

1 INTRODUCTION

“The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police existence, actions, behavior and the ability of the police to secure and maintain public respect.” —Sir Robert Peel

On November 12, 2020, the City of Austin, through the Office of Police Oversight (OPO) in consultation with the City Manager’s Office (CMO), retained Kroll Associates, Inc. (Kroll) to review and evaluate the Austin Police Department (APD) on the extent to which forms of racism, bigotry, and discrimination are present in the protocols, practices, and behaviors of the APD. The initial phase of Kroll’s review called for an assessment of the APD Training Academy (Academy) – specifically, the Academy’s ability and readiness to prepare cadets for policing in a multi-ethnic urban population consistent with best practices.¹

Kroll presented its preliminary findings and recommendations to Austin City Council on March 2, 2021. On March 25, 2021, the City Council approved Resolution 37, the Reimagined APD Training Academy Blueprint, which, consistent with Kroll’s preliminary recommendations, called for enhanced community involvement, a culture of adult learning, and transformative change at the Academy. Resolution 37 acknowledged that police training practices historically have impacted officers’ preparedness and relationships with the community.

Kroll submitted its final report on April 23, 2021 (“Kroll Assessment Report”),² which included 18 short-term and 16 long-term recommendations. APD leadership agreed to implement the short-term recommendations as part of the 144th cadet class and the long-term recommendations by the start of the 145th cadet class.

On May 7, 2021, the City appointed Kroll as Independent Evaluator of the 144th cadet class to verify APD’s implementation of the Kroll recommendations and assess how effectively APD is developing a transformational police academy that openly and honestly addresses issues of racial and gender equity, emphasizes de-escalation tactics that minimize the use of force, incorporates diverse perspectives through community partnerships, and develops into a dynamic learning academy that promotes resilient officers through effective and inclusive adult learning instruction.

Since the start of the 144th cadet class in early June 2021, Kroll observed over 300 hours of Academy training, both in-person and remotely through an installed camera system in the Academy classroom. We also consulted with the Academy Commander, Division Manager, supervisors, instructors, and staff; reviewed updated lesson plans, PowerPoints, and classroom handouts relevant to the courses evaluated; talked with current and former cadets, community participants, and city officials; and reviewed Academy staff reports and documentation concerning injuries, resignations, test results, and disciplinary measures.

Kroll’s preliminary findings and observations from the first four months of the 144th cadet class were summarized in an Interim Report dated October 14, 2021.³ This report updates and finalizes Kroll’s observations and findings through the end of the 144th cadet class, which concluded with 66 cadets successfully graduating and becoming sworn APD officers on January 28, 2022.

¹ Kroll’s retention is pursuant to contract MA 4400 PA210000018.

² <https://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=359317>

³ *Interim Report of Independent Evaluator: APD Training Academy*, October 14, 2021.

2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the outset, Kroll wishes to commend APD leadership and Academy staff for guiding the 144th cadet class through a successful eight-month training program under difficult circumstances. Instructors and supervisors were expected to implement reforms, incorporate new content, expand community relationships, enhance transparency, revise curriculum, and change Academy culture in a relatively short period of time while under the scrutiny of an independent evaluator, the media, and City stakeholders, and while contending with a worldwide pandemic. Although aspects of a military-style culture prevail at the Academy with an emphasis on collective discipline, and while there remains a lack of “buy in” by some Academy staff to reform measures, the recommended changes were nevertheless supported by APD leadership and implemented in good faith. Although challenges continue and much work remains, the Academy graduated a diverse and impressive group of young men and women who are well trained and fully prepared to serve the people of Austin as community-oriented police officers. We congratulate the newly sworn officers of the 144th cadet class and collectively say, “Well done.”



144th Cadet Class Graduation and Swearing-In Ceremony, January 28, 2022

Kroll understands that what the Academy is working to build is a best-in-class learning organization. Although the overall quality of training delivered to the 144th cadet class was excellent, at times it suffered from a lack of deliberate planning and coordination that resulted in some problems with logical training progression. Cadets were occasionally faced with complex topics before receiving the foundational material. Moreover, there was a lack of interconnectedness between modules that siloed course content from related material in other courses. This was especially true when talking about de-escalation and use of force, and it was a constant theme in how community engagement programming was presented, as instructors made little or no attempt to make connections between such programming and the broader learning objectives of police training. To its credit, the Academy recently revised its standard operating procedures to ensure a process of continual improvement, peer and supervisory review, and quality control over teaching methods and course instruction, while encouraging better integration of de-escalation principles and community expectations in each course. Progress is clearly being made and, under the guidance and leadership of the current Commander and Division Manager, this Academy can lead the nation in preparing diverse, resilient, well-rounded, and community-oriented police officers.

