

Focus on Basics

CONNECTING RESEARCH & PRACTICE

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Writing at the House

*Bunker Hill Community College's Offender
Re-Entry Program at the Suffolk County
House of Correction*

by **Bob Flynn**

William sat at the head of the large, gray rectangular table and passed out typed copies of his autobiographical piece, *My Own Prison*, to his eight classmates and their teacher.

"What do you want us to look for?" Manuel asked.

"Descriptive language is the main thing. I mean, can you really see what I'm writing about? Let me know about that," William replied as he quickly shuffled his copy in his hands and *continued on page 3*



Focus on Basics is the quarterly publication of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. It presents best practices, current research on adult learning and literacy, and how research is used by adult basic education teachers, counselors, program administrators, and policymakers. *Focus on Basics* is dedicated to connecting research with practice, to connecting teachers with research and researchers with the reality of the classroom, and by doing so, making adult basic education research more relevant to the field.

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National Center for the Study of
Adult Learning and Literacy



Welcome!

What role does education play in efforts to equip inmates to transition successfully out of incarceration and back into the community? That's the unspoken question at the core of each of the articles in this issue of *Focus on Basics*.

Education is the pivotal element in the Offender Re-Entry Program that serves the Suffolk County (Massachusetts) House of Corrections, writes Bob Flynn in the cover article. The writing workshop instills confidence as it provides inmates with concepts, skills, and strategies. And in working on autobiographies, inmates form relationships with teachers that last as the teachers support them in their transition back to the community.

Kathy Goebel, based in Washington state, describes why an emphasis on re-entry is so important and the role that education plays in those efforts (page 9). NCSALL researcher John Tyler finds that the GED has a positive economic impact on minority ex-offenders during the first two years after release from incarceration. The first two years are crucial, so this is good news. However, these effects diminish over time and are not found for white ex-offenders. Read about this study and consider its implications, page 11.

In Hawaii, Vanessa Helsham uses Hawaiian cultural references and literature in her classes in the Learning Center in the Halawa Correctional Facility. She also teaches traditional hula dancing and, in her class, members of rival gangs work together (page 13). If you're doing it wrong, in hula, you have to change. It's like life, she explains. Pauline Geraci writes about using a different art form — poetry — in the Minnesota Correctional Facility Stillwater (page 15).

On page 21, Dominique Chlup, Texas, provides a chronology of corrections education from 1789 and an in-depth discussion of this area over the past 65 years. Education's role in corrections ebbs and flows as society's views of incarceration shift from punishment-oriented to rehabilitative.

Everyone, even the incarcerated, has a right to an education in Vermont, explains Tom Woods, a teacher in the Community High School of Vermont. Read about this school and how it serves a transitory population with a huge range of educational backgrounds and needs (page 25). While certain aspects of being a teacher transcend place, some do not. For those *Focus on Basics* readers who are not corrections educators, Dominique Chlup describes what it's like to teach in a correctional facility. Her article starts on page 30.

Recognizing that offenders have a high incidence of disabilities, low academic skills, and other related challenges, Missouri and Ohio are using comprehensive screening systems and putting into place a web of follow-up services, including education. Laura Weisel, Alan Toops, and Robin Schwarz report on these efforts (page 31). Bill Muth shares the results of his research on assessing offenders' literacy skills, beliefs, and practices (page 35) and offers a model of literacy assessment that can more meaningfully inform placement and instruction. Just as services are learning to work together to maximize their effectiveness, so are advisory boards. Marianna Ruprecht, Wisconsin, shares how her board used technology to do so (page 40).

Welcome to those corrections educators who are new to *Focus on Basics*: We hope this issue serves you well. We also encourage you to seek out earlier issues of the publication for information and ideas relevant to your experience as an educator.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in yellow ink that reads "Barbara Garner".

Barbara Garner
Editor

Writing at the House

continued from page 1

began reading My Own Prison. His audience listened intently as he recounted his search for a place to live when he was homeless, with several students underlining sentences and scrawling notes on their copies. William finished reading and looked from his piece to the class.

“That’s great, man,” Damon said. “I could really see what’s happenin’. Like when you describe the place your friend showed you.” Damon flipped the pages of his copy to find the exact part. He read it aloud. “It was a drab looking building made of yellow brick and covered with dirt and grime. We walked up the stairs of this morbid looking building and we stepped inside. The hallways were dark and dank. The smell of urine bouncing off the walls made it hard to breathe.’ I could see that, man. I could smell that.”

William smiled.

This scene occurred in the Writing Workshop at Bunker Hill Community College’s Offender Re-Entry Program (ORP). ORP is a collaboration of four nonprofit social service agencies in Boston, MA: Bunker Hill Community College, the Suffolk County Sheriff’s Department, Community Resources for Justice, and the Work Place. Originally funded in 2000 as a federal Department of Education re-entry grant (and now funded entirely by the Suffolk County

Sheriff’s Department), ORP provides offenders at the Suffolk County House of Corrections with comprehensive services that prepare them for a successful and sustained transition to society.

One of the principal tenets of ORP is that education is an essential element in reducing recidivism. A study conducted by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice in 1990-1991 showed that the recidivism rate for offenders without a college degree was 60 percent compared to 13.7 percent



for those with an associate’s degree, 5.6 percent for those with a bachelor’s degree, and 0 percent for those a master’s degree. In similar studies conducted in Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New York, offenders enrolled in higher education programs had average rearrest rates between 1 and 15 percent, compared to the national average of 60 percent (Open Society Institute, Criminal Justice Initiative, p. 5).

Two Stages

ORP operates in two stages. Stage One is an intensive eight-week program at the Suffolk County House of Correction comprised of the

Writing Workshop, a computer course, a job skills course, and a life skills course. Although each course demands complete commitment and effort from each offender, the educational component — the Writing Workshop — is the most rigorous and has become the foundation of ORP. In addition, offenders create a portfolio of their principal work for each course and workshop, which they present to a panel of staff, peers, and representatives from the collaborating agencies. Offenders also work individually with a case manager to create a detailed plan in preparation for their return to their communities.

Stage Two of ORP involves a systematic approach to connecting with the now ex-offenders while they are in the community. Upon release, ex-offenders are contacted by ORP staff (either by phone or in person) once a week for the first month and once a month for the following five months. The goal is to reinforce ex-offenders’ discharge plans and to offer any necessary assistance (including employment assistance, housing assistance, academic counseling, and counseling referrals). In addition, ex-offenders are encouraged to contact ORP staff at any time if they need assistance. Although ex-offenders are under no mandate to remain connected to staff, 90 percent of offenders do remain in contact with at least one ORP staff member after they re-enter the community.

Writing Workshop Philosophy and Format

The Writing Workshop is influenced by the work of Nancy Atwell (1998), Anne Lamott (1994), Donald Murray, Donald Graves, Ralph Fletcher, and Natalie Goldberg

(1995) and operates from the philosophy that writing instruction is about the *process* of writing rather than the *product* of writing. Throughout the Workshop, students work toward completing an autobiographical piece that involves a clear writing process and incorporates specific writing techniques and conventions. Students draft their autobiographical piece throughout the session while working on separate mini-assignments, including dialogue and complete sentences (between the autobiographical piece and the mini-assignments, offenders have between one and one-and-a-half hours of nightly homework). “They are learning to unlearn a lot of what they believe writing means — that their story is ok to write about,” says Amy Carpineto, one of the two Writing Workshop teachers.

Students read Jimmy Santiago Baca’s memoir *A Place to Stand* (2001), which is about Baca’s struggles both in and out of prison. Baca’s autobiography provides students an opportunity to read and

“... they’re not just remaining connected with a program, they’re remaining connected with people who care about them and are committed to helping them succeed.”

discuss the themes of an exceptional and relevant piece of literature, in addition to providing a context in which to study the conventions of writing (e.g., paragraphing and punctuation) and the elements of a memoir (e.g., character development and plot development). Students read two to three chapters each week. Mary Beth Cahill, the second

Writing Workshop teacher, says that Baca’s memoir is important for offenders because “the theme of the book is language — that gaining control of language allowed him to overcome his environment and change his life.”

In the Writing Workshop component of their ORP portfolio, students include the final draft of their autobiographical piece as well as an earlier draft of their choice. During their Portfolio Presentation, students discuss specific revisions they made in the earlier draft and how these revisions were incorporated in their final draft. “The portfolio is so important because it is something concrete,” Carpineto says.

“This is a time for them to shine and show they didn’t sleep their sentence away. It says to an employer or a school, ‘Yeah I was in jail but look what I did.’ Anybody can say they did something, but these guys can show it.”

The box on page 5 shows an example of one offender’s first and final drafts. The selected piece captures a moment when Michael, staring out his cell window, looks upon the Boston University Medical Center. Michael’s piece is impressive not only because the final draft reflects significant revisions from the first draft, including improved descriptive language and the addition of internal dialogue, but also because it includes important reflections on his previous life and the consequences of his crime. The ability to reflect — especially in writing, because of the clarity that is expected — is critical for offenders if they are to make a successful transition to the community.

Impact

The impact of the Writing Workshop, both during the eight-week class and when offenders return to the community, has made it the pivotal element of ORP. During

“The Writing Workshop is based on having students make themselves vulnerable and telling the truth. This allows the teachers to get to know students at an accelerated speed.”

the eight-week class, the concepts, strategies, and skills offenders acquire are integrated into every other course. In the job skills class, students employ their knowledge of active voice, descriptive language, and basic grammatical rules when writing their resumes and cover letters. Kamilah Drummond, the job skills instructor from 2001 through 2004, states that the Writing Workshop “allowed me to use class time more efficiently on job skills areas rather than having to spend time on writing areas.” In the computer course, a component of the curriculum involves learning Microsoft Word’s formatting and style functions. Since the majority of offenders are not computer literate and need to practice their computer skills frequently, the Writing Workshop assignments provide a relevant and important context in which offenders can apply their Microsoft Word skills. Lastly, as part of the life skills class, offenders record minutes of each session. The ability to write clearly, accurately, and succinctly is essential to this task.

The impact of the Writing Workshop transcends the classroom: it

is evident when the offenders return to the community. The most obvious effect is the confidence it instills. Many offenders view obtaining a job and completing a college course in the same way they initially viewed reading a novel or writing a polished paper — as an impossibility. “A lot of our guys have a history of not completing things. Their writing is something tangible they have completed,” says Carpineto. When students complete the intensive Writing Workshop curriculum, they realize that they are capable of success in areas where they once believed it was unattainable. Carpineto cites as an example an ORP graduate, Marcus, who returned to the community and is enrolled in a demanding one-year massage therapy certificate program. He not only successfully managed the rigors of the massage program — which include class four days per week and nightly homework — but also continued with the program despite spending a week in the hospital after being shot in the abdomen.

The writing of a required autobiographical piece plays a significant role in establishing meaningful relationships between offenders and ORP staff. Offenders often write about profound personal experiences and feelings, allowing the teachers and staff a means to understand them and build trusting relationships. “The Writing Workshop is based on having students make themselves vulnerable and telling the truth. This allows the teachers to get to know students at an accelerated speed,” Carpineto says. This relationship is invaluable to remaining connected with students when they return to the community: they’re not just remaining connected with a program, they’re remaining connected with people who care about them and are committed to helping them succeed. Karen Bacon, the program’s former case manager and current director, cites the example of Michael. “The first time I met Michael was to complete the program’s assessment paperwork. When he got to the writing sample, he froze. ‘I can’t do this. Do I have to write?’ I explained

to him that the program’s writing workshop involves a great deal of writing throughout the eight weeks. He responded with, ‘Thank you for this opportunity, but then I don’t want to do the program. I’m sure it’s a good

program and I could use it, but I’ll fail the writing.’ For 20 minutes, Michael carried on about being a bad writer: he felt anxious and self-conscious with even talking about writing. After a lot of coaxing on my part, Michael

Michael’s Draft

First Draft

Every three to five seconds, another vehicle found its temporary residence as the lot filled up to capacity as fast as Fenway Park on Opening Day filled itself with Red Sox fans from all over. However, in this picture, the fans were the many doctors, medical residents, students, interns, and others who were not coming to see a baseball game but were all arriving no doubt with a common purpose in mind. They were coming to be productive members of Boston University Medical Center’s community. They’re coming because, somewhere in each of their individual lives, they had learned that they should work hard to earn a living. They were coming because, unlike a Red Sox game, life itself was no game at all. They knew that productivity, consistency, and labor were the keys to survival and true prosperity.

Final Draft

I’d notice how, every three to five seconds, another vehicle found its temporary residence for the day. The parking lot filled to capacity as quickly as Fenway Park had filled itself with Red Sox fans on Opening Day. However, in this picture, I thought to myself, the fans were the many doctors, nurses, medical residents, students, **interns, and others who were not coming to see a baseball game, but were all arriving, no doubt, with a common purpose in mind.**

I knew this on account of my personal interactions with many of the people I was observing. I knew that they were coming to be members of Boston University Medical Center’s flourishing community. How? Because it was the same community that I was once a part of, not too long ago. Seeing this happening had a profound effect on my inner conscious. I wondered whether the judge knew, when he sentenced me, that I would be confronted with such “smack in the face”.

In this way, I thought to myself, the system seemed heartless and cold, yet it was I who had done myself the injustice and placed myself in this position. I committed the crime of Breaking and Entering and had, therefore, rendered myself powerless to these circumstances. I had no choice but to watch life go on without me.

I thought to myself, **These people are showing up because, somewhere in each of their individual lives, they had learned that they should work hard to earn a living. They were coming because, unlike a Red Sox game, life itself is no game at all. These people knew that productivity, consistency, and labor were all key to survival and true prosperity in the capitalistic society we are living in today. I, on the other hand, had lost touch with this reality and became somewhat of an outcast.**

finally agreed to participate.

“I then asked him to do our standard writing sample. The sample he produced was only a couple of sentences and as he passed it to me he commented, ‘This is all I can do. It sucks. I’ll try the program, but don’t expect much from me because I really can’t write.’ For eight weeks, Michael worked on an autobiographical story. He solicited feedback from staff and classmates, despite how nervous he was that his story was going to be ‘bad’ and people wouldn’t like it. At the end of the cycle, Michael had completed a typed, two-and-a-half-page autobiographical piece that I felt was outstanding. It was thoughtful, had characters that were developed, and he incorporated dialogue. Michael said to me, ‘I can’t believe that I wrote this. Remember, I couldn’t even do the writing sample. I didn’t think I was gonna make it, but look at what I actually wrote.’”

