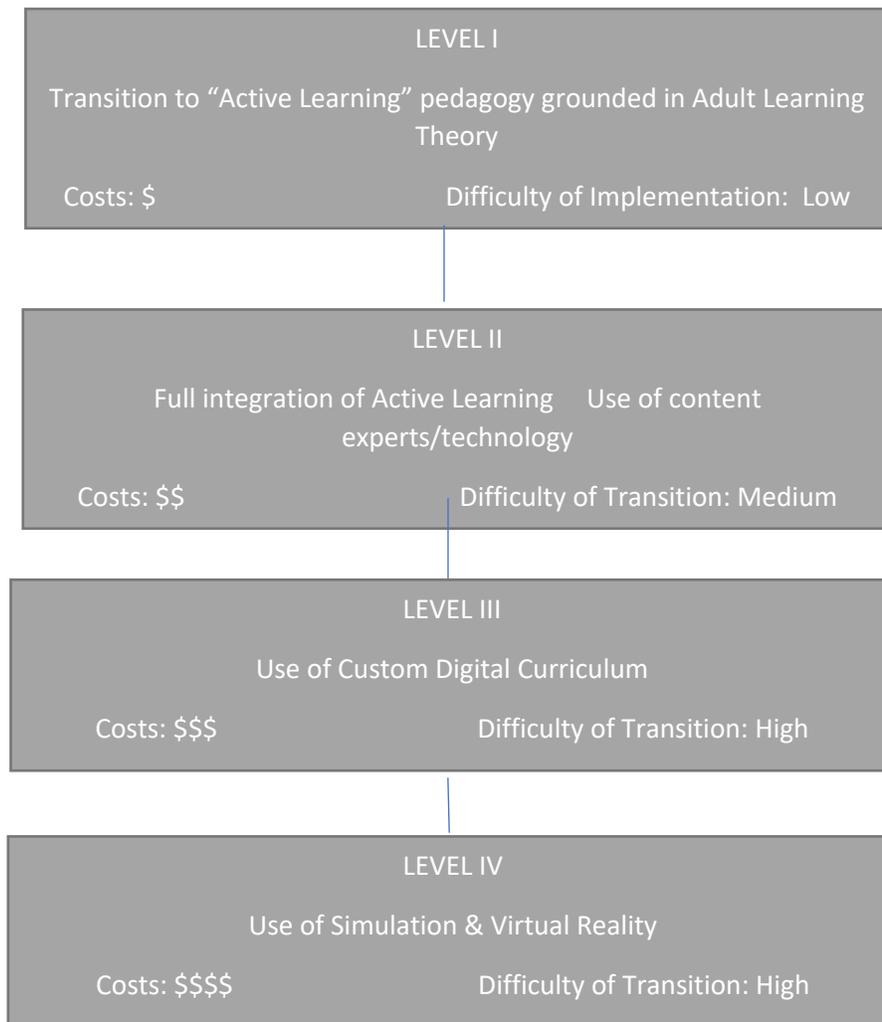
expertise, effort and time on the part of APD, the Academy, the Organizational Development and Training Manager, and instructors. The following sections describe the major components of each level.