In our role as Independent Evaluator of the Academy, Kroll was asked to verify APD's implementation of the Kroll recommendations from our April 2021 report and assess APD's progress in developing into a dynamic learning academy that emphasizes de-escalation and community respect, addresses issues of racial and gender equity, incorporates the principles of adult learning, and partners with the community. With that overview in mind, and based on our review of course content, staff reports, reported data, and hundreds of hours of in-person or virtual class observations, as well as conversations with Academy staff, APD leadership, cadets, and others throughout the eight months of Academy training, Kroll makes the following findings and observations:

Setting the Tone. At the start of the 144th cadet class, Chief Joseph Chacon and APD's executive leadership team appropriately emphasized that the mission of the Academy is training future APD officers to serve the community and treat everyone with dignity and respect while emphasizing sensitivity to community concerns, cultural competency, critical thinking, and adult learning. Cadet interviews and surveys have confirmed that, with some exceptions, Academy instructors positively emphasized community concerns as an important component of policing.

Pilot Community Connect Program. APD successfully implemented a pilot two-week Community Connect program, which provided cadets with valuable perspectives from key community members and organizations, prioritized community concerns, and encouraged cadets to embrace their role as guardians by meaningfully engaging with members of the Austin community. However, many cadets and staff expressed the view that community programming would be more effective later in Academy training, after cadets have been fully oriented into the rigors and expectations of the Academy and have a more developed understanding of their responsibilities as future police officers. Consistent with this feedback, for the 145th cadet class, APD currently plans to incorporate portions of Community Connect later in the Academy schedule. Kroll notes, however, that APD also intends to reduce Community Connect to a five-day program.

Increased Community Engagement. Although APD originally committed to 37 hours of community engagement and lived experience programming for the 144th cadet class (separate and apart from Community Connect), in the end the Academy schedule included 25 hours of community-focused content involving approximately a dozen community organizations. The purpose of the programming was to reinforce the importance of empathy when interacting with the diverse communities that cadets, as sworn officers, will eventually serve. Although not all community engagement content fulfilled this purpose (e.g., a four-hour tour of City Hall), and despite APD falling 12 hours short of its original commitment, the 144th cadet class had more community engagement and participation than any cadet class in APD history. For the 145th cadet class, however, APD plans to further trim community engagement content to 18 hours.

Racial Equity Training. This was the first cadet class to include anti-racism training of staff and cadets in the form of a two-day "Groundwater Analysis of Racial Inequities" workshop led by Joyce James Consulting LLC (JJC). The workshop sessions included meaningful discussions and exercises for cadets to better understand important issues regarding racial equity. Based on cadet and staff feedback, Kroll finds that the workshops were impactful, requiring cadets and staff to ponder tough and sometimes uncomfortable questions, while allowing for honest conversations with each other and participating community members.

Health and Wellness. The training schedule for the 144th cadet class more than doubled the amount of physical fitness training, which helped many cadets improve their confidence and physical health. In addition, the Academy included several classes on mindfulness and resiliency (led by Victims Services), which teaches cadets strategies to cope with stress, anxiety, and the pressures of a demanding job. For the 145th cadet class, however, APD plans to slightly reduce the amount of PT (although with a better distribution of PT hours) and to limit mindfulness and resiliency to four hours (reduced from 11 hours) to allow for more scheduling flexibility.

Increased Cultural Competency and DEI Training. The 144th cadet class included increased attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training. One important addition was an eight-hour course on the History of Police and Race in America taught by the Chair of the African and African Diaspora Studies Department at the University of Texas at Austin. The course addressed the historical forces in the United States with specific emphasis on Austin that impact modern perceptions of the police among communities of color and why people develop different perspectives of law enforcement. Academy training also included valuable instruction on multiculturalism, policing issues related to the transgender and LGBTQ+ communities, procedural justice, and interacting with Spanish-speaking populations, persons experiencing homelessness, and community members in crisis, among other important topics.