The Challenges

There are two primary challenges in running a Writing Workshop in a correctional facility. The first is operating a closed-enrollment eight-week program. ORP operates out of the Community Corrections Unit and, although it recruits offenders from the entire institution, offenders must reside in this unit in order to participate. As result, recruitment for the program can be difficult because:

- the number of available beds in the unit limits the number of new students who can be recruited;
- the unit has strict restrictions: offenders cannot have Superior Court cases pending, a lengthy violent criminal history, or recent disciplinary issues; and
- offenders must be able to complete the full eight-week session: those who are scheduled to be released or paroled before the end of the session are ineligible.

The Suffolk County House of Correction’s Classification Department, which approves and coordinates all

offender movement and programming, has been instrumental in helping ORP navigate these challenges successfully. Without its cooperation, ORP would not be able consistently to enroll a full class each session.

The second challenge is the offenders’ educational experience. The vast majority of offenders enter ORP with low academic levels (ORP graduates read on average at a 7.93 reading level based on the Test for Adult Basic Education) and, because of negative experiences in formal schooling, perceive any educational

“... offenders who graduated from the program had a 12.63 percent lower recidivism rate than a control group who had not participated in ORP.”

activity in a negative light. As a result, teachers consistently find that offenders begin the Writing Workshop with an unequivocal belief that they are not capable of success as writers and readers. “You can make absolutely no assumptions about what skills they have,” Carpineto says. “Most students simply don’t use language as a means to get them through the world. We not only teach students concepts but how to learn concepts, and we must balance between giving students what they need without overwhelming them.”

Measuring Effectiveness

ORP’s model has proved highly effective. An independent evaluation of ORP conducted by Anne M. Piehl, Stefan F. LoBuglio, and Richard B. Freeman (2003) of Harvard’s Kennedy

School of Government showed that offenders who graduated from the program had a 12.63 percent lower recidivism rate than a control group who had not participated in ORP. In addition, their results showed that the longer an ORP graduate remains in the community, the greater the likelihood he will not return to prison: 500 days after release, ORP graduates are 20 percent more likely not to have returned to prison than offenders who did not participate in ORP. Many factors contribute to an offender’s successful transition into the community. The

Offender Re-Entry Program demonstrates that education is one of them. 

Offenders’ names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

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About the Author

Bob Flynn’s professional experience includes seven years as a GED and Writing Workshop instructor at the Log School Settlement House in Dorchester, MA, and three years as the Director of the Offender Re-Entry Program in Boston, MA. He is now the Acting Dean of Developmental Learning and Academic Support at Bunker Hill Community College, Boston, MA. ❖

How Does Writing Workshop Work? *The Seven Steps to Success*

✓ **Step 1: Folders**

Many students have never participated in a structured writing process, so it is essential to incorporate such structure in the Writing Workshop. A multi-colored folder system is used to organize and maintain the Writing Workshop's many materials. The following are the four distinctive folders and their functions:

- Yellow folder: syllabus, homework assignments, and notes
- Blue folder: all text and lyrics
- Green folder: writing in progress
- White folders: corrected homework

✓ **Step 2: Brainstorming**

The instructors use two brainstorming techniques: Free Writing and Writing Territories. The only rule in Free Writing is to write. Students may write about anything they choose and are encouraged to be unconcerned with grammar, structure, or style. Afterwards, students review their writing to identify ideas that they may want to incorporate into a more formal, written piece. The length of time students Free Write increases progressively throughout the session, with students beginning at five minutes each day during the first week and increasing five minutes each week. During the last week of class, students Free Write for 35 minutes.

Natalie Goldberg's concept of Writing Territories provides a more structured brainstorming technique. Writing Territories involve three areas: Topics, Genres, and Audiences. Students are asked to brainstorm ideas for Topics (e.g., an argument with a girlfriend), Genres (e.g., drama or comedy), and Audiences (e.g., teachers, friends, and/or family). Students then identify the topic, genre, and audience for their autobiographical piece.

✓ **Step 3: Mini-Lessons**

This concept, introduced in Nancy Atwell's *In the Middle* (1998), involves the teacher beginning each class with a 15- to 30-minute lesson that introduces

a writing concept that students will incorporate in their autobiographical pieces. The mini-lessons fall into two categories: craft and convention. Convention consists of basic grammatical rules, such as complete sentences, punctuation, and paragraphing.

Craft consists of writing techniques, such as character development, defining a conflict, describing a setting, and figurative language. Jimmy Baca's *A Place to Stand* is used as a context for many of the craft mini-lessons. Student can read Baca's similes, for instance, and then see how they can develop and incorporate similes into their own pieces.

The following two memorable examples of student similes are from James, who wrote his autobiographical piece about the day he was sentenced to the Suffolk House of Correction:

- "When I approached the stand, I didn't know what to expect. *I thought I was smoked like a Newport for sure.*"
- After being sentenced to six months in the House of Correction and having to leave his distraught girlfriend, James wrote: *"I felt like I was sliding down a razorblade and into a pool of alcohol."*

The instructors typically spend two to three days for each mini-lesson and give students mini-assignments that reinforce the concept being taught.

✓ **Step 4: Drafting Process**

The following concepts are incorporated to guide students through the writing process.

First Drafts

Anne Lamott's book on writing, *Bird by Bird*, is an invaluable tool for writers, especially writers who don't think they're writers. In her chapter entitled "Shitty First Drafts," Lamott writes, "Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere . . . For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts. The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it

continued on page 8

all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later." This concept is both validating and liberating for our students, many of whom begin the Writing Workshop believing that excellent writers always write excellently. Cahill says, "Sometimes students think they're not good writers because they don't get it right the first time. It's a relief for students to know that professional writers don't get it right the first time. It gives them confidence."

Next Drafts

After the teacher introduces the mini-lesson concept, students revise their papers while incorporating concepts learned in the mini-lessons. For example, if the mini-lesson introduced dialogue, students would be expected to engage their characters in dialogue that is both interesting and realistic. "Students learn that writing is rewriting. Each time you tackle a draft, you improve upon it," says Cahill.

Final Drafts

A student's final draft is his best piece, not the teacher's best piece: the major revisions need to be done by the student, not the teacher. As a result, a final piece may contain fragmented sentences, vague descriptions, and an incorrect use of quotation marks. This is fine. The objective is for students to improve in specific areas as they move through the drafting process. Since many of our students need significant improvement in many areas, it is not realistic to expect that students will perfect their skills in all areas.

✓ Step 5: Feedback

Students receive feedback on their pieces in two ways: presenting the paper in workshops with the class and individually with the teacher. This occurs once per week. Students are taught to ask their audience to provide feedback on particular areas, for example, similes or character development. One particularly effective technique involves placing the writer in a Fishbowl. This means that while the writer's classmates are commenting on his piece, he must remain silent. After his classmates have finished, the writer then has opportunity to respond. Placing the writer in the Fishbowl forces him to listen to all his classmates' comments and provides him time to come up with thoughtful responses.

One of the challenges with feedback is that students frequently want the teacher to review every draft and "tell them what is wrong," Carpineto says. However, the teachers reinforce that the students need to review and revise their drafts based on the mini-lessons. Teachers will only meet with students individually if students have specific areas that they would like the teacher to review (e.g., leads, dialogue, or plot).

✓ Step 6: Evaluations

Teachers evaluate offenders' autobiographical pieces based on the following criteria:

- Cover Page: Name, Date, Genre, Draft Number, Title.
- Drafts: All drafts must be included and labeled.
- Showing Not Telling: Similes, metaphors, personification, description of setting, and descriptive language.
- Character Arc: Author's ability to show what he learned through the experience he wrote about. Character is round not flat.
- Dialogue: Dialogue is realistic.
- Moment: Author's ability to stick to one moment.
- Commitment: The amount of effort that the author put into the paper and his willingness to revise their work.

The above areas are assessed as (1) exceeding expectations, (2) meeting expectations, (3) barely meeting expectations, or (4) not meeting expectations. The teachers also provide specific and comprehensive comments explaining their assessment.

✓ Step 7: Portfolio Presentations

As part of the Writing Workshop, students' portfolios include the final draft of their autobiographical piece as well as an earlier draft. In addition, students must select a specific area in their piece (e.g., the opening paragraph), and compare the earlier draft to the final draft. Students must discuss specific revisions and their rationale for having made them. "The portfolio is an important part for offenders because they can see the transformation of their writing and share that transformation with the panel. They're really owning their writing because they're explaining it," Cahill says. ❖

Re-Entry and Corrections Education

by Kathy Goebel

“America is the land of second chances, and when the gates of prison open, the path ahead should lead to a better life.”

President George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, 2004

***F*or the vast majority of incarcerated offenders, prison is a transitional placement. They are not “home” in a corrections facility; they are moving toward release. Inmates and those who provide prison-based services must fight the tendency toward institutionalism. The focus should always be on positive steps toward successful transition back in to the community.**

After serving their sentences, the majority of offenders transition from incarceration back to their communities. Ex-offenders struggle to find their place in society while coping with the social pressures and economic hardships that led them to crime in the first place. The cycle of arrest, confinement, and release across our country is nothing new, yet it is even more important today, because more than 630,000 offenders return home each year: four times the number that came home 25 years ago (Harrison & Karberg, 2004). Almost every person incarcerated in jails in the United States, and approximately 97 percent of those incarcerated in prison, will eventually be released (Hughes & Wilson, 2003).

The impact that released offenders

have on public safety cannot be ignored any longer. Of the large number of offenders released each year, an estimated two thirds will be rearrested within three years of their release (Langan & Levin, 2002). Re-entry has major implications for community safety. “Too many are harmed: People are victimized, families are destroyed; communities are overwhelmed; and the lives of individuals cycling in and out of incarcerations are wasted” (Solomon et al., 2004, p. 4). A greater proportion of offenders are being released without postprison supervision or services to assist them with finding jobs, housing, and needed support (Petersilia, 2000).

The high social and economic costs associated with ever-higher rates of incarceration are staggering. With the exception of health care, spending on corrections has increased more rapidly than any other item in state budgets (National Association of State Budget Offices, 2004). In this country, expenditures on corrections have gone from \$9 billion in 1982 to \$60 billion in 2001 (Bauer, 2001). The fiscal impact is further amplified because prisoners are spending longer periods of time incarcerated and experience fewer opportunities to take advantage of education and training programs that could assist in their transition upon release (Lynch & Sabol, 2001).

Returning offenders face myriad challenges as they transition to their communities (Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council, 2005; Harlow, 2003; Holzer et al., 2003; Lynch & Sabol, 2001; Mumola, 1999; Travis et al., 2003):

- Three quarters of offenders have a history of substance abuse.
- Two thirds of offenders do not have a high school diploma or equivalency.
- About one third of all offenders were unemployed before they were incarcerated. A criminal record hinders both their employability and their earning capabilities.
- One third of incarcerated offenders reported having some physical or mental disability, with a rate of serious mental illness that is two to four times higher than that of the general population.
- About two thirds of offenders returning to the community have children under the age of 18, and incarcerated parents owe an average of \$20,000 in child support debt when they are released from prison.

Given this stark picture, the current emphasis on re-entry must continue to be a high priority for corrections educators and the criminal justice system as a whole.

“Of the large number of offenders released each year, an estimated two thirds will be rearrested within three years of their release (Langan & Levin, 2002).”

Phases of Re-Entry

Re-entry efforts should begin while offenders are still in correctional facilities and preparing for release, continue through their immediate transition back into the community, and then help to sustain them with support services such as job search assistance, substance abuse counseling, and mental health treatment. The Serious and Violent

Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI) is a federal effort to improve outcomes for adults and juveniles returning to communities from correctional facilities. The goal of SVORI is to reduce the likelihood of reincarceration by providing tailored supervision and services. SVORI has designed one re-entry model comprised of three distinct phases that are described in detail below (Lattimore et al., 2004).

Corrections educators usually work with offenders during the prerelease phase. The emphasis of many programs is to prepare offenders for their transition back to their homes and neighborhoods. Literacy skills, classes that prepare learners for the tests of General Educational Development (GED), life skills instruction, employment training, parenting classes, and crime intervention programs make up a large portion of the prerelease programs that are sometimes available to eligible offenders. However, resources continue to diminish as the offender population increases, thus limiting access to needed educational programs.

The intense demands of the release phase usually preclude offenders' involvement in educational programming. Offenders during this stage face many pressures as they reunite with family, begin searching for employment, come in contact with previous acquaintances and the temptations of old habits, as well as comply with community supervision requirements. In the ideal situation, during this phase offenders would be provided with information on available community resources.

During the sustained support phase, ex-offenders should be connected with community-based educational programs. Linkages between the institutional education and community-based programs require extensive work and continued nurturing. Ex-offenders' previous assessment results and their participation in educational programs while incarcerated should be documented

and made easily accessible to them as they begin community-based education programs.

Employment Challenges

Employment is critical for returning offenders, but finding and retaining employment is incredibly difficult. Many offenders have limited education and little employment experience. A felony conviction often restricts the type of employment an offender can be offered. A disproportionately large number of offenders return to low-income and predominantly minority communities that have relatively few unskilled jobs

“Corrections education needs a sharp focus on employability issues.”

available. Corrections education needs a sharp focus on employability issues. The Reentry Policy Council urges service providers “to teach inmates functional, educational, and vocational competencies based on employment market demand and public safety requirements” (2005, p. 1). Training must correspond with jobs that are in high demand or with those employment sectors forecasted to provide new job opportunities in the community. It is critical that corrections educators and corrections officials create direct linkages with employment service providers in the release phase. We must design educational services that meet the employment challenge. Housing, health care, employment, family stability, and drug treatment are all critical needs that often take on crisis proportions for ex-offenders. However, all of these life challenges are related to education. Inmates who address their educational needs during confinement do better when they

return to their families and communities and are significantly less likely to be reconvicted (Harlow, 2003; Steurer et al., 2001).

