

Identifying and Addressing Cadet Decision-Making Gaps from the Academy to Field Training

A Longitudinal Case Study Using Scenario-Based Analytics

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In modern policing, the standard cannot be, *“this is how we have always done it.”* Every action an officer takes has the potential to be recorded, scrutinized, and judged—by supervisors, courts, and the community. Even routine calls for service or traffic stops can quickly become chaotic and legally complex, requiring split-second decisions that shape both incident outcomes and public trust.

In this environment, decision-making quality is no longer an internal training concern; it is a matter of public accountability. Agencies must therefore hold officers to higher standards while providing training that prepares them mentally, emotionally, and cognitively to meet those expectations.

This article describes how the Camillus Police Department partnered with eTRAIN to examine one officer’s decision-making performance from academy training through field training. This case study demonstrates how scenario-based analytics identified a topic-specific weakness during the academy, how contextual factors helped explain it, and how continued cognitive reinforcement during field training led to measurable improvement.

Traditional training evaluations often emphasize completion rather than competence. While written exams and policy reviews have value, they can unintentionally reinforce a “check-the-box” culture that rewards adequacy over excellence. In the field, officers are not evaluated on whether they remember policy in isolation, but on whether they can slow down, assess the totality of the circumstances, develop a plan, and execute under pressure.

Scenario-based training shifts the focus from completion to human performance. Repeated exposure to realistic, time-constrained situations reinforces decision-making habits aligned with real-world demands. These scenarios enable officers to evaluate their decision-making, identify errors, and refine their thinking before encountering similar situations in real-world incidents, where mistakes can carry legal consequences and erode public trust.

eTRAIN builds on this approach by pairing body-worn-camera-based scenarios with objective performance metrics, including decision accuracy, response time, and performance trends. Together, these metrics provide insight into how officers process information under stress and whether decision-making improves with experience. Because these metrics persist across training phases, they create continuity between academy instruction and field training—something compliance-driven training models cannot provide.

During academy training, the officer in this case study (Officer A) completed 291 scenario trials across core domains, including de-escalation, vehicle stops, use of force, mental health crises, and DUI enforcement.

At an aggregate level, Officer A's performance appeared unremarkable:

- **Overall accuracy:** 75.9%
- **Academy cohort average:** 80.6%
- **Average response time:** 1.28 seconds (cohort average: 2.13 seconds)

Viewed only through summary metrics, the officer might be characterized as slightly below average but decisively quick. However, aggregate scores alone risk rewarding speed without understanding judgment quality. Topic-level analysis revealed a more consequential pattern.

From a leadership perspective, this distinction matters: rewarding speed or completion without examining decision quality risks normalizing marginal performance in situations where errors carry significant consequences.

In DUI-related scenarios, Officer A's performance diverged sharply from peers:

- **DUI accuracy:** 54.5%
- **Academy average (DUI):** 81.6%
- **Average response time:** 0.83 seconds

This combination—low accuracy paired with fast response times—suggests rapid decision-making that failed to consistently account for the full set of cues required in DUI investigations. In contrast, the officer performed at or above academy averages in other domains, including domestic violence and constitutional policing.

Without scenario-level analytics, this topic-specific vulnerability would likely have gone unnoticed. Overall performance did not indicate a lack of effort or competence—only that certain incident types disrupted the decision-making process.

During academy training, supervisors became aware that Officer A had prior family experiences involving DUI incidents. Research on stress and cognition suggests that emotionally salient topics can increase cognitive load and impair structured reasoning—even among capable officers. These effects do not always slow responses; in many cases, they produce faster but less accurate decisions.

eTRAIN does not attempt to diagnose personal factors. Instead, it provides objective evidence of where decision-making deviates from expected performance. In this case, DUI scenarios represented a specific cognitive challenge rather than a generalized deficiency. Recognizing this distinction allowed instructors to address the issue through targeted cognitive reinforcement rather than discipline.

After joining the Camillus Police Department, Officer A continued scenario-based training during field training, completing 352 additional trials across the same topic areas. Because the same evaluation framework was used, academy and field-training performance could be directly compared.

