Whittier Daily News

Making the grade
Getting into police academy gets tougher
By Susan McRoberts
Staff Writer

Monday, February 07, 2005 - WHITTIER -- It's getting harder to become a law enforcement officer.

Despite a growing need for qualified police, it is now tougher to get into the Rio Hondo College Police Academy, according to its interim director, Bill Heckel, a retired Whittier police lieutenant.

Applicants now must pass a test to qualify for the academy, he said.

"We wanted to make sure as many (cadets) as possible get through the academy,' he said. "We suspect that even if there are fewer people in our academies, a higher percentage will graduate.'

The first group of 82 students, hoping to get into the academy's spring session, took the qualifying test last month.

The test is designed to reveal applicants' weaknesses. Because the test is taken before the students enter the academy, the students have time to study up on their weak areas before entering the training program.

On average, 70 percent of students who enroll in the academy successfully complete the six-month course. Of the 265 cadets who completed the last three sessions, about half already were working for law enforcement agencies. Most of the other half had jobs waiting for them upon graduation, Heckel said.

The new, pre-qualifying exam adds to existing criminal background checks done on all candidates. No one with a misdemeanor or felony conviction is accepted.

There also is a physical agility test, a polygraph examination and psychological screening.

Bob Feliciano, a former sheriff's deputy who teaches administration of justice at Rio Hondo College, said "it's a shame' that a minor teenage brush with the law can eliminate an otherwise promising candidate.

"Out of every 100 people that considers a law enforcement career, only 10 successfully complete the process,' he added.

Feliciano suggested that easing entrance requirements for cadets might help meet an urgent need for qualified police officers.

Heckel disagreed.
If anything, he said, the standards should be raised.

"Society has given police officers a job and with that job comes accountability,' Heckel said. "The most precious thing you have is your freedom and your life. We have been given license to take those from you, given certain circumstances.'

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Members of the basic recruit class break formation to return to class at the police academy at Rio Hondo College Monday January 31st 2004 in Whittier. (Staff photo by Greg Andersen)