“Rather than draining community resources, safety and morale, prisoners who return to the community with support systems in place can become productive members of society, thus saving resources, strengthening family and community ties, and expanding the labor force and economy” (Solomon et al., 2004, p. 1). Corrections educators toil to bring this vision to reality. 

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What Are the Economic Effects of Earning a GED in Prison?

What economic impact does earning a certificate of General Educational Development (GED) offer offenders after they are released from prison? NCSALL researcher John Tyler and a colleague, Jeffrey Kling of Princeton University, examined this question using data from the state of Florida. They compared school dropouts who had been incarcerated in Florida prisons between 1994 and 1999 and obtained a GED during that time with dropouts who entered and exited prison at about the same period but either did not participate in educational programming while in prison or who participated but did not complete a GED. They used state unemployment insurance data for earnings information: the study examined the mainstream labor market rather than the “under the table” economy.

This study is important because, as Tyler reminds us, “The growing prison population is primarily fueled by low educated individuals, especially racial and ethnic minorities: the people we are most worried about in the labor market.” To what extent do education and training programs help these individuals successfully reintegrate into the mainstream labor

market? “GED programs are ubiquitous in prisons,” points out Tyler, so studying the economic effect they have makes sense.

“Among racial and ethnic minority offenders — primarily African Americans with a smaller number of Hispanics — we found about a 20 percent increase in the earnings among GED holders relative to non-GED holders in the first post-release year. This effect declined in the second year and by the third year it fell away to basically zero,” explains Tyler. “We found that, for white offenders, there was no difference in the post-release earnings or employment for individuals who got a GED versus those who did not.”

Tyler and Kling’s findings are very similar to those reached by a previous study on the effects of vocational education in prison by the Bureau of Prisons (Saylor & Gaes, 1996). “If you think that the GED is something that will turn prisoners’ lives around, this is a discouraging study,” explains Tyler. “On the other hand, in a world where it’s hard to find big effects in many social programs targeted at our most disadvantaged populations, [this study shows that] the GED program does have pretty big initial effects for people we are very concerned about.”

Why?

The initial positive economic effect of the GED on minorities — compared to similar ex-offenders who did not attain the GED — dwindles away after two years. Research needs to be done to help us understand why this is so: it may be because the jobs that ex-offenders get tend not to be

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About the Author

Kathy Goebel began her career as a special education elementary and middle school teacher. After 10 years in the K-12 system, she shifted to adult education as a basic skills instructor and later director of education at two correctional facilities in Washington state. She is currently the Correctional Education Program Administrator for the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. ❖

“career ladder” jobs with opportunities for growth. The non-GED-holding ex-offenders may be getting jobs over time, and the GED-holding group, while working, may not be experiencing substantial wage increases. Thus, over time, the initial positive effect on the earnings of ex-offenders who earned GEDs may be diminishing as the uncredentialed ex-offenders eventually find their way into employment. This is, however, speculation at this point.

Why the white GED-earning ex-offenders’ earnings were not statistically different from those of white ex-offenders who did not complete GEDs or did not participate in GED programs while incarcerated is unknown. This phenomenon

certainly raises questions and merits further study.

Other Attributes

By making offenders who participated in prison-based GED programs but did not get their GEDs a key comparison group, the researchers addressed the question of the “omitted variable” problem: what if the offenders who studied for their GEDs in prison had attributes that would have led them to have “superior labor market outcomes” to those of non-GED attempters, even if they did not complete a GED? “For example,” says Tyler, “a GED may simply be a proxy for intelligence or motivation that would have led to greater employment

and earnings anyway, with no causal role for the GED itself.”

The study is also important because the researchers were able to control for a variety of factors that others researching the impact of prison education on ex-offenders have not been able to control for: prior criminal justice record, prior earnings, marriage status, and prior academic skills level as measured by the Tests for Adult Basic Education, for example. This methodology enables researchers to attribute impact to the GED rather than to these other factors.

Generalizability

Whether these findings can be generalized to other states depends upon the similarity between Florida — the state that was the source of the data — and the state in question. “Florida is a pretty big prison population state,” notes Tyler, “but it looks much more like the rest of the US prison population than do other big states like Texas or California, because those states have much higher percentages of Hispanics in their prison populations. You also have to think about the economies: in the late 1990s, when these folks were moving out into the Florida economy. Was [Florida’s economy in the late 90s] sufficiently different from yours? If so, will the lessons hold for your state?”

To read the full study, “Prison-Based Education and Re-Entry into the Mainstream Labor Market,” go to http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Education/facpages/j_tyler/pdfs/papers/Prison_d11_sage2_brownWP.pdf

—Barbara Garner 

Understanding and Acting on these Findings

This is a thought-provoking study. The findings — that the GED has a positive economic impact on minority ex-offenders during the first two years after release from incarceration but that the impact dwindles thereafter, and that the GED has virtually no economic impact on white ex-offenders — raise important questions. These include, but are certainly not limited to:

- Why does the impact dwindle after two years?
- Why does the GED have no positive economic impact on white ex-offenders?
- What role does society’s treatment of ex-offenders have that overrides the positive economic impact the GED has on non-offenders? (see <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=171> *Why Go Beyond the GED?*; <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=409> *Results from a New Approach to Studying the Economic Benefits of the GED*; <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=329> *Do the Cognitive Skills of Dropouts Matter in the Labor Market?*)
- What other impact does earning a GED have on offenders?
- What could corrections GED programs do to help ex-offenders improve their economic futures?

We hope that you and your colleagues, and you and your students, explore these questions. Share your ideas with others via the *Focus on Basics* electronic discussion list (see page 39 for information on how to subscribe). Researchers including John Tyler are particularly curious about why, for example, earning the GED offers white ex-offenders no economic boost. ❖

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Culturally Relevant Education

Teaching Hawaiian inmates about and via their culture motivates and inspires them

Between 60 and 70 percent of the inmates in Hawaiian prisons are of Hawaiian heritage, but many of them were not raised in it or have lost contact with it. Hawaiian values are really different from western values, according to Maureen Tito, Corrections Program Services Manager for the state of Hawaii. “In our corrections education programs,” she explains, “we try to use cultural information to teach math, English, and cognitive skills. Sentenced felons learn hula and Hawaiian chant, learning, at the same time, how to behave, and the expectations of the community.”

The Learning Center in the Halawa Correctional Facility in Aiea offers adult basic education, preparation for the tests of General Educational Development (GED), independent studies, college courses, and what they call “branch electives”: Hawaiian chant and dance, Hawaiian language, music, yoga, meditation. Samoan, Japanese, German, and Russian language have been offered as well, based on the availability of instructors. Of a total population of about 1,200 inmates, about 650 a year participate in educational programs. This represents a large proportion, given that participation is voluntary. The teaching staff includes three full-time education specialists, one education supervisor, usually three contract teachers, and about six

volunteers. All inmates who wish to participate take the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) to determine their reading and math levels. After they complete it, they attend orientation, during which a staff person explains the rules of the center and helps inmates choose classes based on their test scores and interests. Most offenders take a combination of up to six classes at one time.

The adult basic education classes use, among other materials, Hawaiian authors writing about Hawaii. *Chicken Soup from the Soul of Hawaii* includes a number of such stories, and although the learners have to stretch because of the material’s reading level, its content sparks their interest and motivates them to make the effort. In math, learners might be asked to calculate the number of flowers needed to make an ili lei (approximately 4,000), explains Vanessa Helsham, a teacher at the prison. Of course, she points out, many learners don’t see math as relevant to their lives. “We tell them, you need to bring up your math scores,” she says. “And they ask why they need to know math. ‘I don’t use math in my life.’” She asks them, “Aren’t you here for a drug charge? So how many

grams did you sell? And they say, ‘I can tell you that.’” Her retort: “So I thought you don’t use math in your life? There are grams, ounces, money.”

And they say, “Wow, ok.”

Relate to Them

Unless you tell them something that relates to them, they won’t get the importance, Helsham explains. She is Hawaiian, and most of the staff are either native Hawaiian or grew up in Hawaii. They all use cultural references in their classes, not just Hawaiian but almost all the cultures that are, as she says, “part of what makes Hawaii a unique place to live.”



Helsham starts work with her students by connecting with them, explaining that she grew up in [public] housing, as did almost 80 percent of them. She explains to them that life is not easy: it’s a matter of choice and consequence. “I hear

from folks,” Helsham remembers, “that they wish that someone taught them that, that it’s choice and consequence.”

Not just Hawaiian culture, but really local cultures, street and drug culture, become reference points, if

“Not just Hawaiian culture, but really local cultures, street and drug culture, become reference points, if not topics.”

not topics. What is and what is not Hawaiian culture is also investigated. Helsham teaches a cognitive skills class, providing participants with tools that help them change the way they make choices. “I find that I can’t teach it Americanized,” she says, “so we step back and change it, not just to Hawaiian culture but local culture here. I have heard students say, ‘I get it when you tell me.’”

Teaching Hawaiian culture and values via dance and music, language and discussion, and using Hawaiian examples in the teaching of basic academic skills works because learners see themselves in this material. The approach incorporates two elements that underlie Youth Cultural Competence, a technique found to be successful in engaging youth (Weber, 2004). These elements are positive peer influence and popular culture. In this case, the positive peers are teachers such as Helsham and local artists such as the hula dancers whom she brings into her classes. Popular culture encompasses all the material drawn from local life: the drug references that illuminate the inmates’ use of math, the critical analysis of trips to the park, the Hula and the expectations that go along with the dance.

Helsham explains, “I say at the beginning of class: ‘I can get you to

realize within the next ten minutes that you’re going to realize something you never realized before.’ I ask them how many of them take their children to the park, and 99 percent raise their hands because they all have children, or nieces or nephews.” Then, she continues, she asks “When you take your children to the park, do you see that as being quality time with those children?”

She probes: “Ok, so what are you doing at the park? Are you letting your child play? And that’s quality time, because you’re at the park with them?”

“A lot don’t answer,” she explains. “Most of you, I say, are probably partying at the park, drinking. They say ‘Yeah’

and I say ‘and you call that quality time with your child? Quality time means you’re actually playing with them, incorporating yourself into their lives.’”

She explains to her students that they — and by “they” she includes herself — were brought up to know that being at the park with our child was our culture: it was good enough, and that parents didn’t have to also play with the children. She challenges them: “Why do you see it as good enough?”

“This is your homework,” she explains. “Call home and ask your child if just being at the park was good enough.”

According to Helsham, 80 percent of her students returned to class reporting that their children were angry with them for not being with them, because they saw the other kids’ parents playing with them. Their children had not forgiven them.

Helsham presses her learners, asking them if they really believe that that’s local culture.

She feels that drinking and having fun isn’t a culture: it’s a behavior and it is one that they can change.

Hula Is Like Life

About 50 percent of the adult basic education students in the Halawa Correctional Facility take branch electives in addition to their academic classes. Helsham teaches a Hawaiian chant and dance class in which she explains to the students, “Hula is a lot like life: if you’re going the wrong way in hula, you have to change it to make it right. I say that it’s like life: if you’re going the wrong way you have to change to make it a better person.”

“Right now, my dance class students are mostly of non-Hawaiian ancestry. Most of them have girlfriends or wives of Hawaiian ancestry. I asked them if that was the reason they were taking the class and 95 percent said no. They took the class because they were once one of the men who would ‘tease’ the men in previous classes because they once thought that hula was for females only. They learned that hula in the old days was taught only to men and was kapu (forbidden) to women. I have often challenged inmates to come to class to see what hula is all about. Lots of them say that they first joined the class for a form of exercise or to ‘just get out of the modules [housing units].’ They soon found that they were actually working hard, using

“In my class I have the gangs,” she notes. “Knock on wood, I’ve never had a problem. When you’re in my class you’re a dancer, nobody but a dancer.”

their minds and their muscles in ways unknown to them before.”

Helsham’s first break in hula, she explains, was given by a very kind woman, Mrs. Maxine Kidder, who understood that Helsham wanted to

study hula but couldn't afford even the \$10 a month that the lessons cost. Mrs. Kidder told her that she was giving her the opportunity to learn and that, one day, she would do the same for those who were less fortunate. "When Ms. Tito approached me with the idea of teaching hula in the prison, my response was automatic, 'Yes of course!' Even to this day, I can feel the spirit of that wonderful lady each time I pa'i [hit] my 'ipu heke'." (Ipu heke is the name for a double-gourd hula instrument. Ipu Hele 'Ole is the more commonly used drum, used in modern dances. Ipu Heke is what the Kumu Hula [the hula teacher] uses to send the beats to the haumana [students].)

"In my class I have the gangs," she notes. "Knock on wood, I've never had a problem. When you're in my class you're a dancer, nobody but a dancer." She remembers the Chief of Security's amazement in seeing members of rival gangs tying each other's skirts and helping each other with their leis. He never thought he would see that, she explains.

Support

Moments like that help to build support for the education program, particularly the Hawaiian cultural classes. The warden and deputy warden are very supportive. The Chief of Security is so supportive that he asked Helsham to increase the number of performances given by her Hawaiian chant and dance class from one to four times a year.

Can other corrections institutions use a cultural approach to education? Helsham thinks so. "Any culture can do what we do here," encourages Helsham. "It's important for you to know who you are, so that others can understand you."

—Barbara Garner 

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The Critical Poetry Project

Giving Voice to the Oppressed

by Pauline Geraci

An inmate stood at the microphone and read a poem by another inmate, who was in "the hole" (segregation). Afterwards, Reggie Harris, a visiting poet, asked if any of the inmates knew where he could find more poems by the guy in the hole. From breast pockets, men pulled poems their absent friend had written. "This is why I come into these spaces," Reggie said, "Where else do you find guys carrying poems around with them?"

In the Beginning

Teaching offenders is challenging. Many of those I teach dropped out of school in the 9th or 10th grade due to boredom. They need variety or they lose interest quickly. They also live in a regimented culture. They are told what to wear and eat; what time to eat, wake up, and sleep; when to participate in recreation; when they can make phone calls and to whom; when family and friends can visit; what they can or cannot receive in the mail. As a corrections educator I try to grab their attention and then maintain it. I do so by providing activities that not only stimulate

them intellectually but also engage them emotionally. I have found that activities that connect them to members of the outside community work well.