Overall FT performance:

- **Overall accuracy:** 84.5%
- **Department average:** 77.8%
- **Average response time:** 1.50 seconds (department average: 1.65 seconds)

These results suggest maturation rather than simple improvement. Response times became slightly slower but more consistent, indicating more deliberate cognitive processing.

DUI Performance in FT

The most significant change occurred in DUI enforcement:

- **DUI accuracy:** 88.1%
- **Department average (DUI):** 79.5%

From academy to field training, DUI accuracy increased by more than **33 percentage points**. Trend analysis showed sustained improvement over time rather than isolated gains, indicating consolidation of learning and improved situational awareness (Figure 1).

Performance gains extended beyond DUI scenarios. During field training, Officer A also exceeded departmental averages in vehicle stops (87.6%), de-escalation (85.3%), and suicide-by-cop scenarios (88.9%). This indicates that the early-identified weakness did not persist. Instead, it was resolved through continued exposure, reflection, and reinforcement.

This case study reinforces several leadership lessons:

1. **Overall scores can mask meaningful risk**
2. **Speed alone is not a virtue**—accuracy and judgment must guide evaluation.
3. **Cognitive training is operational training.**
4. **Training must extend beyond the academy** to verify improvement over time.
5. **Mediocrity carries organizational risk**

Policing operates in a competitive and highly scrutinized environment. High expectations must be paired with training that develops cognitive readiness and human performance. Leaders cannot endorse “check-the-box” training without implicitly accepting average outcomes.

Policing is ultimately a test of judgment under pressure. This case study demonstrates how scenario-based analytics can identify hidden decision-making challenges during academy training and document their resolution during field training. Additional information is available in this [video](#).

For Camillus PD, the value of eTRAIN was in reinforcing a culture that prioritizes cognitive readiness and rejects mediocrity as the standard. As agencies face increasing complexity, scrutiny, and accountability, longitudinal, data-driven training approaches offer a path to demanding excellence while providing officers the tools to achieve it.

References

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Disclaimer: This article was edited with the assistance of AI-based writing tools.

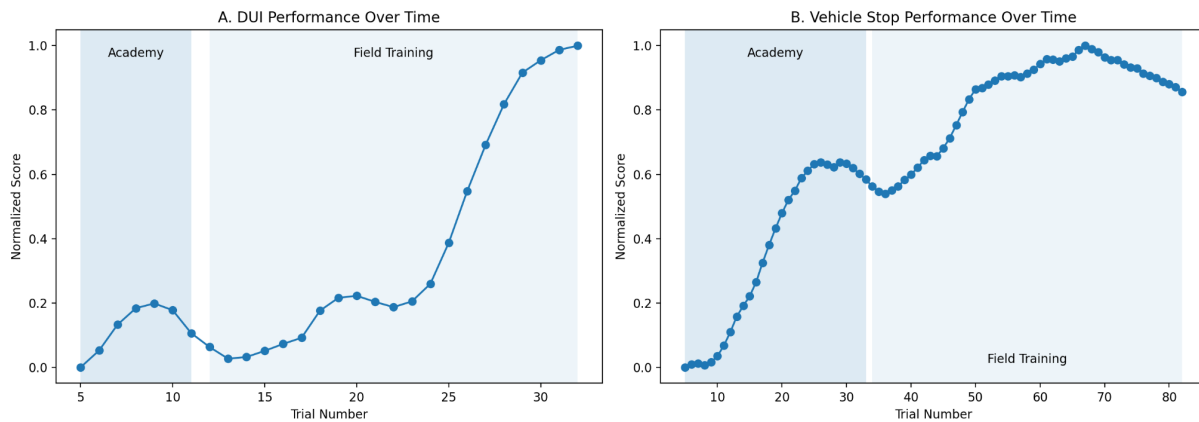


Figure 1. Topic-specific decision-making performance across academy and field training. Normalized decision-making scores plotted by trial number for **(A) DUI** and **(B) Vehicle Stop** scenarios. Shaded regions indicate the training phase (Academy vs. Field Training).

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