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The role of prerequisites in a criminal justice curriculum

By. Marian R, Williams

Abstract:

This article examines the value of requiring prerequisites beyond the standard introduction to criminal justice course in a criminal justice program. Using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of eight sections of a criminal procedure course over a period of four years, this study found a significant difference in final grades in an upper-level Criminal Procedure class between students who enrolled in a recommended prerequisite (Criminal Courts) and students who did not take the prerequisite. As administrators become increasingly concerned with student success, it is argued that additional prerequisites may be beneficial in improving student learning.

According to Stitt, Leone, and Jennings-Clawson (1998), administrators and legislators are increasingly calling for accountability in higher education. Questions abound concerning what needs to be done to ensure student success in the classroom. Claxton and Murrell (1987) argue that anything that can improve the learning process will increase quality and effectiveness. Sims and Sims (1995) state that colleges and universities that experience the most success with student learning are continually improving their efforts to ensure that success. Many programs have begun to measure effectiveness by examining what students have learned over the course of study. These programs have specified outcome measures that gauge student success through scores on written and oral exams and one-on-one interaction (Schrink, Roy, and Ransburg 1999).

The idea of sequential learning, i.e., building upon previous knowledge, is a central feature of various learning theories. In fact, scholars have emphasized the importance of the sequential nature of learning and its value in educational activities (Cross and Steadman 1996). Based on

this concept, many higher education programs require introductory courses as prerequisites prior to taking more advanced courses on a related topic. Criminal justice programs often follow this logic when they require an introduction to criminal justice course as a prerequisite for further coursework. However, unlike the physical sciences, which tend to have a more structured, sequential nature to their curriculum (see Leggat 1998), many social science majors, including criminal justice, require only a single prerequisite and do not build sequential learning into their advanced coursework (Kessler and Swatt 2001). Instead, students are often able to take courses in a haphazard manner, despite advising suggestions to the contrary. This raises concerns that students may not be adequately prepared for more advanced courses even though they have passed the introductory course (Kessler and Swatt 2001). In fact, Southerland (2002) maintains that curricula in higher education, especially criminal justice curricula, need to be reformed, "focusing on higher standards, more requirements, and a tighter structure in the curriculum" (p. 591). What is lacking, however, is an empirical analysis of the impact of a prerequisite on student learning in future coursework. Although common sense and learning theory suggest that students with advanced prerequisites (prerequisites beyond the initial introductory course) should perform better, to date there is little empirical evidence to support this claim. More importantly, there are no empirical studies that examine the relative importance of advanced prerequisites in a social science curriculum such as criminal justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The typical prerequisites, such as introductory courses, enable students to learn the basic concepts of an issue that will facilitate further learning in upper-level courses. According to Cross and Steadman (1996), prior knowledge of an issue influences how well new information is understood. Weinstein and Meyer (1991:16) point out that, ". . .the more prior knowledge we have. . .the more we can make sense of new information that we are trying to learn." Learning theories suggest that new information is more easily understood and retained when an existing base of knowledge is present (Cross and Steadman 1996; Crawford and Chaffin 1986; Hirsch 1987). In addition, Cross (1976:18) argues that, ". . .most learning has a sequential nature, and there are some core concepts and principles that must be learned by everyone." In fact, Cross (1976) states that learning must be thorough and that knowledge in a particular area must be gained to a certain level of competency before a student may move to the next level. Thus, the use of prerequisites is considered critical in preparing students for future learning.

Cross and Steadman (1996) suggest that limited prior knowledge of an issue affects student ability to learn new material. Students who have taken prerequisite courses are able to link "background" information with new information more effectively, and this results in better performance on assignments and exams. Students lacking prerequisite courses are more likely to memorize information without trying to understand it, and this results in lower grades (Cross and Steadman 1996).