I met Reggie Harris in 2003, when he came into the prison to speak and perform some of his poems as part of the Character Education class we offer. Harris is the co-founder of "in the belly...", a nonprofit collective of artists who perform and conduct residencies and workshops in prisons, substance abuse rehabilitation centers, shelters, and alternative schools. I was awestruck by his work and the students' reactions, so I decided to apply for a \$3,000 grant through the Education Minnesota Foundation to start "The Critical Poetry Project" with him. Harris wrote a grant proposal and received an additional \$3,000 from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council (MRAC) to supplement my grant. The grants paid for visiting artists, supplies, videos, books, and music CDs to help



Desdamona (Heather Ross)

students learn to study poetry critically and to improve their writing and public speaking skills. *continued on page 16*

Why Poetry?

“Oppression, according to Augusto Boal, is when one person is dominated by the monologue of another and has no chance to reply” (Gewertz, 2003). Inmates are told what to do and often cannot reply unless they want to end up in segregation. “I feel more comfortable in the circle of poets than I do sitting in the visiting room with some of my

family, because the visiting room is so restricted. I don’t care how hard you think you are — gangster, killer, drug dealer — you want to express yourself,” commented an offender. Poetry provides them with the opportunity to express themselves and to address important issues. Spoken word poetry, performed aloud with more of an emphasis on performance than on printed forms, has been particularly effective with my students. It is

known as a populist form, performed by male and female speakers and readers of all races. It inspires people who, in their pasts, have found poetry to be irrelevant. According to Miguel Algarin, founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café, a spoken-word venue in New York City, spoken word poetry, or “rather the poetry of the nineties, seeks to promote a tolerance and understanding between people. The aim is to dissolve the social, cultural, and political boundaries that generalize the human experience and make it meaningless” (Miazga, 1998).

Goals

The offenders I teach represent a number of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and social class groups including Native Americans, Asians, Hispanics, African Americans, and Caucasians. Some speak Spanish, others Khmer, and some Ojibwae. Some of the students grew up on welfare or on the reservations. Some come from middle-class families. They come from various geographic locations: large cities such as St. Paul and Minneapolis and rural areas such as

White Earth Reservation. Many were educationally disadvantaged before they came to prison. Most or all have taken advantage of educational opportunities offered here at Stillwater and attained their certificates of General Educational Development (GED) or college diplomas. They live together with the men on their unit, eat together, go to recreation together, and go to school or work together. Their social connections are limited to their unit. I hoped poetry would have value as a tool for creating community and unity among diverse groups of male offenders; I wanted it to enhance the social interaction between racial and ethnic populations in order to reduce conflict. I wanted poetry to help students learn how to attain and improve their academic skills and cultivate positive attitudes about themselves.

Where It All Happens

Minnesota Correctional Facility Stillwater (MCF-STW) is Minnesota’s largest close-security institution for adult male offenders. Approximately 200 of the 1,300 offenders participate in educational programming. The average age of offenders is 34. Of the population, about 50 percent are people of color. Approximately 72 percent of the population has received a GED or high school equivalency, data documented by Minnesota’s Department of Corrections. Approximately 70 percent of the prison population has committed violent offenses.

At Stillwater, a 13-member staff offers adult education services in basic literacy, adult basic education (ABE), preparation for the GED, vocational training, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), life skills, and college courses available through correspondence and the Corrections Learning Network (CLN).

I am the Literacy 3 instructor: I currently work with 25 men each morning and another 25 men each afternoon for three hours, and conduct

A Spiritual Encounter by Sarith Peou

*Vorn and I walk eastward
As the KR directs
And search for Vorn’s family
And reach Wat Chroy Ampil
Where the smell of dead humans is
Thick, and I hope my body is home
And I’m only here in spirit
When we enter the temple
And more dead bodies are strewn
And weapons, uniforms, and amulets are
Strewn like my hope for my nation
Like my hope for my world
And free, terrified, we find no monks
And we hear no one except
The cicadas’ buzz and the still leaves
The spirits of the dead possess me
And the cicadas’ laugh and mock
Like ghosts, my silent cry of fear
And pain I can’t release, not even
To Buddha whose defeat is before my eyes.
I pray to my mother, without a result
And demons overpower me, terrify me,
Poison my blood, tear out my soul
They have power I cannot fight
And I want to surrender and obey.
I could sing. I could dance.
I could cry. I could laugh.
But please let me do it peacefully and without fear
But they don’t want my surrender
They want my destruction*

Sarith Peou is a survivor of war and Khmer Rouge genocide that ravaged Cambodia when he was a young boy. He escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand in 1982 and was resettled in the United States in 1987. He is now an inmate at Minnesota Correctional Facility Stillwater, serving a double life sentence. He has been writing his memoir and poems telling his war and Khmer Rouge experience. ❖

an evening literacy class once a week for men who work during the day. At the time I started using poetry with my students, I was helping offenders raise their reading and math skills and get their GEDs. About a year ago, I



Reggie Harris

started working with offenders who have their GED or high school diploma and wanted to move on to higher education.

Starting the Poetry Group

After we received the grant, I posted a flier in the education department to see who would be interested in joining a poetry group. I met with 30 men from the various literacy classes who responded to the flier. Since 1994, I have written and received more than 15 grants. Because of this and what the grants have provided in equipment and learning materials, the students were ecstatic to learn about the new grant that supported Reggie Harris's participation in the program.

I explained the project and the time involved. Criteria were minimal: Students could be at any academic level; they had to have an interest in poetry and the ability to come for two hours on Tuesday evening and three hours one afternoon a week. That reduced the group to 20 members, which became the core Stillwater

Poetry Group (SPG). All but one have their GED or high school diploma. Three have an associate's degree; only four have a reading level below grade 13. The group fluctuates in size somewhat because men go to segregation, go home, or transfer to another prison. As in everything we do here, flexibility is the key.

The Workshops

Reggie Harris was the middle man in planning the workshops. During a planning workshop, the inmates submitted themes that interested them: manhood, fatherhood, American dreams and

nightmares, and the value of a man or woman. Then Harris contacted artists to set up dates for them to come to the prison, connecting artists to themes he felt were of interest to them and pairing them with offenders, including some who had never written poetry before. The outside artists e-mailed poems and suggestions for the workshop to me to pass on to the offenders and in turn I e-mailed work by offenders to the artists for critique.

We ended up having an artist visit once a week for three hours over the course of almost nine months: spoken word artist Desdamaona, writer J. Otis Powell, musician Douglass Ewart, actor James Williams, improvisationalist Mankwe Ndosi, meditation teacher/writer Jon Passi, poet Emmanuel Ortiz, and filmmaker Rachel Raimist. All these artists were involved in poetry in one form or another.

SPG member David Doppler, who considers himself a visual artist, took on the job of offender facilitator of the SPG, collecting poems from the offenders, placing them on a floppy disk, and handing it to me to e-mail to the outside artists. Offenders do not have access to e-mail, the Internet, or outside lines of communication while in the education department. Not only did Doppler help prepare for and run workshops, but he also helped edit poems for others back in the cell block where he and the offenders live. Sometimes, he and the other SPG members who live in the same block got together to produce group poems.

The community artists had never met members of the SPG until the actual workshops. The first workshop was cofacilitated by Doppler and Harris. The theme, which Doppler came up with, was The Message of Our Poetry. "I started thinking about what is the meaning behind our writing. We can't just come down here and throw stuff together because it sounds nice, it has to have a message," he said. Doppler helped create a lesson plan including readings, questions, and discussion and writing prompts.



Joey Davis and Carl Wesley

Readings included "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" and "Message to Messenger," by Gil Scott-Heron. Other readings were original poems by Doppler and Harris. Discussions

revolved around these questions: Are self-development and social change one and the same? Is there freedom of expression? Is there freedom in voicing your truth? Who is the messenger and what makes a message relevant? During the discussion, a question was asked about “Who gets to determine who the messengers are?” Most of the offenders commented, “The multi-media.” Another question was, “Can everyone be the messenger?” One inmate replied, “No, I think you only listen to certain people. We don’t pay attention to people who are nothing.” In the end, participants decided that anyone could be the messenger, because if you can speak or write then you are a messenger. Students then wrote using writing prompts such as “I write because...,” “My voice trembles when...,” or “Freedom is...”

The workshops were held on Thursday afternoons. The SPG then met the following Tuesday evening for two hours to make sure everything was ready for the new workshop as well as to share and critique some of their poetry. Tuesday night is usually recreation night or the night when inmates have an opportunity to make phone calls to loved ones. Giving



Juan Smith

those activities up showed the extent of the workshop participants’ concern for their own work, interest in poetry, and genuine commitment to each other’s writing and development. They now consider themselves as artists and

writers. According to Doppler, “We have a community providing for, nurturing for, and caring for one another. It’s not just about writing but caring for each other’s problems.”

Doppler explains, “In a prison environment inmates are forced to develop defenses. Putting up walls in order to protect emotions and reputations is the most popular way to deal with anyone when you are incarcerated. Some attempt to meet their social needs in gangs and cliques or try out some new religion. But many find themselves even more alienated and build even stronger defenses.”

Evolution of Criticism

An important part of the poetry writing process is giving and receiving criticism. I always try to be as honest as I can with my critiques in the regular classroom and with the SPG — sometimes to a fault. Nonetheless, at first, no one wanted to offend anyone by being too critical. Members read their poems to the group and then each member offered critique. Most would say, “That was a great poem, or good job.” As the men gained a certain comfort level, critiques became more honest. The visiting artists facilitated this by sharing their inner selves through their poetry, by role-modeling critique, by talking to the men as fellow artists, and by treating them with respect. The men commented, “This is the only place where we can be honest and share openly.”

A great example of honest critique happened about three months into the project, when the men rehearsed for a spoken word presentation. They



Reggie Harris

organized into small groups and read their poetry while the others listened, then discussed how best to present their work. The men no longer held back their thoughts. One inmate shared a poem that used a negative word about women. Other SPG members quickly spoke up about how they felt. “I know you can do better than that. We have mothers, sisters, girlfriends. We don’t need to be using that word,” responded an inmate.

The day of the spoken word event was filled with anticipation. The men had practiced so hard to memorize their work. In corners of the room you could see them, eyes closed, lips moving as if in silent prayer, going over their poems. Several of the men asked if I could provide some water because their mouths were becoming dry.

The event was a success. After each man performed his poem, the audience clapped. The men were patted on the back and congratulated. Some of the men even garnered a standing ovation from the enthusiastic crowd. Dan Frey, one of the outside poetry volunteers, commented, “The men performed with closed eyes and clenched fists. The men spoke of their lives, their anger, and their sadness. It

was totally transformative. You could see eyes light up and high-voltage smiles emanating from their faces.”

Everyone involved with the SPG discovered that poetry enables them to express anger about life, about prison, about the system, about families. “I didn’t intend to write poetry ever. I didn’t have any interest in poetry because it is so abstract. But now I understand it better because it gives me another avenue to create,” remarked a member.

Another member stated, “Before I got involved with the SPG, I wrote poetry but not for some time. When I joined the SPG, it rekindled my writing of poetry a lot because I have another way of expressing myself on a larger scale other than personal communication like writing a letter or talking.”

In one workshop, outside artist Mankwe Ndosu talked about moving through pain, not just writing about it. “I can’t keep blaming my parents; it’s time for me to take responsibility to transform myself,” remarked an offender.

Another inmate, almost in tears, revealed for the first time, a personal side, “Our history has to start from me (referring to his son). I’m here for 20 years of my life for some stupid thing I did and now I can’t be a father to my son. I have asked him, ‘Do you realize why I am in here?’ He tells me he does but I have never told him I am in here for killing a man.”

The men also learned about each other and their cultures. During a workshop about borders, an inmate wrote a play about crossing the Mexican/American border. He started out by talking about his Latino heritage and shared a poem about his mother. Then he had every SPG member play a part, including me.

After the play, outside poet Emmanuel Ortiz told the men, “Our stories are not told in high school textbooks or in libraries; we survive

culturally though the oral tradition.” Afterwards the men discussed what kind of borders they find in their lives. One inmate commented, “We encounter borders everyday. Everyone has their own groups, Black, White, or Hispanic. We only hang with the same people in our groups. It’s like walking into a different neighborhood just four cells down.”

Lessons Learned

Even though the grants are coming to an end, the SPG still wants to continue. The group and I have learned a lot this year. The group suggested that next time we have one artist come in four times a month instead of a different one each week, so they could get to know the artist better and work through a theme more fully. Because we are in a prison we did encounter some difficulties. Most of the outside artists like to hug



Emanuel Ortiz

when they greet others. I didn’t realize this until they hugged the inmates. We ended up having to institute a no hugging policy and just

shook hands for greeting. Sometimes we had to work around lock-downs: when the cell blocks where the offenders live are quarantined so that officers can go through their cells searching for contraband. When this occurred, we had to reschedule the workshop. Difficulties arose when artists brought in restricted items. I had to write a letter noting everything the artist would bring in for the workshop, including, for example, the name of the CD or book and how many. Sometimes an artist decided to bring in another CD or five books instead of two. Prison officials are not very flexible because of security: if it wasn’t on the event letter, it could not be brought in.

Appropriate for Lower Skill Levels

Even though the SPG members have higher skill levels than most adult basic education students, this type of activity would work well with students who are preparing for the GED. Students learn a broad array of writing skills. They learn to organize their thoughts and express them creatively. Not only do they improve on grammar and spelling but they also increase their vocabulary. They learn to use the rhyming dictionary, hip-hop dictionary, and thesaurus. Students can incorporate what they learn about history and political science into their poems.

Benefits for Participants and Programs

The SPG has had a big impact on the local community. The Center for Media Arts in Minneapolis hosted a Spoken Word fundraising event for the SPG, featuring a videotape of the SPG group during their workshops, their

poetry, and artistic collages depicting their poems. More than 100 people attended, including the offenders' parents and relatives, community members, and local poets. One parent came up to me in tears, saying, "The SPG has been the best thing to happen to my son while in prison." Recently the SPG's work has been displayed and presented at the Macalester College Sixth Annual African American Studies Conference on "Incarcerated Intelligence: African Americans and the Prison Industrial Complex." The SPG's work is also being presented in Chicago courtesy of the Illinois Arts Council, by writer, director, and actor Michael Agnew.