Use of External Content Experts. Courses that were taught or co-taught by outside subject matter experts included the History of Police and Race, Interacting with Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, Data Integrity, Mindfulness and Resiliency, and Victims of Crime. Additionally, courses related to Transgender and LGBTQ issues were taught by APD officers with specialized knowledge and experience. However, we continue to believe more classes should be co-taught by external subject-matter experts moving forward, particularly DEI-related courses, cultural competency training, and some law-related classes. Kroll observed that some instructors remain reluctant to embrace a co-facilitated teaching model in courses where such a model would be helpful. Nevertheless, and to its credit, APD recently hired a community engagement specialist who will assume responsibility for coordinating external content experts and community participants to assist in DEI-related course instruction moving forward. Kroll notes that various law professors have already been contacted about potentially co-facilitating law-related classes in the 145th Academy.

Adult Learning Teaching Methods. Instructors continue to utilize a variety of instructional techniques, including lectures, visual aids and handouts, class discussion, case studies, and role plays. The classroom culture was disciplined and orderly, but most instructors encouraged questions and class participation. Although some verbatim reading of APD policies or legal code still occurred, there was less reliance on verbatim reading of materials than in years past. Still, Academy staff recognizes that improvement is needed. Recently, the Training Supervisor began implementing a series of instructional development training classes for instructors that address what APD expects from lesson plans, the peer review process, how to create and update curriculum, and organizational tools for establishing learning objectives and incorporating adult learning concepts and methods into each course. For the 145th cadet class, instructors will be expected to build more role plays into the curricula, including for classroom-based instruction.

Academy Culture. The Academy made positive strides in shifting to a more balanced, resilience-based training model in the 144th cadet class. Overall, however, aspects of a military-style culture still prevail at the Academy with an emphasis on disciplinary measures and collective accountability. Some instructors struggled with how to effectively implement the reforms and had reservations about the requested changes. In a September cadet survey, for example, more than half of cadets (54.2%) reported that some instructors had ridiculed the concept of a “reimagined police academy” during performance accountability sessions. These staff comments caused some cadets to question APD’s commitment to a “reimagined” emphasis on community-oriented policing. Outside of Kroll’s presence, one or more instructors allegedly stated “the cameras are off” as an indirect reference to Kroll’s practice of observing certain classroom-based courses remotely through the installed camera-system in the Academy’s main classroom. Although APD and Academy leadership addressed concerns with messaging once these issues were brought to their attention, a later performance accountability incident that allegedly involved singling out and humiliating a cadet (discussed in Section 5.3) unfortunately suggested that Academy staff had failed to completely embrace Chief Chacon’s directives and the City’s mandate for a more guardian-centric, adult learning, community-oriented training academy. Despite these concerns, however, both the mid-point and end of Academy cadet

While we understand this banner was a gift to the Academy from a prior cadet class, the message unfortunately reinforces a fear-based, “us vs. them” mentality that seems woefully out of place in a police training academy that is trying to emphasize de-escalation, empathy, community trust, and procedural justice. Another poster in the second-floor hallway had displayed a muscle-bound man in an orange jumpsuit with the caption, “Every Day You Don’t Work Out, Someone Else Does.” Upon being informed of Kroll’s concerns regarding messaging, then Commander Johnson had the second-floor poster removed. However, the above banner remains.

Kroll also observed that Academy practice is to have cadets gather each morning for the ceremonial raising of the flag. During this daily ceremony, cadets salute the flag and read off names from the National Law Enforcement Memorial of officers who gave their lives in the line of duty. Cadets then ring a bell for each officer who died. Kroll understands that the Academy is the hallowed ground of the Austin Police Memorial, which memorializes APD officers who have made the ultimate sacrifice. Kroll also understands the need to inform cadets of the sacrifices that may come with serving as a police officer and the importance of never forgetting those who have given their lives for the safety of others. However, a *daily* reminder of officers who have been killed in the line of duty, combined with some of the messaging that is currently on display in Academy facilities, potentially reinforces the “us versus them” mindset that APD and the City of Austin are trying to move away from.¹⁶

5.4 Roles of Division Manager and Training Supervisor

On March 15, 2021, APD filled the Division Manager position by hiring Dr. Anne Kringen, formerly an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of New Haven. Dr. Kringen was a police officer in Alexandria, Virginia, before pursuing her Ph.D. in Criminal Justice at Texas State University. Her research interests included mental illness stigma and the limitations of crisis intervention, gender imbalances in policing, learning community policing through community engagement, and identifying barriers that prevent enhanced diversity in police organizations, among other topics. Kroll finds that Dr. Kringen has performed superbly well in her role as Division Manager. Indeed, Dr. Kringen’s efforts were essential to the Academy’s ability to complete the tasks needed for the start of the 144th cadet class in June 2021. By all accounts, Dr. Kringen is well-liked and respected by staff, and she has substantially improved instructors’ willingness and ability to update lesson plans, incorporate active learning and adult learning methods into teaching, and prepare for classroom instruction. She has also proved essential to ensuring implementation and progress on needed reforms and improvements.