Most programs require an introductory, one-course prerequisite, but a question remains whether that is enough to prepare students for later courses. One study by Berger (1997) highlighted many questions regarding the implementation of prerequisites in an English department at a community college. Before the prerequisites were instituted, students were free to choose the courses in which to enroll. Faculty members were increasingly frustrated and cited the college's "access over standards" policy as a reason that students were enrolling in classes unprepared. In fact, according to Berger (1997:35), ". . .when a student enrolls. . .above his or her level of readiness, no amount of tutoring and no amount of dedication by the faculty can enable that student to master. . . the material in the current course and that of two or more prerequisite

courses." Berger (1997) contended that faculty were faced with a "dumbing down" of classes so as not to fail a substantial majority of students in a class.

Regarding criminal justice courses, Kessler and Swatt (2001) point out that an introductory course provides students with information about the system as a whole and does not prepare students for future classes involving such issues as research methods. In fact, students typically enter research methods courses with little to no preparation for what is ahead. However, Kessler and Swatt (2001) did not empirically evaluate the impact of prerequisites on student academic performance, and knowledge on this issue remains primarily anecdotal.

THE STATE OF CURRICULUM PREREQUISITES

Felkenes (1987) noted that programs cannot cover all areas of criminal justice, so the programs must decide, based on what they want to achieve, which areas should be emphasized. According to the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) (1998), a four-year program in criminal justice should be broad in scope and include required courses that focus on legal issues, criminological theory, policing, and corrections. It is also important to cover these areas in a way that will deliver a quality education in the midst of a rapidly growing field. Some have speculated that the increase in the growth in criminal justice programs in the past twenty years has compromised the quality of education provided to students (Sampson and Salvesberg 2000). The combination of accountability, student success, and program growth presents an interesting situation with regard to offering and teaching courses in any curriculum.

Many programs require students to pass an introductory-level criminal justice course before being allowed to enroll in other criminal justice courses. Beyond that, programs vary as to the use of prerequisites in their curricula. According to the American Society of Criminology (2002), there are over 500 undergraduate programs in criminology and criminal justice. This includes stand-alone programs and departments as well as departments that are situated in other programs (such as sociology or political science).

Before addressing the central research questions, it would be useful to review the current status of prerequisites in criminal justice programs in the United States. To do this, the author examined the course and program descriptions of the institutional members of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences that award a bachelor's degree. This eliminated two-year programs from the following discussion. As the present study was conducted at a four-year program and two-year programs may have unique features and concerns beyond the scope of this paper, the omission of these programs seemed reasonable. Information was gathered by examining the course catalog descriptions from 67 four-year programs via the Internet.¹ The list of schools encompassed a variety of programs, from smaller, private colleges to larger universities. Institutional members of ACJS include programs housed within a variety of academic disciplines (such as sociology) and those that offer degrees in criminology rather than criminal justice. For the purpose of this study, however, the term "criminal justice" will be used to generally refer to the sampled programs even though it is recognized that differences between these programs may exist.

Table 1 describes how the sampled criminal justice programs describe their use of prerequisites in their curriculums. Of the 67 programs examined, eight programs (12%) did not have any prerequisites listed in their course catalogs. The remaining 59 programs required the completion of at least one introductory course prior to taking other criminal justice classes. While most of these were an introduction to criminal justice class, some programs used alternative courses

such as Criminology as their initial prerequisite. Of the 67 programs, 43% had no prerequisites listed or no further prerequisites beyond the introductory course, while 40% required just one or two prerequisites beyond an introductory course. These additional prerequisites often involved completing a research methods course before enrolling in a statistics course and/or completing an introductory policing or corrections course before enrolling in upper level courses in those areas. Only 10% of the programs examined required a sequential program of study in which multiple prerequisites existed and students advanced systematically through the curriculum. Rather than enlisting additional course prerequisites, the remaining programs (6%) controlled student access to courses by limiting enrollment to eligible students based on class standing or through instructor permission. It is possible that such practices act as a proxy for formal course prerequisites, but this is unclear and these programs may vary in their practices.