Within the prison community, the SPG has led others to poetry. Part of the grant included videotaping of all the workshops to produce a video later that could be used for presentations. We also taped the spoken word event and played it on our in-house educational television station for the rest of the institution to view. We had more positive responses from the other offenders about what they saw. Requests to join the group came in as well as requests to play other, similar videos. Since then, the SPG has received letters from offenders asking for information on how to improve their writing skills, where they can get published, or if there are any more openings in the group.

Evidence of Success

You could say the SPG is a success by the number of poems that got written, the goals that were met, or by the Best Practice Award it received from the Correctional Education Association. In the end, however, the students are most eloquent about the impact: "It is something positive in here amongst all the negativity."

"I would recommend this so others can open up and share things they hold inside. This workshop can bring truth and understanding to all participants."

"These workshops have helped me to open up."

"This is one of the best ways to foster positive rehabilitation."



"I wish we had more time for these workshops. I think it is kind of funny that someone in prison would request more time."

Poetry did all of the above and much more. Men wrote and shared poems about their culture and upbringing. "We built a community of guys who otherwise would never have talked to each other," commented one poetry student.

Another noted, "When I listen to you people talk, I see just how much we all have in common. I am just happy to be here to listen and experience this."

As David Doppler wrote in the March 2005 issue of the prison's newspaper *The Prison Mirror*, "The SPG quickly transformed into much more than just writing and discussing the rhythm and verse of poetry, but rather a place where the real life issues that lay beneath the surface of the poems could be openly discussed without the fear of ridicule."

The men wrote more, read more, and engaged more in discussions. One

offender, a victim of torture and a survivor of Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia, came to the group with the idea that he could not write poetry. He was very shy and hardly spoke. Today, this same man is one of the most prolific poets in the group and is not afraid to speak up about his work. "Poetry gave me a way to write away some painful experiences. It's hard to write those experiences. I have to feel the emotions again. But when I get it onto paper, I feel like, wow, I'm happy."

At the start of the project, another man mumbled in a soft voice, with head down, while he read his poetry. Gradually he listened to the encouragement of others and now he speaks loudly, with confidence. According to Dan Frey, community volunteer for the poetry group, "It has been interesting to see them mature as writers. You can see them go through some of the same things you went through as a writer. They are really passionate about putting words to paper and sharing them." 

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About the Author

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The Pendulum Swings

65 Years of Corrections Education

by **Dominique T. Chlup**

Twelve women sat around the gracefully curved table while the autumn sun streamed through the high-arched library windows. In the late afternoon setting, the shadows of the tree limbs danced long and tall against the spines of the books, countless books that lined the shelves like companions waiting to be addressed. Some women scribbled notes furiously while most listened as the teacher read the line, “October has come again...” from Thomas Wolfe’s *Of Time and the River*. The scene appears no different from those that take place in many adult literacy classrooms in operation across the United States,

except that these women were not adult learners attending classes in the year 2005; instead, they were inmates at the Massachusetts Reformatory for Women at Framingham and the year was 1941.

At the time, the institution operated 26 other correctional education classes. This number would continue to grow into the late 1950s and included classes in the visual arts, beginners’ English, poetry, typing, Bible study, metal craft, arithmetic, folk dancing, and a biography class run by the superintendent’s (warden’s) mother. This list does not include the correspondence courses, which were procured from the University Extension Division of the State Department of Education and included courses in chemistry, biology, Spanish, and Latin. In a span of 25

years, nearly 90 different classes would be offered. In addition to the classes, the well known and well-to-do contributed significantly to the prison, including Robert Frost, Thornton Wilder, Eleanor Roosevelt, Eunice Kennedy, and the entire Boston Symphony Orchestra (Chlup, 2004).

Legislative Changes in 1994

Enter that same institution today and you will find that its educational department offers far fewer classes, the majority of which focus on basic education. Classes now include adult basic education (ABE), communications lab (designed for graduates of the English for speakers of other languages [ESOL] who have a diploma or a certificate of General Educational Development [GED] in their native language), ESOL, GED, pre-GED, mandatory literacy, and special education. This situation differs markedly from the 26 classes available in 1941.

To its credit, Framingham is one of the prisons that still offer inmates the opportunity to obtain a college degree. (A variety of academic classes are available to inmates *continued on page 22*)

Chronology of Corrections Education

1789: Correctional Education Movement in the United States began with clergyman William Rogers offering instruction to inmates at Philadelphia’s Walnut Street Jail.

1816: Elizabeth Fry began teaching women inmates and their children to read in London’s Newgate Gaol [Jail]. This example later served as a model for American women prison reformers.

1820s: Rival penitentiary plans were put into effect: The Auburn (New York) Plan had inmates sleep alone but come together to work. The Pennsylvania Model kept prisoners in solitary confinement for the entire period of their incarceration.

1820s & 1830s: American women concerned themselves with the plight of female prisoners during the Second Great Awakening, which popularized perfectionist theology, advocating the possibility of individual and social salvation.

1825: The first institution for juvenile delinquents, the New York House of Refuge, opened its doors. Prior to this, children were often housed with adults in prisons.

1826: Jared Curtis became the first chaplain of New York’s Auburn Prison. He gave 160 students in 31 classes Bible instruction.

1824-1837: During the period surrounding and including Andrew Jackson’s presidency, Americans believed that crime was posing a fundamental threat to the stability and order of republican society. This gave way to the Rehabilitative Ideal: the notion that an individual’s behaviors could be changed through rehabilitative efforts.

1833: The Boston Prison Discipline Society created the Sabbath School Movement, which had 700 tutors in 10 prison schools instructing 1,500 scholars (prisoners).

1833: During the same year, the chaplain remarked that while being a male convict there was tolerable, to be a female convict [there] would be a fate worse than death.

1846: In England, corrections educator Mary Carpenter opened her first Ragged School: a charitable school dedicated to teaching poor children literacy skills, so that they could read the Bible. Carpenter became renowned for her work with juvenile offenders and her early influence on the field of correctional education.

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via Boston University.) Many of the country's corrections college education programs were eliminated with the passage of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1993 and the Higher Education Reauthorization Act of 1994. The acts, which repealed Pell Grant funding for prisoners enrolled in college programs, significantly reduced the number of postsecondary programs available for inmates. Michele Welsh, who surveyed corrections directors from the 50 states and the District of Columbia about the effects of the elimination of Pell Grants, found that they perceived "a significant decrease in access, quality, and success due to the elimination of Pell Grant eligibility for inmates." She concluded that "the loss of Pell Grant eligibility has reduced correctional education" (Welsh, 2002, p. 157).

What's Being Offered Now?

Unpublished policy data from the Institute for Higher Education indicate that of the 44 states that

responded to their Prisoner Access to Postsecondary Education Survey, 685 facilities offer inmates postsecondary education of some type (Contardo,

“Historic links between prison reform and corrections education show that when a punitive approach (“lock them up and throw away the key”) is ascendant, educational programming is de-emphasized.”

personal communication, 2005). In general, it was offered by community colleges and often one college would offer courses to multiple facilities. When the Institute for Higher Education study is completed, it should provide a more comprehensive picture of the access that prisoners

currently have to postsecondary programs across the country. In 1994, some corrections directors predicted that the financial commitment to postsecondary education in the future would significantly increase due to replacement or supplemental funding for programs (Welsh, 2002) — that is, funding procured by organizations and individuals who would see the value of inmates' access to an education while incarcerated.

One example of this can be seen in the agreement among Boston University, Partaker's Inc. (a nonprofit, faith-based organization), and several of the correctional institutions in the greater Boston area, including Framingham. This collaboration provides tuition and mentoring for inmates enrolled in a college program.

The amount and type of education offered in corrections seem to change depending on the approach and philosophy to corrections that are dominant at the time. Historic links between prison reform and corrections education show that when a punitive approach (“lock

1860s: Dorothea Dix surveyed 320 penal institutions and almshouses (poorhouses) up and down the Atlantic seaboard in an effort to learn about and document the inmates' living conditions. Her findings indicated that extensive prison reform was needed.

1864: Hannah B. Chickering, together with several of her contemporaries, opened the Dedham Temporary Asylum for the Discharged in Massachusetts.

1867: Enoch Wines and Theodore Dwight were commissioned by the New York Prison Association to conduct a nationwide survey and evaluation of penal methods. Their *Report on the Prisons and Reformatories of the United States and Canada* called for changes to the prison system.

1869: The first statutory provision for separate male and female prison institutions was passed.

1870: Governor Rutherford B. Hayes (later 19th president of the United States) welcomed 130 wardens, chaplains, judges, and humanitarians to the Cincinnati National Prison Congress to begin the work that would later be termed the beginning of the country's prison reformatory movement.

1873: The first Women's Prison opened its doors in Indiana. Two

types of penal institutions were established for women: the traditional penitentiary model was based on custodial and punitive measures; and the model that emphasized reform was based on the notion of reforming and rehabilitating inmates.

1876-1900: Zebulon Brockway became Superintendent at the Elmira Reformatory in New York. He set a pioneering example for the social, academic, vocational, and special education of prisoners.

1877: The second Reformatory for Women opened in Framingham, MA. Clara Barton, best-known for founding the American Red Cross in 1881 at the age of 60, was Superintendent for the year 1883. She accepted the position only after the governor threatened to give the position to a man, which challenged the notion that women's reformatories be run solely by and for women.

1897: Construction of the first federal prison began in Leavenworth, Kentucky. It would take 30 years to complete.

1901-1929: Progressive Era included a focus on prison reform and an emphasis on educating prisoners.

1900-1914: Katharine Bement Davis, superintendent of Bedford Hills [New York] Reformatory for Women, was the first female

them up and throw away the key”) is ascendant, educational programming is de-emphasized. Instead inmates may spend 17 hours a day locked in their cells, with one hour a day outside for exercise (Prison Activist Resource Center, retrieved May 16, 2004). At present, this approach is followed by several correctional institutions. This model differs from a rehabilitative approach in which sentencing is viewed as the punishment and time spent in correctional institutions focuses on rehabilitation, counseling, overcoming addictions, acquiring vocational skills, and academic learning. Earlier reformatory models sought to take a Progressive Era, rehabilitative approach (Gehring, 1995).

The Last Decade

In 1994, during the congressional hearings that debated the repeal of Pell Grant funding, a state judge denounced this generation of criminals as “dead to us.” She argued vehemently that they should all be locked in prison and the key be thrown away (Zahm, 1997). Unfortunately, this mentality still

forms the basis of the current conservative attitudes toward criminal justice. Howard Davidson (2000), a sociologist and researcher on prison education, has argued that several prison administrators are in service to this ideologically slanted view as they engage in the concept of “new penology.” In this approach, mandatory corrections education classes are used to control idleness, manage risk, and “maintain order by keeping prisoners occupied at seemingly meaningful work” (p. 393). Missing in this new penology is the goal of actually educating prisoners.

Loss of Pell Grants for college education in correctional facilities was not the only change effected under the 1994 legislation. Under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, the requirements in effect under the Adult Education Act (1964-1998) — that, at minimum, 10 percent of federal ABE funds be set aside for corrections institutions — were changed. WIA allows only a maximum of 10 percent of ABE funds to be used for correctional facilities. Under the Vocational Education Act, the minimum requirement of one percent has likewise

now become a maximum of one percent (Spangenberg, 2004, p. 5).

Future Directions

The pendulum may have begun to swing in a new direction. According to a recent report, *Current Issues in Correctional Education: A Compilation and Discussion*, the last few years have marked a shift away from the “lock them up” mentality. In the fall of 2003, the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL), in cooperation with the Correctional Education Association (CEA), surveyed 15 leaders in corrections and adult education. These leaders believed that most recently “attitudes have begun to turn back from punishment to rehabilitation with more emphasis being placed on education in corrections” (ibid, p. 5). These same individuals reported that “10 years ago, the trend was to cut off programs, including education, because the predominant impulse was toward punishment” (ibid, p. 6). Today, the impulse is shifting toward programming that will help rehabilitate and transition prisoners back into society. However, the report

superintendent to attempt adapting school education to the particular needs of the reformatory population, thereby setting an example for other reformatories.

1914: Davis was the first woman named head of the New York City Department of Correction.

1913: Thomas Mott Osborne posed as the prisoner Tom Brown in Auburn Prison to learn first hand the conditions. Later that year he became the chairman of the commission established to reform the New York penal system. He established a system of self-government run by and for the inmates called the Mutual Welfare League at the Auburn Prison in New York State.

1914: Osborne was appointed warden of Sing Sing Prison, where he organized another Mutual Welfare League.

1928-1968: Edna Mahan’s tenure as Superintendent of Clinton Farms in New Jersey spanned these years. Her educational work with female inmates is considered exemplary.

1929: Opposition from correctional officers and politicians brought about Osborne’s departure from Sing Sing Prison and the collapse of the Mutual Welfare League.

1929: The Federal Bureau of Prisons turned rehabilitation into a legislated policy concerned with developing an effective

classification system and individualized decisions regarding discipline and treatment.

1931: Austin MacCormick founded the Correctional Education Association. The professional organization is still in existence (www.ceanational.org).

1931: MacCormick completed a survey of 110 of 114 correctional programs for adults. His results were published in the seminal book *The Education of Adult Prisoners: A Survey and a Program*.

1932-1957: Dr. Miriam Van Waters’ tenure as Superintendent at the Reformatory for Women in Framingham, MA, spanned these years. The reformatory made education one of its central tenets. She banned the term “prisoner” and had the inmates officially called “students.”

1937: The *Journal of Correctional Education* was founded.

1946-1962: The murder rate decreased 6.9 percent, which gave foundation to rehabilitative optimism.

1954: The American Prison Association changed its name to the American Correctional Association and encouraged its members to redesignate their prisons as “correctional institutions.”

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also reminds us that public policy is determined by the legislature. At both the federal and state levels, current legislatures are dominated by conservative members, who usually lean toward the punitive rather than reformative approach to corrections.