**Level I:**

1. Provide instructors with the resources necessary to learn about using Adult Learning Theory in their teaching. Particularly to be aware of and act according to the Knowles' [Five Assumptions of Adult Learners](#) (Merriam, 2017).
  - i. *Self-Concept* – Because adults are at a mature developmental stage, they have a more secure self-concept than children. This allows them to take part in directing their own learning.
  - ii. *Past Learning Experience* – Adults have a vast array of experiences to draw on as they learn, as opposed to children who are in the process of gaining new experiences.
  - iii. *Readiness to Learn* – Many adults have reached a point in which they see the value of education and are ready to be serious about and focused on learning.
  - iv. *Practical Reasons to Learn* – Adults are looking for practical, problem-centered approaches to learning. Many adults return to continuing education for specific practical reasons, such as entering a new field.
  - v. *Driven by Internal Motivation* – While many children are driven by external motivators – such as punishment if they get bad grades or rewards if they get good grades – adults are more internally motivated
2. Transition the Academy curriculum and teaching methods to an “Active Learning Model.” Active Learning Models can work well with adult learners who are disciplined, are interested in developing knowledge and skills, and can apply higher order thinking via a range of activities. Sometimes referred to as a “flipped classroom,” courses that utilize Active Learning Models expose new material to students outside of class and provide a multitude of activities in the classroom that allow students (cadets) the opportunity to process, evaluate, and analyze information in a manner that develops critical thinking skills and the ability to problem solve (Vander Kooi & Bierlein, (2014). Instructors at the Academy could redesign classrooms, assignments, and activities to optimize group problem-solving in person or as part of (a)synchronous classes (Hitchcock, Sage & Smyth, 2019). In this model, instructors do not focus on teaching basic material but act as experienced facilitators and designers of developmental activities that would allow cadets to integrate their knowledge in a meaningful way.
3. Conduct a thorough review of duplicated course content between courses and consider consolidation to address redundancies and identify opportunities to incorporate new, evidenced based material.
4. Update curriculum in each topic area and have instructors learn how to design and facilitate Active Learning Model methods and techniques. This process could be facilitated by outside training or perhaps via training led by the Organizational Development and Training Manager at APD.

**Level 2:**

1. Implement Active Learning Models throughout the ten courses included as part of this evaluation.
2. Recruit content experts to teach certain classes (or assist in the instruction of courses). This could elevate the level of expertise and provide the Academy with a way to diversify its instructional faculty.
3. Provide basic technology to instructors and cadets (“clickers,” apps, and subscriptions to learning software) that can facilitate the integration of Active Learning techniques throughout the curriculum and provide basic analytics on cadet progress and performance.
4. Provide financial and professional incentives to attract and retain a diverse ensemble of high-performing instructors.



### **Level III:**

1. Hire one (or more) Instructional Design (ID) experts and hire (or contract with) a film producer to develop custom curriculum in each of the ten courses under consideration in this report.
2. Instructional designers have expertise in developing curriculum that is specially attuned to the needs of adult learners (in this case, cadets in training). The curriculum should be developed in conjunction with outside content experts, Academy faculty, and the Organizational Development and Training Manager.
3. The curriculum could provide the basis for knowledge to be covered by cadets outside of class and participatory activities facilitated by instructors in class (or online).
4. The curriculum should be available on any computer or mobile device and captioned in English and Spanish. The captioning may allow recruitment of cadets who are deaf/hard of hearing or those who prefer to learn in Spanish. It may also help cadets who are learning Spanish to strengthen their vocabulary and maintain language acquisition throughout the 32 weeks of Academy training.
5. The curriculum should be delivered on a learning management system that allows for testing and the capture of performance analytics (Coursera, Thinkific, etc.)

### **Level IV:**

1. APD should contract with an Immersive Learning/Gaming company to produce state-of-the-art simulations via the use of animation, virtual reality, and Artificial Intelligence (AI).
2. Simulations can be developed using real-life scenarios developed by Academy instructors who have years of experience, and thus reflect what cadets are likely to see and experience as officers working in the Austin area.
3. Immersive technology has been shown to strengthen and increase learned skills, change certain behaviors, and improve test scores (Christian, 2016).
4. The use of artificial intelligence generates copious data on performance, can identify skills gaps among cadets, and help tailor the development of curriculum to address those gaps.
5. Supplements to the simulations can be developed for each course, and “push server” notifications using spaced repetition can help cadets strengthen decision-making skills and identify skill and knowledge deficits and strengths.
6. The existence of a world-class training simulation could help recruit a more diverse and high-performing pool of recruits and could also be used to provide continuing education to officers throughout APD.

A final report will be submitted after each course under review has been completed and end of Academy critiques for the current cadet class have been analyzed. The report will also include information for each of the following APD training courses:

Cultural Diversity

History of Policing

Professionalism and Ethics

Fair and Impartial Policing

Services for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired

Multiculturalism and Human Relations

Spanish  
Transgender  
LGBTQ  
Racial Profiling

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