Table 1: The State of Prerequisites in Selected Criminal Justice Programs^a

State of prerequisites	Number of Programs
No listed prerequisites	8 (12%)
Introductory course as only prerequisite	21 (31%)
Introductory course plus one additional prerequisite	13 (19%)
Introductory course plus two additional prerequisites	14 (21%)
Introductory course plus sequential program of study	7 (10%)
No listed prerequisites, but need class standing OR permission of instructor	4 (6%)
Total	67 (100%)

^a See footnote 1 for an explanation of the selection of these programs

Information from the sampled programs indicates a variety of methods for providing a criminal justice education. That a large percentage of programs (43%) either have no listed prerequisites or only require an introductory course suggests that many programs may assume that an introductory course prepares students for the remainder of courses in the criminal justice curriculum. An additional 19% of programs only require one prerequisite beyond an introductory course, suggesting that these programs may assume that some courses benefit from prerequisites but not others. This may not necessarily be the case, however. Covering a broad topic such as "criminal justice" over the course of one term or preparing students for some courses but not others may not adequately prepare students for all future criminal justice courses.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The types of courses offered in criminal justice programs vary, but scholars and students agree that courts and criminal procedure courses should be fundamental to any course of study (Southerland 2002; Russell 1998; ACJS 1998; Bennett and Marshall 1979). Spader (1999) argues that teaching courses on the criminal courts, law, and procedure is difficult and that it is important to structure courses in a way that students can get the maximum possible education out of the courses. One method of doing this, which is the focus of this study, is to require

prerequisites that will prepare students for the more difficult courses in this area of study, which are usually upper-level in nature.

Based on the author's experience teaching in a criminal justice program, the current study assessed whether the use of an additional prerequisite (beyond the introductory course) would be beneficial for an upperlevel course in an undergraduate criminal justice program. Courses on the court system and procedural or constitutional law seem to be well-suited to test the validity of advanced prerequisites. A course on the court system enables a student to become familiar not only with the day-to-day operations of courts, but also provides an understanding of the basic structure of the court system. In addition, a courts course introduces a student to the primary decision-makers in the court system - judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys - and the impact that their decisions have on the criminal justice system. Subsequently, a course on criminal procedure builds upon what is learned in courts and provides an examination of how the courts (both trial and appellate) work to ensure that actors in the criminal justice system are following proper procedures when the law is applied.

Among the sampled criminal justice programs (above), 32 of the 67 programs (48%) offered courses in both courts and criminal procedure, but only four of those programs required that a student complete the courts course before enrolling in criminal procedure. Additionally, 14 of the 67 programs (21%) offered only a criminal procedure course, while 6 of the 67 programs (9%) offered a combination courts-procedure course. Of the remaining programs, 11 offered a courts course only, and 6 offered neither courts nor criminal procedure.² Students enrolled in a criminal procedure course could benefit from a previous completion of a courts course, but the examination of sampled criminal justice programs suggests that this is not taken into consideration. As noted earlier, Spader (1999) suggests that curricula featuring these courses should be structured in such a way so as to ensure maximum learning. Thus, the current study examines whether students would benefit from increasing the structure of a curricula involving these two courses.

In the program under study, Criminal Courts is a required course for the criminal justice degree and is offered only in the fall semester. This course provides a thorough understanding of the criminal court system in the United States and, in effect, provides a framework for the criminal procedure course. Students learn about the law and the legal process, the structure of state and federal court systems, and the role of judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys. The concepts of discretion and decisionmaking are introduced to give students a sense of the consequences of decisions made by those working in the court system. These concepts provide a segue into the issues covered in the criminal procedure course.

Criminal Procedure is a required course offered only in the spring semester. The course covers the various rights afforded to criminal defendants throughout the criminal justice process, from investigation through appeal. Students are required to complete multiple assignments that involve various procedural issues. These assignments require students to follow a case through every stage of the court system, assessing decisions made by the actors in the criminal justice system, in particular, police, prosecutors, judges, defense attorneys, and juries. The course involves extensive reading of United States Supreme Court decisions and requires a basic understanding of the trial court and appellate court systems. Thus, it is important that students have an understanding of the role of the court system in ensuring that procedures are carried out properly by the actors in the criminal justice system.