Conclusion

Former Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger once observed that prisoners should be allowed to *learn* their way out of prison. A surprising advocate of correctional education programs, this conservative justice, who served on the Supreme Court during the 1970s, felt that prisoners are entitled to education programs. He considered it an injustice not to try to rehabilitate inmates while they are in institutional care. In the current climate, in which some policymakers and political officials view correctional education as unfashionable and unimportant, the Critical Poetry Project at the Minnesota Correctional Facility Stillwater presents an example of what remains possible even when nationally the tide of support ebbs (see p. 15). This project seems to

show that we have more reasons than not to support these programs. Earlier in our history, women's reformatories, like the one described at the start of this piece, were credited with having educational work serve as "the backbone of the institution's program" (MacCormick, 1931, p. 292). While we may seem a long way from that history, the project at Stillwater suggests that the legacy of our past focus on education still persists, informing the work of many corrections educators today. 

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About the Author

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1955: An international rehabilitative emphasis was formalized in the United Nations Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.

1950s & 1960s: The Prisoners' Rights Movement began during this period. Prisoners sought enforcement of their constitutional rights through the writ of habeas corpus and the Civil Rights Act.

1960s: The Chino Experiment in California followed a therapeutic community method designed to change the antisocial behavior of offenders. The prison became a community center for special training, work release, and family contacts.

1965: The Survey for the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, carried out by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, found that many institutions were brutal and degrading and did nothing to prepare prisoners for re-entry.

1965: The Texas Prison College system was established, along with an emphasis on higher education for inmates.

1970s: A movement arose to oppose and discredit the rehabilitative approaches because of the belief that the therapeutic model of rehabilitation led to the abuse of intrusive therapies.

1971: Inmate uprising at Attica [New York] prison resulted in the deaths of 11 prison employees and 32 unarmed prisoners. All of

the prisoners and four of the employees killed were killed by gunfire as the authorities reclaimed the prison.

1970-1994: Mandatory and minimum sentencing practices led to the doubling and redoubling of incarceration rates.

1993 & 1994: The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1993 and the Higher Education Reauthorization Act of 1994 eliminated Pell Grant Funding for prisoners, prompting many college programs for prisoners to shut down.

1980s & 1990s: A new category of prisons was established: private prisons, built and sometimes operated by for-profit corporations under contract to the federal and/or state government.

1995-Present: A conservative approach to the treatment of prisoners, with an emphasis on increased severity of punishment, reintroduction of capital punishment, lengthening of prison terms, and continued incarceration for drug-related offenses.

Much of this information comes from Rothman, D., & Morris, N. Eds. (1998). The History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society. New York: Oxford University Press; and Gehring, T. "The History of Correctional Education." Available on the Correctional Education Association's web site at: <http://www.ceanational.org> 

The Community High School of Vermont

An Uncommon High School in An Uncommon Setting

by Tom Woods

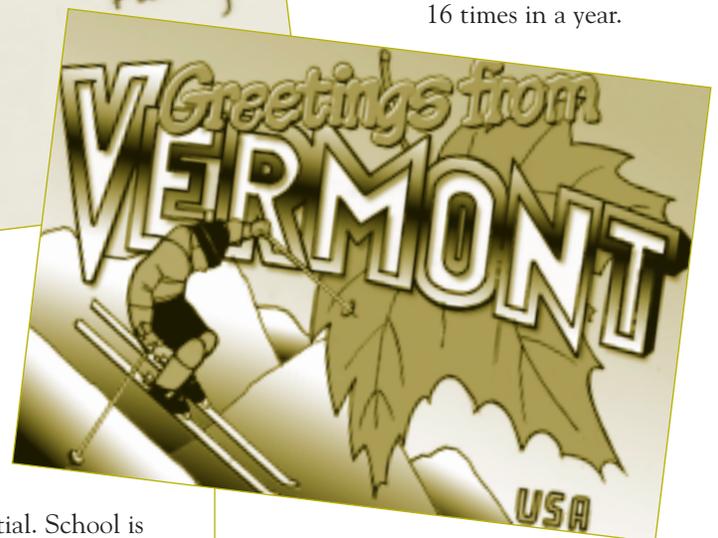
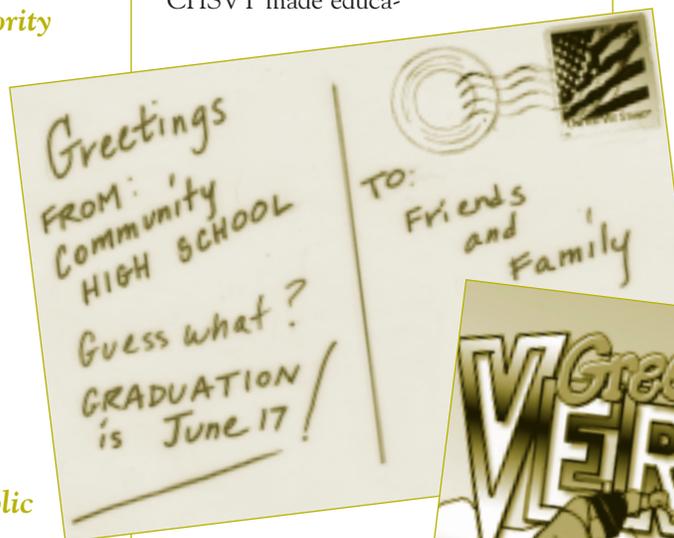
Everyone in Vermont is entitled to a free and appropriate public education, and it must be equal for all Vermonters regardless of race, age, gender, religion, or personal condition. It is a basic civil right written into the state's constitution. The overwhelming majority of the state's incarcerated population are high school dropouts. A great many of them are youth aged 17 to 22 years. The state legislature was concerned that offenders, especially young offenders, did not have access to public education. In response, the state enacted in its Public Institutions and Corrections statutes Public Law 28VSA120, which created an independent school within the Department of Corrections, approved by the Vermont Department of Education, able to award secondary credit and high school diplomas. This independent school has come to be known as the Community High School of Vermont (CHSVT).

With 47 full-time teachers and approximately 350 part-time adjunct teachers distributed among the state's nine correctional facilities, the school offers courses and instruction to youth and adults. The CHSVT is also present in eight community probation and parole sites to allow students to complete schooling they started in prison.

The state law that created CHSVT made educa-

tion mandatory for incarcerated offenders who are under 22 years of age and who do not yet have a high school diploma or an equivalent credential. School is voluntary for older offenders and high school graduates. As Vermont's largest high school, CHSVT has a total enrollment of more than 4,100 students: approximately 85 percent male, 15 percent female. Of the 3,206

individuals served in 2004, 2,179 were incarcerated in correctional facilities and 1,027 lived in community settings. These enrollment figures are deceptive, however. That they can be tabulated and readily presented in two sentences might cause one to envision a large, static, and captive population of students that is parceled out into various classrooms from September to June, completing coursework until they either graduate or their sentences are completed. The reality is more complicated. A typical offender may enter one correctional facility, then move numerous times to other facilities within the system. Disciplinary actions, threats of violence, health and safety needs, failure to meet programming expectations, court appearances, and population management all contribute to inmate movement. Offenders who reside in the community under field supervision or on probation can receive disciplinary sanctions that send them back to prison for rule violations, causing individuals to bounce back and forth between prison and the community. It is not unusual to find that one person has moved as many as 16 times in a year.



As well as the student body being transitory, many students are also former dropouts and many have long histories of school failure. CHSVT faculty members have created a structure and delivery

system to re-engage students. They have had to cast off many traditional practices of public education because they didn't work with the students when they were in public school and they aren't effective with them now. The CHVST delivery system is effective because it: motivates students by providing a pathway to a real diploma; emphasizes student-centered approaches; accommodates individualized student needs; and fosters positive teacher-student relationships.

Individual Graduation Plans

The CHSVT diploma is the same as any other public school diploma awarded in Vermont. To graduate, students must earn 20 credits in the school's course of study, including credits in English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, health, art, trades and vocational studies, and computer studies. In addition, students must demonstrate a minimum level of proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics.

Entering students' graduation needs vary greatly. Some were expelled from school when they were in the eighth grade and may not have earned any high school credits. Others may need just one or two more credits to earn a high school diploma. At any given time, 40 percent of students have a prior history of being placed in special education classes. In many instances students' academic skills are significantly behind those of their age peers. Still other students may have completed the required coursework to earn credit in their public school, but were not awarded any credit because they had too many absences. Some students are returning to school after 30 or 40 years.

No matter what the student's background may be, faculty work with him or her to craft what CHSVT calls an individual graduation plan: a

roadmap for attainment of a high school diploma. In the graduation planning process, teachers interview students to learn what their strengths are. Teachers find out what the students want to learn more about, what they have done since leaving school, and what they want to accomplish in the future. The school obtains students' prior education records and transcripts. Teachers and students devise ways to assess and award credit for the prior learning. Looking at what has already been accomplished

“The CHVST delivery system is effective because it: motivates students by providing a pathway to a real diploma; emphasizes student-centered approaches; accommodates individualized student needs; and fosters positive teacher-student relationships.”

and what still remains, the student and teacher map out a strategy for fulfilling the remaining graduation requirements. The students choose the courses to meet these requirements.

The individual graduation plan becomes a working document used to record a student's progress as he or she earns credits. It includes transcripts, charts showing credits earned and credits needed, worksheets detailing how needed credits will be earned, and a statement verifying the student's proficiency in the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics. The graduation plan resides physically in a student's education file and follows the student wherever he or she goes in the system.

Choosing Courses

Working within the school's graduation requirements, students decide which courses to take. Teachers are encouraged to teach their passions and, in turn, respond to students' interests. This has resulted in a wide variety of course offerings ranging from the traditional textbook course to highly experiential, hands-on learning.

Classes tend to be small, with perhaps four to eight students in each. The hour-long classes are usually scheduled two or three days per week; occasionally they run just one day, or every day. The number of classes students take at any one time varies because students have different demands on their time. Some, for example, are participating in programming related to their substance addiction; others have facility jobs or work in corrections industries. As mentioned previously, students under 22 years old are required by state law to go to school if they do not already have a diploma. They must attend courses totaling at least 15 hours of class time per week, or approximately three hours of school per day.

The school enters into independent learning contracts with students. These contracts may follow the prescribed course of study, but the student does some or all of the work independently outside of class. As an alternative, a contract may involve a unique set of learning objectives that do not fit any existing course, but involve an area of study about which the student is passionate. For example, one student found himself in need of just one more English language arts credit, but none of the language arts courses offered at his school appealed to him. He and a teacher worked out a plan whereby the student would study dogs and kenneling, a subject about which he was passionate. They agreed on course requirements that addressed language

arts topics of reading, responding, verbal and written expression, and research. The student was excited about coming away with not just the language arts credit he needed but also valuable information that would serve him well when he starts his own kennel: a goal of his when he returns to the community.

GED?

Sometimes a new student, who doesn't know about graduation plans, says, "I don't want school. I only want a GED [certificate of completion of the tests of General Educational Development]." The CHSVT prefers a diploma, but it will assist any student in attaining a GED if that is the student's goal. The CHSVT will help students prepare, make arrangements for testers to come to the site, and pay for the tests. Faculty members use this as an opportunity to connect with the students and encourage them to use the GED as a starting point for continuing their education rather than as an end point. The school often finds that goals change for the student who initially "only wants a GED," once he or she considers new options and is exposed to other students' ideas through attendance in classes and graduation ceremonies, and looking at transcripts that list newly earned credits. Students see others making progress on their diplomas and they want to experience that success too. Many students who earn a GED go on and work on their diploma.

Motivation

When students meet with CHSVT teachers for the first time, they often report a sense of hopelessness about their prospects for graduation. They say that their previous difficulties in school make them think it will be impossible or pointless to try to earn a diploma.

The CHSVT faculty motivate students by showing them that getting a diploma is not the impossible task they think it is. Teachers make the school environment a place where students will feel safe and be treated respectfully. In such an environment, there is kindness; there are no put-downs. Teachers work to create the idea that when students walk through the classroom door, they leave the prison environment and enter a world that respects and values learning, in which everyone has something to offer. Confidentiality is respected. In only two situations are teachers required to report to authorities what is said in the classroom: when the teacher believes that a crime is being, or is

“Instead of using grades, the school measures progress by assessing students’ proficiency in fulfilling the course requirements.”

about to be, committed; and when the teacher believes that an individual's safety is at risk.

Commenting on the character of the CHSVT, students said:

*You don't remind us of teachers.
You don't come in and preach to us.
You work around my needs. —J.H.*

*You treat us like we're in school,
not prison. It's a student/teacher
relationship versus an inmate/guard
relationship. —D.S.*

*At first I didn't want to come to
school, but I got to like it. I even
got another person to join the health
class. Now he's in school all the
time. —S.G.*

Frequent feedback is another motivating factor. Students can monitor their own progress by pulling out their graduation plans. They receive credit awards soon after they

complete course requirements, and with everyone talking about progress, credits, graduation plans, and diplomas, even the students who arrived thinking a diploma was beyond reach begin to see that a diploma is possible.

Receiving credit on the basis of what they know or can do rather than on time spent in class is also motivating. Tests, portfolios, projects, and other student-generated products serve as assessments that document students' knowledge and skills. These products are used to fulfill course requirements necessary to earn credit. For instance, a mathematics course may use a textbook that has chapter pretests and posttests. Students can leapfrog over chapters they already know, or even the whole text, by passing chapter pretests.

In a creative writing course, the requirements may ask a student to compile a portfolio of a variety of types of writing. The writing must show evidence of proper use of writing conventions, use of the writing process, and clear expression of ideas in final drafts. A student may write very quickly outside of class to produce the finished portfolio. It

sometimes takes time for students to get used to the idea that, in CHSVT, they can work through the requirements very quickly if they so choose. This provides a strong incentive for students to study outside the classroom.

The school recognizes learning that takes place everywhere. Teachers assess prior learning through tests, portfolios, and assigned tasks that require students to demonstrate skills or use knowledge. Prior learning credits are powerful motivators. They jump-start a student's education, particularly when he or she has no academic credits to begin with.

