



The Utilization of Simulation Equipment as an Interactive Learning Experience: Implications for Public Opinion and Professional Socialization

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Abstract

This article examines simulation-based learning as a reflective, practice-based instructional approach within higher education programs that prepare students for public service roles, including law enforcement and corrections. As technological advances and changing student learning preferences challenge traditional pedagogy, simulation tools such as use-of-force systems, driving simulators, and immersive virtual platforms offer experiential environments that enhance decision-making, situational awareness, and professional judgment. Drawing on professional experience, student reflections, and relevant scholarship, the article explores how simulation-based instruction contributes to the professional socialization of future public servants and shapes how they interpret authority, exercise discretion, and engage with the public. From a political science perspective, these pedagogical practices influence public trust, perceptions of legitimacy, and the broader civic responsibilities of public service institutions. The discussion highlights how intentional integration of simulation technology in higher education can support both workforce readiness and democratic accountability, while situating experiential learning within the context of public opinion and institutional legitimacy.

Keywords: Simulation-Based Learning; Experiential Learning; Public Service Education; Law Enforcement Training; Professional Socialization; Public Trust and Legitimacy; Civic Preparedness

Introduction

Institutions of higher education play a central role in shaping how future public servants understand authority, legitimacy, and their relationship to the communities they will serve. In disciplines such as law enforcement, corrections, and public service administration, instructional practices do more than transmit technical knowledge; they contribute to professional socialization, ethical reasoning, and the interpretation of public expectations. As such, pedagogical

approaches within these programs have implications not only for workforce readiness but also for public trust, institutional legitimacy, and the broader dynamics of public opinion toward governmental authority [1, 2].

In recent years, higher education has faced significant challenges that intersect with political and social change. Shifts in student learning preferences, the proliferation of technology-mediated information, and the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have altered how knowledge is acquired and evaluated. Students increasingly encounter political narratives, policy debates, and representations of public institutions through social media and informal digital platforms, often before engaging with formal academic instruction. This environment can create tension between experiential expertise and externally sourced information, particularly in politically salient fields such as policing and public safety.

Simulation-based learning has emerged as a pedagogical response to these challenges, offering experiential environments in which students engage directly with scenarios that mirror real-world public service contexts. Long utilized in aviation and military training, simulation technology has gained prominence in law enforcement and public service education as a means of fostering decision-making, communication, and situational awareness under conditions of uncertainty. From a political science perspective, these learning environments are significant because they shape how future practitioners interpret authority, exercise discretion, and interact with the public factors closely linked to public perceptions of legitimacy and support for public institutions [1, 2].

This article examines the instructional role of simulation-based learning in higher education through a reflective, practice-based lens, drawing on professional experience, student perspectives, and relevant scholarship. Rather than presenting empirical outcomes, the article explores how simulation-based instruction functions as a form

of political and professional socialization within public service education. By situating simulation pedagogy within broader discussions of experiential learning, institutional trust, and public-facing governance, this article contributes applied insight relevant to scholars and practitioners concerned with political behavior, public opinion, and the preparation of future public servants [3].

Simulation-Based Learning in Higher Education

Simulation-based learning is grounded in the experiential learning theory, most prominently articulated by Kolb [4], who conceptualized learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. According to Kolb's model, knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, making structured engagement and post-activity reflection central to deep learning. Within higher education, simulation exercises align with this framework by providing students with immersive, practice-oriented experiences that are followed by guided debriefing and analysis.

However, experiential learning theory extends beyond Kolb's foundational model. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the importance of situated cognition, which posits that learning occurs within authentic contexts that mirror real-world environments [5]. Simulation-based instruction reflects this perspective by embedding students in realistic decision-making scenarios that require contextual judgment rather than memorization. This alignment enhances the transferability of knowledge from classroom settings to professional practice.

Additionally, research in high-impact educational practices highlights experiential and applied learning as mechanisms for increasing student engagement, retention, and critical thinking [6]. Simulation environments promote active learning by requiring students to assume responsibility for decision outcomes, fostering accountability and adaptive reasoning. In politically salient disciplines such as public safety and law enforcement, these learning modalities are particularly significant because they shape how students interpret authority, discretion, and public interaction before entering professional roles.

Emerging research on simulation-based instruction in policing further supports its pedagogical value. Recent literature reviews suggest that immersive technologies, including virtual reality and scenario-based simulation, enhance situational awareness, stress management, and communication skills when integrated with structured reflection [7]. Importantly, scholars emphasize that the effectiveness of simulation is contingent upon instructor-guided debriefing, reinforcing Kolb's assertion that reflection transforms experience into learning.

Taken together, these theoretical and empirical foundations position simulation-based learning not merely as a technological enhancement but as a pedagogical approach rooted in experiential theory, contextual learning, and evidence-based instructional design. When applied within higher education programs preparing students for public service, simulation-based instruction functions as a mechanism for professional socialization, bridging cognitive development with civic responsibility.

Application of Simulation Technology in Law Enforcement and Public Service Education

Within law enforcement and public service education, simulation-based learning offers a unique instructional advantage by allowing students to engage in realistic, scenario-driven experiences that reflect the complexity of professional practice. Unlike traditional classroom instruction, which often emphasizes policy, procedure, and legal theory, simulation environments place students in dynamic situations requiring rapid decision-making, effective communication, and situational awareness. These competencies are essential in public service professions where outcomes frequently depend on judgment under pressure.

Simulation technologies commonly used in law enforcement education include use-of-force systems, driving simulators, and immersive virtual or extended reality platforms. Use-of-force simulators, such as MILO-based systems, integrate visual, auditory, and interactive stimuli to replicate real-world encounters. These systems allow students to practice verbal commands, threat assessment, de-escalation techniques, and tactical decision-making within a controlled environment. Prior research has highlighted the value of such systems in supporting short, high-fidelity training scenarios that emphasize procedural and situational learning.