The problem, however, is that the criminal courts class is not a required prerequisite for the criminal procedure course; thus, students may enroll for either course whenever they choose. Often, students will enroll for a course whenever they can get it and, as a result, may not be adequately prepared for the courses in which they do enroll. This is true of the criminal procedure course - students will often enroll in Criminal Procedure before enrolling in Criminal Courts - but students may not necessarily be prepared for the criminal procedure course, having no background in the criminal courts. As a result, in the first two weeks of Criminal Procedure, it is necessary to review court structure, operations, and the role of court actors for those students who have yet to take Criminal Courts.

The present study examined if there was any relationship between class performances in the criminal procedure class and whether students had previously completed the criminal courts course. Based on learning theories and prior education research, it was hypothesized that students who completed Criminal Courts prior to enrolling in Criminal Procedure would receive higher grades in Criminal Procedure than those who had not completed Criminal Courts. Data were collected from eight criminal procedure courses taught over a four-year period, all of which were taught by the author. The total number of students enrolled during this time was 172. Data were collected on a number of variables, which are listed in Table 2. Grade point average, number of cumulative credit hours, and number of absences were collected because of their possible relationship with a student's grade in Criminal Procedure. Gender of the student was also collected to control for differences between males and females. It should be noted that a variable regarding race of student was not collected since over 95% of students enrolled in these courses were White.

RESULTS

Table 2: Variables in the Analyses

GPA	grade point average while taking Criminal Procedure (minimum = 2.20; maximum = 4.00)
HOURS	number of cumulative hours taken by the student at the beginning of the semester in which Criminal Procedure was taken (to represent standing) (minimum = 45.00; maximum = 176.00)
ABSENCES	number of student absences during Criminal Procedure (minimum = 0; maximum = 14)
COURTS	whether the student completed Criminal Courts prior to enrolling in Criminal Procedure (0=no; 1=yes)
GENDER	gender of student (0=male; 1=female)
CPGRADE	final grade in Criminal Procedure (minimum = 31.10; maximum = 96.10)

Descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analyses are found in Table 3. The table provides a year-by-year analysis of each variable based on whether a student completed Criminal Courts prior to enrolling in Criminal Procedure. Preliminary findings indicate there were several differences between students who completed Criminal Courts and those who did not. These differences included the mean cumulative hours (those who completed Criminal Courts had earned more credit hours) and the mean number of absences (those who completed Criminal Courts missed fewer classes). An examination of the letter grades in Table 3 indicates

that students who completed Criminal Courts earned more As and Bs and fewer Cs in Criminal Procedure than students who did not complete Criminal Courts. Another interesting finding is that no students who completed Criminal Courts failed Criminal Procedure (a grade of "D" or "F" is considered failing grade in the program). Of the six students who failed Criminal Procedure, none had completed Criminal Courts. There was little difference in grade point average between the two groups. Examining the primary variable of interest, mean Criminal Procedure grade, students who completed Criminal Courts had a higher mean grade in Criminal Procedure than the other students. To test the significance of a relationship between these two variables, a bivariate correlation analysis (Pearson's r) was conducted. Results indicated that, for each year, the variables exhibited a significant and positive relationship.³

To further test the relationship between completion of Criminal Courts and subsequent performance in Criminal Procedure, OLS regression was performed, controlling for the above variables.⁴ Results of this analysis are found in Table 4. When controlling for relevant variables, results indicated that the primary variable of interest, whether students had completed Criminal Courts prior to Criminal Procedure, was statistically significant. Those students who completed Criminal Courts before enrolling in Criminal Procedure received higher grades in Criminal Procedure than students who had not completed Criminal Courts. Grade point average was also statistically significant - students with higher grade point averages received higher grades in Criminal Procedure. The number of absences was also statistically significant, in that students who missed more classes received lower grades in Criminal Procedure than students who missed fewer classes. Gender and number of cumulative credit hours were not statistically significant.