Instead of using grades, the school measures progress by assessing students' proficiency in fulfilling the course requirements. In a history class, for example, a student may be asked to demonstrate certain skills in archiving and handling old documents. This

could be met by observing the student as he or she uses proper techniques. In an oil painting class, one requirement may ask a student to use elements of composition such as line, texture, and negative space. A teacher might assess the student's ability by asking him or her to point out these elements in his or her completed paintings. In a math course in which the course objectives include performing basic operations with whole numbers, a math test that asks the student to perform these operations will be a suitable assessment. A defined minimum score on the test would signify proficiency. The important point is that if the student does not demonstrate proficiency, it doesn't mean the he or she has failed. It just means the student has not yet reached the necessary level of proficiency to receive credit. The student is given as much time as he or she needs and is encouraged to keep trying until he or she succeeds.

Open Entry/ Open Exit

The CHSVT has adopted a model it calls open-entry/open-exit to make it possible to accommodate students who enter and leave in midstream. In this model, as much as possible, courses are designed so that each lesson can stand alone. A "stand-alone" class can be envisioned by thinking of a guest lecture series at a museum, or a guided nature walk with a park ranger. People attending such activities need not have attended previous sessions to benefit from the current one. In the CHSVT History of the 20th Century course each decade is addressed separately over just a few classes. A student may not have been present for the 1920s lessons and started sometime during the 1960s lessons. The student can start anywhere in the course and will eventually be able to pick up all the lessons when the cycle repeats. This works very well for most subject areas,

and enables teachers to award partial credits when students leave before completing a course.

Mathematics requires both scope (what is taught) and sequence (in what order) because a student must work through a definite progression of math concepts and skills. In a CHSVT mathematics course, each student works at his or her own pace. In the classroom some students may be

“... teachers try to inform all corrections personnel of the school's activities. They seek to involve staff in individual student matters, for example, inviting officers to attend a graduation ceremony, asking officers to assist in reminding a student to attend a class, or to provide encouragement.”

learning place value, others fraction addition, still others algebra or geometry. The teacher does not say, "today we are going to study _____," but instead cruises among students, providing individual help and feedback as needed.

Both stand-alone and the self-paced individualized methods of instruction are extremely well suited to the transitory nature of the student body. Both are also very conducive to adaptations and accommodations for students with special needs or those with large gaps in their knowledge base. They allow teachers to work with the student at his or her level rather than force teachers to aim for the middle of the class's range of abilities. Each student gets exactly what he or she needs.

Because failure in school has been

such a big part of CHSVT students' lives, the school works very hard to remove the possibility of failure. Most students who were once labeled as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed in public schools do just fine in the CHSVT regular education program. This is because features common to special education programs, such as individualized self-paced instruction and small groups, are built in and available to every student.

Challenges Old and New

CHSVT has had its bumps. Corrections education in Vermont was essentially born of a problem. The state's youth who ran afoul of the law and ended up in state correctional facilities were not being educated under local educational jurisdictions. Moreover, the local school district did not want to pay for students' education once they were under the custody or supervision of the Department of Corrections. The legislation that created the school opened up an alternative way to provide education to the state's incarcerated youth. The political battle remains

over how to pay for it: should it be funded with general fund tax dollars as it is now, or should education funds be used to pay for prison education?

Corrections issues are sometimes at odds with education issues. Security may deem it necessary to lock down a living unit, at worst putting a halt to all education for the day. At best, students come to classes, but they are agitated and distracted. The school can live with lock-downs and other security concerns. A more pressing and serious concern is attitudes. A few individuals (fortunately a very few) believe that inmates are incapable of change, that they will always con you if you let them, and that the only effective means of management are punishment and force. This attitude is out of step with the Department of Corrections' mission and runs counter

to fundamental beliefs of the school. To combat this attitude, teachers try to inform all corrections personnel of the school's activities. They seek to involve staff in individual student matters, for example, inviting officers to attend a graduation ceremony, asking officers to assist in reminding a student to attend a class, or to provide encouragement. A continual public relations campaign is waged in which corrections staff are reminded that the school's successes with students are made possible by the help and cooperation of all staff, and that the school assists security by taking the young, difficult inmates and engaging them in productive activity rather than allowing them to be idle.

A form of détente has evolved between the CHSVT and Department of Corrections. The school does not make corrections decisions. Corrections does not make education decisions. Occasionally the lines are crossed, but, for the most part, the détente holds.

Looking ahead, many challenges remain. The school has recently completed what it considers to be its core curriculum, and now must decide how that core should be implemented at all of its sites. Faculty members are also working to define better the methods for awarding credit for prior learning, in much the same way that prior learning credits are awarded at the college level. The school is attempting to expand its use of course syllabi, which will improve the practice of making credit requirements explicit for students and keeping track of students' progress.

In the future, we will attempt to resolve our longstanding dispute with the state Department of Education. The funding issue, especially funding for special education, is thorny. Since more than 40 percent of our students have a history of receiving special education services, it must be determined whether the student continues to be eligible for special services while incarcerated. Making these determinations and complying with special education law requires

personnel and resources. The school has difficulty keeping up with the paperwork requirements. In most cases, however, because of the school's model of education delivery, in which all students can work at their own pace and receive individual help when it is needed, students don't need special education services while at CHSVT. They are able to make progress through the regular education program successfully. As a result, the school receives very little special education money from the state Department of Education. In fact, CHSVT special education has been level funded since 1987, despite a threefold increase in student numbers.

The special education issue leads into the much larger and more complicated issue of providing education at the school's eight community sites. The CHSVT is at loggerheads with the Department of Education over who pays for special education at the community sites. While accepting financial responsibility for special education students who are incarcerated, the CHSVT maintains that youth in the community on probation are the financial responsibility of the community, and local school districts must pick up the tab. The Department of Education disagrees. The result of this impasse is there is no special education for youth in the CHSVT community sites.

Hiding just under the surface of this disagreement is another issue. Right now, in a very few cases, local school districts are referring students to the CHSVT community sites, as an alternative placement, and the students want to attend. The school was never intended to serve youth who are not under the custody or supervision of the Department of Corrections. At present the CHSVT has no authority to bill school districts for services rendered. This has not stopped CHSVT from accepting community students. Where this will lead and whether it is good for Vermonters is as yet unclear. CHSVT faculty members have

expertise with students who have traditionally been labeled as difficult, and the school has established practices that help meet these students' needs. The larger issue of governance will need to be decided. Vermonters will have to ask themselves: Do we want a statewide school to serve some of our citizens? If so, to what standards will it be held accountable? If not, how will we enable local schools to educate all of our youth?

A Decade

Meanwhile, CHSVT is entering its tenth year as an independent school. Last year it awarded 106 diplomas. That's a long way from the 18 diplomas awarded in its first year. The school has changed attitudes of offenders from one of "I dropped out when I was 16 and you can't make me go to school" to one in which an offender enters a new correctional facility and stops at the school office to ask, "Where is my grad plan, where are my credits?" The school has seen its students participate in rowing races on Lake Champlain; history students have worked in cooperation with museums and town historical societies to help organize and preserve their collections; CHSVT art exhibitions have been held on college campuses; horticulture students have entered prize-winning vegetables at state fairs. Graduates don their navy blue robes and mortarboards as the school itself dons the common trappings of a high school in a most uncommon setting, helping to ensure all Vermonters' constitutional entitlement to an appropriate public education. 

About the Author

Tom Woods is member of the faculty of the Community High School of Vermont, where he works as a corrections instructor and special education instructor at the Caledonia Community Work Camp, a minimum security correctional facility in St. Johnsbury. Tom also serves on the school's Curriculum Policy and Practices Committee. ❖

Teaching on the Inside...

by **Dominique T. Chlup**

I ran my hand across the pile of clothes laid out on the bed. This was not the ordinary search for the perfect outfit. I needed a pair of pants that did not require a belt, had pockets that could be turned inside out for inspection, and had no elastic in the waistband. The shirt needed to be tucked in, have sleeves, and preferably not have buttons. Denim material of any kind was forbidden. Socks had to be worn with shoes that contained no metal, so sneakers were out of the question as the eyelets were metal, and the shoes needed to be able to slip off and on easily. The bra was the biggest obstacle. I could not wear an underwire bra, but it was absolutely mandated that I wear a bra. At first I had thought my only option would be to wear a sports bra, but when I asked the Educational Director about that as a possibility I was told that that would count as a second shirt — and that was strictly forbidden.

My question to her, “Do they even make non-underwire bras?” was met with a shrug and a quick response, “You’ll just set off the metal

detector and that’s a guaranteed search with the handheld wand. Anything metal will set those things off including a gum wrapper. Hey, but you know you can’t have anything in your pockets, not even tissues? You know that, right?”

Luckily, I did and luckier still I was able to find a bra without underwire in the juniors section of my local department store. Unlike other important first days in my life, I would not bother to find the perfect jewelry or accessories to go with this outfit. No watches, no scarves, bobby pins, or pony tail holders could be worn. A traditional wedding band and medical alert bracelet were the only types of accessories allowed. This posed a

problem: my grandmother’s ring had adorned my right hand for years.

She had worn it in lieu of a wedding band after her divorce nearly 50 years earlier. As a sign of affection I’d worn it every day since it had been passed on to me. I slipped it from my right hand over to my

left and figured no one would even notice the little white lie.

Unlike other classrooms I had taught in, to this one I was not taking a briefcase stuffed with paper, books, and pens. Instead, I was only taking what I could carry in my hands and

exactly what I had already told my employers I would have: 12 copies of Jamaica Kincaid’s poem “Girl,”

(unstapled and not paper-clipped), 12 pens that met all of the safety regulations (they could not be taken apart, have springs or clear plastic barrels showing the ink, and all had to be ball points), and one pad of paper from which I was to distribute individual sheets of paper to my 12 women learners as needed.

I reviewed the Visitor’s Guidelines one last time, placed my driver’s license in my pocket, and prepared myself for the possibility that by the end of the night I might have the inside of my mouth swabbed and a stranger’s hands padding down the length of my inseam. Or worse yet, some tiny glitch or infraction could deny me admittance. I was trying desperately to get inside a place that most of us strive to stay out of. But I had a job to do. I had my very first teaching job.

My first job in adult education was at Valhalla’s Women’s Jail in New York state. I did not have experience as an adult educator on the outside to compare this against until I later taught courses in more “traditional” adult education settings. And while the similarities are great, the differences are indeed striking. My inmate learners were not allowed to know my last name or any other personal information about me. I had to monitor the amount of paper that I distributed. (Students are permitted only a certain area of square footage in their cells to be occupied by paper. When they exceed this amount, they must either mail the excess to an individual on the outside for safekeeping or risk having it destroyed should it be found during an unannounced inspection.) I was never allowed to leave pens with

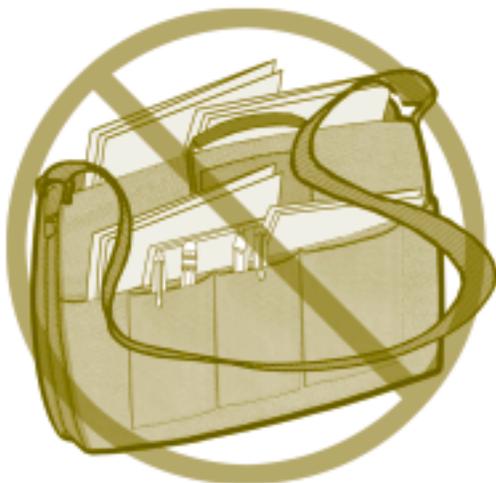


my students, making it nearly impossible to assign written homework. All of the supplies I brought into the jail had to be accounted for before I left. The corrections officers once kept my students an extra 20 minutes as the class searched for a missing pen. It had simply rolled away from the table at which we had been working and another student inmate had picked it up, thinking it belonged to her group.

I held class alongside five other teachers in the jail's gymnasium. A less than ideal working space: a chair was always being scraped across the floor, and when one group was writing it seemed as if another was always reading aloud. It was never quiet, but it was also never dull. Spanish and English flew through the air from woman to woman and the energy was something palpable. That first job was the one that called me into teaching. It is the continual thrill, joy, and reward of working with inmates that helps keep me there. 

About the Author

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Understanding the Complexities of Offenders' Special Learning Needs

by **Laura Weisel, Alan Toops, & Robin Schwarz**

Compared to the general population, the offender population is known to have lower-than-average academic skills, with the vast majority not having completed high school (Haigler et al., 1994; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1988). To complicate this, the offender population has a significantly higher incidence of disabilities, including learning disabilities (LD) (Haigler et al., 1994; Mears & Aron, 2003; Steurer, 1996). Estimates of those in corrections facilities needing special education hover near 40 percent of juveniles and at least 50 percent of adult prisoners (Winters, 1997; Mears & Aron, 2003; Corley, 1996). Added to these challenges are high incidences of mental illness, poverty, and substance abuse among offenders (Califano, 2000; Winters, 1997).

Many of the physical and learning disabilities among the offender population were unsuspected and undiagnosed or, if noticed, were misdiagnosed (Mears & Aron, 2003). School has been a painful experience for many and their feelings of shame and anger at being unsuccessful in a world

where academic achievement is highly valued run deep (Winters, 1997). In addition to learning problems, Winters notes, incarcerated youth "...usually have maladaptive, passive learning styles, and attribute their lack of academic success to extra-individual factors" (p. 2).



Based on these well-documented observations, Missouri and Ohio decided to institute holistic screenings to obtain specific information on offenders' underlying learning challenges that can lead to more effective instructional programming. We examine here the initial findings from

those two states and the related changes they are making in their corrections education systems to address offenders' many learning issues.

Screening Procedure

Both the Missouri Department of Corrections and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction chose to administer *PowerPath to Basic Learning* (Weisel, 2003), a holistic diagnostic screening and intervention system. In Missouri, offenders entering the corrections system who met the criteria of being struggling learners were screened; in Ohio, offenders already in the system who met the criteria of being struggling learners were screened. The criteria include extremely weak reading and other academic skills (as indicated in Missouri by a reading level of 5.0 or below on the Wide Range Achievement Test [Jastak, 1998], or in Ohio

by a score of below 220 on the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, or CASAS [2005]), together with a score of 12 or higher on the Washington State Screening for Learning Disabilities (Giovengo et al., 1998).