Driving simulators represent another critical instructional tool, particularly in preparing students for emergency vehicle operation and pursuit-related decision-making. Similar technologies have long been utilized in commercial driver training to help learners transition from everyday passenger vehicles to larger, more complex systems. In law enforcement and public safety education, driving simulators allow students to experience adverse weather conditions, high-stress responses, and risk assessment scenarios without the physical danger associated with real-world training. These simulations support experiential learning while mitigating institutional liability and safety concerns.

The integration of virtual reality (VR) and extended reality (XR) platforms further expands the instructional potential of simulation-based learning. Emerging research suggests that immersive technologies enhance realism and emotional engagement, enabling learners to experience stress, ambiguity, and consequence in ways that closely resemble operational environments [8]. Within academic programs, these tools allow exposure to diverse scenarios, including correctional settings, community supervision contexts, and interactions with emotionally disturbed individuals situations students may not encounter during traditional coursework or limited field placements.

From an instructional standpoint, the value of simulation technology lies not only in the experience itself but in the structured reflection that follows. Faculty-guided debriefing allows students to critically evaluate their actions, identify areas for improvement, and connect experiential outcomes to course concepts such as ethics, legal standards, and professional responsibility. This reflective process reinforces learning while supporting the development of professional identity and confidence.

While simulation technology has often been discussed primarily within the context of law enforcement training academies, its application within higher education represents an important bridge between academic instruction and workforce preparation. By exposing students to realistic decision-making environments prior to entering the field, simulation-based learning supports institutional goals related to student readiness, community partnerships, and public service effectiveness.

Student Perspectives and Instructional Value

Student perspectives provide valuable insight into how simulation-based learning is experienced within higher education settings, particularly in applied programs such as law enforcement and public service education. While these perspectives do not constitute empirical data, they offer illustrative reflections that help contextualize the instructional value of simulation technology and its perceived impact on student engagement and learning.

Students frequently describe simulation-based activities as more engaging and meaningful than traditional lecture-based instruction. The opportunity to participate in realistic, scenario-driven exercises allows learners to move beyond passive content consumption and actively apply course concepts. One student reflected that access to simulation equipment "opens up ideas about law enforcement to those who may be on the line about it," noting that the experiential nature of the simulation environment helped clarify career interests

and increase motivation. This type of engagement aligns with existing literature indicating that experiential learning environments can enhance student commitment and interest in applied fields.

Another recurring theme in student reflections is the value of hands-on learning for accommodating diverse learning styles. Simulation-based instruction allows students to learn through action, observation, and reflection, which may be particularly beneficial for learners who struggle to connect abstract concepts to practical application. One student noted that the simulator “allows for new methods of teaching without the repetition of lectures” and provides “a more hands-on approach” that mirrors real-world experience while remaining within a controlled academic setting. Such reflections support the pedagogical argument that simulation-based learning complements traditional instruction by offering alternative pathways to understanding.

Students also emphasized the role of simulation in building confidence and professional readiness. Exposure to realistic scenarios such as traffic stops, emergency responses, and interpersonal encounters allows learners to practice decision-making and communication skills prior to entering formal training academies or professional roles. A student described the simulation lab as providing “an accurate glimpse into what law enforcement deal with on a daily basis,” highlighting the perceived authenticity and relevance of the experience. This sense of realism appears to contribute to increased self-efficacy and preparedness, which are critical outcomes in public service education.

Importantly, these student perspectives underscore the role of simulation technology in shaping the overall classroom experience. Beyond skill development, simulation-based activities appear to influence attendance, participation, and motivation by creating an environment that students perceive as relevant and engaging. While such reflections should be interpreted cautiously and within the context of instructional design, they provide useful insight into how simulation-based learning is received by students and how it may enhance educational outcomes when thoughtfully integrated into academic programs.

Conclusion

Simulation-based learning occupies an increasingly important position at the intersection of higher education, public service preparation, and political life. In disciplines such as law enforcement and public safety, instructional strategies influence not only skill acquisition but also how future professionals understand authority, accountability, and their role within democratic society. As public confidence in institutions remains closely tied to everyday interactions between citizens and public servants, the pedagogical environments that shape these professionals warrant sustained scholarly attention [1, 2].

This article has examined simulation-based learning as a reflective, practice-based instructional approach situated within higher education and informed by experiential learning theory. High-fidelity simulation tools including use-of-force systems, driving simulators, and immersive virtual environments provide structured opportunities for students to engage with the complexities of decision-making, discretion, and communication in controlled settings. When paired with intentional debriefing and critical reflection, these experiences support not only professional readiness but also the development of judgment and ethical awareness central to public-facing governance.

From a political science and public opinion perspective, simulation-based instruction contributes to early professional socialization by shaping how students interpret public expectations of authority, which is known to influence public trust and legitimacy in policing institutions [1, 2]. These formative experiences may also influence broader democratic outcomes, including citizen perceptions of institutional effectiveness and fairness [3]. While simulation technology alone cannot resolve structural or political challenges facing public institutions, it represents a pedagogical tool through which higher education can intentionally prepare students for the civic dimensions of public service work.

Future research should examine the relationship between simulation-based learning and outcomes such as professional identity formation, public trust, and citizen perceptions of institutional performance. As higher education institutions continue to partner with public and private sector organizations, simulation-based pedagogy offers a promising avenue for aligning academic preparation with the political realities of public service. Thoughtful integration of these tools may strengthen not only workforce readiness but also the democratic relationship between public institutions and the communities they serve.

Competing Interest: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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