DISCUSSION

After teaching both courses for four years, this author had a sense that students who did not complete Criminal Courts prior to enrolling in Criminal Procedure had more difficulty understanding course material than those who completed Criminal Courts beforehand. In particular, when reading United States Supreme Court cases, students who had completed Criminal Courts had been exposed to discussions on the history of a case and its progression through the trial and appellate processes. Therefore, these students may have had a better understanding of the various terms used in these decisions (e.g., "remand," "writ of certiorari," etc.) and themes such as policy-making and discretion. Students who had not completed Criminal Courts had not been introduced to most of these terms and class time had to be used to teach these students many of the basic concepts from the criminal courts class. In fact, some teaching evaluations have noted that there is overlap between the criminal courts and criminal procedure courses. The primary reason for this overlap is the need to teach the basics of the court system to those who have yet to take the criminal courts class.

The above study was undertaken to quantify the differences between two groups of students - one that had previously taken a related courts course and another that had not - and their performance in an upper-level criminal procedure course. Results suggested that prerequisites beyond an introductory course can have a positive impact on student performance in subsequent courses. This relationship is significant even when controlling for other relevant factors. It appears that the minimal coverage given to court-related issues in the first two weeks of the criminal procedure course is insufficient to prepare students for the remainder of the course. That completion of Criminal Courts is positively related to a student's grade in Criminal Procedure suggests that these courses are complimentary and should perhaps be considered sequential courses in curricula that offer both courses. Additionally, the requirement of a courts

course in those programs with only a criminal procedure course could possibly benefit those students enrolled in such courses.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Students With and Without Prerequisite for Criminal Procedure, by Year

	1999		2000		2001		2002		All Years	
	Yes (n=17)	No (n=18)	Yes (n=36)	No (n=11)	Yes (n=21)	No (n=18)	Yes (n=28)	No (n=23)	Yes (n=102)	No (n=70)
Took Courts First?										
Mean GPA	3.23	3.09	3.15	3.37	3.03	3.18	3.18	2.97	3.15	3.15
Mean Credit Hours	91.90	80.10	95.81	76.53	94.59	81.20	104.55	80.26	93.76	82.47
Gender										
Male	13	13	19	7	11	13	12	12	55 (32%)	45 (26%)
Female	4	5	17	4	10	5	16	11	47 (27%)	25 (15%)
Mean Absences	4.72	4.28	2.42	2.55	2.86	3.06	1.36	3.43	2.84	3.33
Mean CP Grade	84.00	74.90	88.72	86.22	87.72	83.64	86.33	81.67	86.69	81.61
A	8	2	19	4	8	4	9	4	44 (26%)	14 (8%)
B	4	6	14	4	12	8	13	11	43 (25%)	29 (17%)
C	5	6	3	3	1	5	6	7	15 (9%)	21 (12%)
D/F	0	4	0	0	0	1	0	1	0 (0%)	6 (3%)

Table 4: OLS Regression Results for Students With and Without Prerequisite for Criminal Procedure

Variable	B	S.E.	Sign.
COURTS	4.071	1.154	.000**
GPA	10.247	1.411	.000**
HOURS	0.022	.025	.383
GENDER	1.322	1.021	.197
ABSENCES	-.353	.238	.007**
CONSTANT	44.748	5.513	.000

$R^2 = .45$

**p<.01

n=172

Despite concerns about unprepared students, many colleges and universities face budget shortfalls that could prevent the imposition of multiple prerequisites for courses. Administrators are demanding accountability on the part of higher education, but it could be difficult to provide positive evidence of learning if the resources are not available to experiment with alternative curriculum models. While budget shortfalls are temporary, teaching students who are not prepared to learn can have lasting effects. For example, a student who fails a course may be

forced to retake the course, change majors, change schools, or drop out of school altogether. An instructor may have to devote extra time to unprepared students, thereby decreasing the quality of interaction between the instructors and the other students. This is problematic, since Beasley-Fielstein (1986) points out that meaningful teacher-student interactions are one of the most important parts of a college career. In the program under study, requiring the sequential pairing of Criminal Courts and Criminal Procedure would allow the instructor to better utilize the time devoted to Criminal Procedure. Since the first two weeks of the course are devoted to repeating information from the criminal courts course, some aspects of criminal procedure either cannot be covered or cannot be expanded upon. Thus, the importance of preparing students for future classes is critical to the overall success of the student, the instructor, and the program.