The Training Supervisor position was filled in early August 2021 with the hiring of Phil Axelrod, an Army veteran and former high school teacher with a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction and substantial experience training and managing people in the military. His job description includes instructor development, curriculum development, and standardization of lesson plans and course materials. He has immediately proved an excellent choice for this role. Mr. Axelrod is helping instructors develop curriculum and continuity of instruction so the curriculum will remain consistent and usable whenever an instructor moves on and someone else takes over. This is an important role at the Academy and recognizes that instructors are police officers first, not professional teachers, so helping them professionalize their curriculum and standardizing the product for sustainability is crucial.

¹⁶ In discussions with Kroll, Commander Vallejo acknowledged that he was also concerned about messaging and was taking steps to address it. Kroll recommends that the Commander oversee a project where the next cadet class works with staff and community to strike a balance with appropriate messaging and displays at the Academy, and perhaps consider limiting the morning memorials to the anniversary dates of fallen APD officers as opposed to all officers nationwide.

The internal video review process will require instructors to submit, review, and discuss their video selections with their immediate supervisor. The instructor's supervisor will document his or her approval, approval with edits, or disapproval for each training video, and record this interaction in the database. No training videos will be used without documented supervisor approval.

Since context is critical to video review, the video review process will become an aspect of curriculum development. Henceforth, training videos will be reviewed by the Academy Curriculum Review Committee to ensure on-going community input and continued transparency and accountability. Finally, as noted below, a media literacy advisor has been hired to provide media literacy training to APD instructors that will help them better understand how visual media should be used in law enforcement training and the potential unintended consequences of certain types of visual media.

Development of Video Library

Kroll had previously recommended that APD develop a video library for all existing training videos and to expand the library by researching and accessing other relevant and useful videos (including APD body-worn camera and dashboard camera footage, where appropriate). Due to a lack of organization and documentation, APD has historically had difficulty identifying the number, content, and location of training videos that had previously been used by APD instructors. The CVRC also recommended the creation and development of a video library. After some effort, Academy staff has begun developing a video library that contains electronic folders for all of the Academy training units (Cadet Training, Learned Skills, Continuing Education, and Organizational Development & Training). The library includes a hyperlink to the Video Log SmartSheet, which will be the web-based database containing all required and relevant information for each training video. An additional folder titled "Unassigned Videos" has been created for videos with potential training value that instructors may find and want to save for a future class, or for use by another instructor. No unassigned videos will be used in training until they have been submitted for use for a specific class and gone through the video review process. The video library will provide a central repository for all training videos and related information that will be documented in one place (Smartsheet).

Media Literacy for APD Instructors

CVRC members additionally suggested, as did Kroll (see Section 3, long-term recommendation no. 1), that APD instructors might benefit from media literacy training to help them better understand how to effectively use visual media in law enforcement training and the potential unintended consequences of certain visual media. In response, the Academy has hired a community engagement specialist part time whose role includes establishing relationships with consultants and university partners that specialize in media literacy. The community engagement specialist has identified Dr. Renee Hobbs, a renowned media literacy specialist at the University of Rhode Island, who has submitted a proposal to develop and deliver a media literacy training for Academy instructors. APD executive staff has approved the proposal, which is currently awaiting finance and purchasing approval. The Academy has also requested permission to hire a full-time content designer to work with any outside specialists or consultants once services have been contracted.

Kroll Assessment

Kroll agrees with the intent of the revised video review process outlined above. This revised process should allow APD to address many of the community's previously expressed concerns by internally focusing on (1) how videos are framed in the context of each course; (2) how balanced are the video depictions of various demographic groups, community members, and good versus bad police techniques; and (3) whether the videos avoid an "us vs. them" depiction of policing, emphasize the importance of de-escalation, and address similar community concerns. Kroll also agrees with the decision to transfer the work of the CVRC to the Academy Curriculum Review Committee, which will allow for continued community input into

instructional videos as part of the course curriculum review process. Moreover, APD will benefit from the further guidance to be provided by a media literacy expert (Renee Hobbs), who can work with APD and the City of Austin to help guide/facilitate the Academy's development and selection of training video content in future cadet classes.