An important caveat is that both courses examined in this study were taught by the same instructor, and students may have benefited from some degree of consistency of instruction. From the present study it is impossible to address whether these findings would be replicated in a setting where the prerequisite course and subsequent course are taught by different instructors. While it is likely that even with a different instructor, students would benefit from having Criminal Courts first, it is unclear how strong these effects would be.

As Table 1 indicated, relatively few four-year degree criminal justice programs appear to utilize a heavily structured, sequential curriculum. The findings from this study should not be interpreted as advocating the necessity of such models. The present study, however, does suggest that students may benefit from additional prerequisites beyond an introductory course. For example, in closely related courses involving law enforcement and investigations, corrections and community corrections, and research methods and statistics, students may perform better if they had taken the former course prior to the latter. The assignment of teaching responsibilities within a program varies based upon a number of factors. It is likely, however, that the previously mentioned courses are taught by the same instructor or a small cohort of instructors (due to specialization, territoriality, etc.). This could possibly reduce, but not eliminate, the potential problem of inconsistency noted above. Ideally, different instructors should meet to discuss common objectives and goals of a course. This is not to suggest that all courses should follow a similar template or be uniform, but merely to note the potential advantages of course consistency within a curriculum.

Programs that allow students from other majors to take their courses may be opposed to adding prerequisites because this would make it more difficult for non-majors to enroll in such courses and potentially reduce enrollment. At the author's program, only criminal justice majors can enroll in criminal justice courses beyond the introductory course. Therefore, readers may choose to limit the generalizability of these findings and conclusions to criminal justice majors. It seems likely, however, that non-majors would equally benefit from an additional prerequisite such as the one examined in this study. This suggests that a primary criticism of adding additional prerequisites is a practical one - programs may be afraid of losing non-major enrollment due to additional requirements. Though such practical considerations are important, they do not detract from the pedagogical benefits and enhanced student success that the present findings demonstrate.

Ideally, programs can offer multiple sections of courses throughout the academic year to ensure that more students will have the opportunity to take courses in logical sequence. Many schools cannot afford to do this, however, and students may continue to enroll in courses for which they could be better prepared. This study provides some evidence that prerequisites beyond an introductory course make a quantitative difference on student outcomes. Specifically, student

success in a criminal procedure course was enhanced by having previously taken a criminal courts course. Although there are numerous constraints on academic programs that make adding additional prerequisites difficult, perhaps criminal justice programs should consider the value and feasibility of such changes. While not all criminal justice courses may require advanced prerequisites beyond an introductory course, students enrolling in courses involving investigations, community corrections, and statistics may benefit from having taken a related prerequisite course. Such changes, however, should be considered only if they are pedagogically sound and increase the likelihood of enhancing student success. Future research may want to consider replicating the present study with different courses to evaluate the benefits of additional prerequisites.

Footnote

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1 The ACJS website lists 74 four-year programs as institutional members. Seven programs were not accessible through the Internet, either because no course catalog descriptions were available or the web pages could not be accessed. The excluded programs represented a variety of institutional settings, suggesting that no systematic bias was introduced by excluding these seven programs. This left a final sample of 67 four-year programs.

2 The programs with courses involving criminal courts and/or criminal procedure were offered at varying levels of study. Some programs offered courses at the 100- or 200-level (suggesting freshman or sophomore level courses), while others offered courses at the 300- to 400-level (suggesting junior or senior-level courses). In addition, most titles of criminal courts courses were variations of "Courts," "Judicial Process," or "Court Administration." Titles of criminal procedure courses were variations of "Criminal Procedure," "Constitutional Law," or "Legal Process."

3 Results for each year are as follows: 1999 ($r = .307, p < .05$); 2000 ($r = .278, p < .05$); 2001 ($r = .312, p < .05$); 2002 ($r = .340, p < .05$).

4 To account for yearly variations, an OLS regression analysis was also performed using dummy variables. The year 1999 was used as the criterion, with year 2000, year 2001, and year 2002 included as dummy variables. Results indicated that yearly variations did not alter the significance of the associations.

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