A holistic diagnostic screening for struggling learners consists of evaluating the basic processing functions and skills needed to learn and perform academic and workplace tasks successfully (Weisel, 1998). These processing functions and skills include:

- Vision functions: ability to use both eyes to see at near and far point; and binocularity, defined as the integration of both eyes to focus on a single object and to move smoothly along lines of print.
- Hearing function.
- Scotopic sensitivity: a neural pathway dysfunction that leads to sensitivity to light and difficulty with reading black letters on white paper. This sensitivity can negatively affect reading fluency and sustained reading ability.
- Attention difficulties: hyperactivity, distractibility and impulsiveness, difficulty with completing tasks, hypersensitivity to criticism.
- Information Processing
 - Visual processing skills: visual-spatial orientation; memory; closure; discrimination; figure-ground discrimination, such as looking at a page filled with text and easily finding a specific word or sentence, or looking at a graph and focusing on a specific element.
 - Visual motor integration: transferring visual information to motor output (the ability to copy).
 - Auditory processing: (working) memory and comprehension.
 - Basic reading encoding and

decoding skills: sound-symbol associations, auditory and visual sequencing.

In an extended interview, offenders are asked to tell about themselves, their learning and work histories, family learning histories, medical issues that could affect learning, and other aspects of their lives that may be relevant to their difficulty in learning.



The Results

Missouri and Ohio collected interview and screening data on 510 offenders from 2003 through 2004 who met their states' criteria for screening for special learning needs. These data reveal the complexity of the issues faced by these struggling learners.

Individuals were screened for visual and auditory function difficulties while wearing any prescribed glasses, contacts, and/or hearing aids. These data include results from those who had weaknesses despite using corrective lenses or hearing aids as well as results from those without any corrective lenses or hearing aids.

- More than 30 percent had weaknesses in distance acuity.
- About 38 percent showed weaknesses in near acuity at reading distance.
- Nearly 40 percent had problems with binocularity including: tracking: moving eyes together along a line of print; convergence: focusing at the same point; alignment: seeing the same thing with both eyes; or amblyopia: so-called lazy eye.

- About 38 percent had weaknesses in basic hearing function.

Screening for information processing difficulties yielded similarly revealing results.

- Approximately 35 percent indicated a weakness in visual motor integration: copying or transferring written information from one place to another.

More than 50 percent had weaknesses in auditory comprehension for both short-term recall of facts and inference-making. Attention difficulties were identified as well.

- Nearly 40 percent were identified as having mild attention difficulties.
- Another 35 percent were identified as having moderate to severe attention difficulties.

Scotopic sensitivity greatly affects a learner's capacity for sustained reading, fluency, and comprehension. Not surprisingly, it also compounds frustration levels. Slightly more than 50 percent of the offenders were identified as having moderate to severe scotopic sensitivity. Another 35 percent were identified as having mild scotopic sensitivity. The majority of offenders screened made phonological errors (problems correctly matching letters to sounds) in reading single words and spelling.

Of the offenders screened in the Missouri and Ohio systems, fewer than 20 percent did not have any learning difficulties with functions or

information processing, 20 percent had no attention difficulties, and only 15 percent indicated no difficulties with scotopic sensitivity. In other words, 80 to 85 percent of these learners had documented function or processing challenges that interfered with their efforts to learn.

Offender History

Just as a majority of offenders screened had learning challenges, in interviews most offenders reported that their learning challenges were present from their earliest years in elementary school. More than 50 percent stated that they had been told they had a “learning disability,” with almost equal numbers reporting they had received special education, Title 1, or other remedial services while in school. The others had either never been told or helped. Whether or not their learning difficulties were ever actually identified, these offenders felt that their learning needs had not been fully recognized and/or that their learning needs were not met by the educational services they had received. They felt they had been left in the dark about why they struggled to learn and stated they had not been offered specific interventions they could use to become successful learners. Many described painful and frustrating interactions with family members and teachers that occurred when what was said or how it was said was misinterpreted.

How do these results compare with the incidence of such problems in the non-incarcerated population? Little agreement exists as to the incidence of learning problems in the adult basic education and literacy populations except that it is high. Estimates obtained from nonspecific screenings range from 30 to as high as 80 percent of the adult learners having learning challenges that have had a negative impact on their learning (see <http://www.nifl.gov/niflgaqs.html#learning>).

Little is known in the wider scope of adult learning problems about vision, hearing, or other types of problems. Except where diagnostic screenings have been instituted by program initiative or where diagnostic screenings are mandated by the state, no systematic approach has been taken in adult education to identify the specific issues underlying academic challenges among adult learners.

After the Screening

In Missouri and Ohio, the screening process is the first step in the correction system for offenders

“Moving to a holistic service approach for offenders with special learning needs will require that departments collaborate in new ways at the state level.”

who meet the criteria for being at risk of special learning needs. The two states have established somewhat different criteria for deciding which entering offenders are administered the diagnostic screenings. Each system is working to create a way for the screening results to be sent with the offender to his or her home institution for follow-up and to allow for access to needed interventions.

Having implemented a protocol for new admissions, Missouri and Ohio have recognized the importance of establishing models and protocols for conducting screenings at the institution level for current students in education programming. Ohio has decided to establish five model institution sites at which a process will be created with input from institution-based administrators and instructional staff. Elements from each of these model sites will be

adapted and used in the implementation of institution-based screening protocols that the entire education system can use.

Missouri has chosen to implement screenings for students with special learning needs at all institutions. Each institution uses special education and literacy staff, trained in implementing the screenings and interventions, to support institution-based screenings. Education administrators, in turn, are designing local approaches to support screening and ensure implementation of methods that use the information gained from screenings to accommodate learners’ special learning needs.

Both Missouri’s Central Office of Special Education and the literacy administrators provide additional training sessions and on-site technical assistance as needed.

With one year of experience, both systems are looking at revising their initial roll-out plans to ensure that individual institutions identify the special learning needs of offenders already in the system.

At the state level, service collaboration agreements are beginning to be discussed with health, mental health, and recovery services so that these departments can address issues that have contributed to and grown from the learning challenges identified in the data. State departments are often so-called silos — they tend to run autonomously and independently of each other. Moving to a holistic service approach for offenders with special learning needs will require that departments collaborate in new ways at the state level. Only then can collaborative actions at the institutional level follow.

Part of the focus of the collaborative efforts in Ohio and Missouri corrections systems is on creating ways of supporting professional development to ensure that instructors can learn and demonstrate the skills needed to do the following:

- Provide offenders with meaningful

feedback from their diagnostic screenings on the nature of their strengths and challenges and allow for a conversation about how these have had an impact on the offender's life.

- Help offenders learn how to select instructional accommodations that address their learning challenges.
- Provide explicit, continuing, purposefully structured instruction in the skills of learning (metacognitive skills) including:
 - breaking down tasks into manageable pieces
 - applying selected instructional accommodations
 - managing time and selecting materials
 - transferring learning from one situation to another
- Offer learning situations that:
 - are active
 - are project-based
 - use multiple ways of learning
 - rely on groups of students co-planning learning sessions and working collaboratively: participating in evaluating the success of the planned instructional time and identifying ways to improve the next session.

Conclusion

The data from the two state initiatives provide a clearer picture of the challenges facing offenders struggling to learn. As a result, new approaches are being tried to address the systemic factors that have kept struggling learners struggling. New questions are being asked that will, when addressed, drive services that are based on real, identified needs instead of assumptions. As these two states continue in their efforts, more offenders who have not been successful with learning will be able to find success. They will be able to learn needed academic skills, skills for better management of life, and ultimately have a better chance at sustaining employment after their release from prison.

The experiences and examples of Missouri and Ohio will provide models

that other states' departments of correction education can use as they establish policies and procedures to institute diagnostic screening for the most vulnerable offenders. Specific professional development activities that enable instructors to identify, understand, and provide better interventions for offenders with special learning needs will undoubtedly be included. States will find ways to shift the paradigm of education services to align with these data and other research findings on the elements for success in learning, life, and employment for persons with multiple learning challenges (Raskind et al., 1999; Mears & Arons, 2003). 

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Two Ways to Assess Literacy Learners in Prison

by **Bill Muth**

As corrections educators, everything about our task is complex: the rigors of teaching reading, the needs of the prisoners, the learning spaces in which we teach, the nature of literacy itself. Thus what we need to know about the literacy learners in our classrooms is multifaceted and extensive, yet our instructional decisions and our ability to support learning are only as good as the knowledge we possess about them. For a recent study of federal prisoners, I created a two-pronged assessment protocol to address these needs. The protocol was based on two pioneering projects: The Adult Reading Components Study (Strucker & Davidson, 2003) and the Adult Literacy Evaluation Project (Lytle, 2001). In this article I share some of the results of my study and argue that corrections educators can use similar assessment protocols to gain a wide base of knowledge about their literacy learners.

What do teachers who work in prisons need to know about their students? The answer to this question depends on the stated and unstated purposes of their programs (Moore & Readence, 2001) and the beliefs about literacy and learning that underpin them. I believe that prison-

based programs should support such immediate and long-term literacy needs as communicating with children and other loved ones at home, improving reading skills and strategies, earning a certificate of General Educational Development (GED), reflecting on one's life, and preparing to re-enter society. To support these broad literacy purposes, the assessment protocol described in this article embraces two different, but complementary, ways of knowing about literacy and learning. These ways of knowing pertain to inmates' strengths and needs across components of reading such as vocabulary, decoding, fluency, and comprehension; and the ways in which they view and practice literacy and learning.

Ways of Knowing About Literacy and Learning

Knowledge about the inmates' reading strengths and needs is needed to place learners appropriately into programs and to inform instruction. Prisoners display an extremely diverse range of abilities. Many are English language learners; received special educational support in school; are unschooled; or have histories of head trauma, drug abuse, and difficulty paying attention and remembering things (Travis et al., 2001). Assessing inmates' abilities in key reading component areas — such as decoding, fluency, vocab-

ulary, and comprehension — can empower corrections educators to embrace skill diversity by identifying distinct learning profiles and using them as instructional starting points. I assessed federal prisoners' ability patterns with traditional reading tests and educational history questionnaires.

Traditional tests of reading skills have limitations. They often cannot tell us if readers are actually using the skills they possess, or whether they take spelling risks when they write letters home, or what strategies they use to check comprehension or attack a new word in print. Questionnaires

“Knowledge about the inmates' reading strengths and needs is needed to place learners appropriately into programs and to inform instruction.”

may tell us which literacy practices inmates engage in during leisure time and how often, but they are not designed to assess how learners feel about the prison's literacy program. Nor are they designed to determine what their personal purposes for learning are, and whether these purposes are consistent with official purposes such as passing the GED exam.

Qualitative interviews enable teachers to understand the views and practices of their students. The need to create structures to assess the views of students may be unnecessary in other settings, but prisons can be places of profound mistrust and miscommunication. Without some understanding of prisoners' literacy-related beliefs — about, for example, their own abilities and purposes for learning, or what aspects of the program are most threatening — great divides

between student and teacher can arise, especially in compulsory literacy programs.

Reading Components

I assessed the reading abilities of 120 prisoners using a protocol adapted from *The Adult Reading Component Study* (ARCS), which was devised to examine the reading patterns of 955 adult learners from communities throughout the United States. Strucker and Davidson found distinctive patterns among these learners, whose demographics resembled those of federal prisoners (e.g., overwhelmingly minority and poor, linguistically diverse, with limited formal schooling).

Using traditional, easy-to-administer, and relatively inexpensive tests, I assessed three component areas of reading. Tests of phonemic awareness, decoding, and word recognition (in and out of context) measured print skills. Tests of oral expressive and receptive vocabulary measured meaning skills. Tests of rapid naming and a timed oral reading test measured reading rate. I used a questionnaire, based on the ARCS questionnaire and modified for use with prisoners, in conjunction

with the tests to provide background information about prisoners' first language, education and work history, and other family- and health-related areas.

Qualitative Interviews

To gain an understanding of prisoners' views about literacy and learning in prison, I engaged six prisoners in open-ended interviews. Each interview lasted one-and-a-half to two hours. My qualitative research questions were based on Lytle's (2001) theory of adult literacy development. Lytle suggests that development can be measured along four dimensions of literacy: beliefs about literacy and learning, literacy practices (such as helping children with homework, using an ATM machine), the processes used to decode and gain meaning from print, and plans that reflected students' purposes for learning.

I encouraged the participants — all were currently enrolled in literacy classes — to “tell their story about what it was like to learn here” (in prison). I attempted to ask this question in a neutral way and to keep the conversation on topic. However, I allowed them to take the discussion of their views about literacy in any direction they wished. They described

childhood experiences in school, their struggle to stay in touch with family members through letter writing, the trouble that a nephew was currently having in school, the materials they most liked to read and what they got out of it, what it was like trying to process print and get meaning out of various texts. They speculated about how their lives might have turned out if they had completed school, voiced their embarrassment about not being able to read or spell as well as others, and described unsafe prison spaces where ridicule (for being “stupid”) could lead to confrontation, which, in turn, could lead to more prison time. Some resented being forced to attend school but revealed learning purposes and goals that were personal and immediate (e.g., being able to write letters without having to ask others for help; proving to others that they had reformed; reading the newspaper). They noted how infrequently they could express the kind of ideas we were discussing in the interviews, and how they typically kept their personal goals, fears, worries, and hopes to themselves.

Two Learners

The following examples illustrate how the two-pronged approach to assessment can build a rich knowledge base from which instructional decisions can be made. These decisions are informed by both the strengths and needs of the learners and their personal purposes for learning.

Mark Harrison

Mark was 41 years old at the time of the interview. A white male, he was born in a major port city in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. He experienced extreme difficulties trying to learn to read in the first grade, which persisted through the middle of the eighth grade when he quit school. In the interviews he described how he coped with school, siblings, and peers, knowing that he was not stupid but also knowing that

Getting Started

Corrections educators can construct their own relatively inexpensive initial assessment protocol that requires about two hours to administer: one hour for tests and questionnaire, and one hour for the qualitative interview. Since teachers often have large classes, meager resources, and little time to conduct in-depth assessments, they will need the support of their administration in order to implement this.

More information on Adult Reading Components Tests and Questionnaires is available from:

- http://www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/MC_Test_Bank.htm
- http://www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/MC_Questionnaire.htm

More information on qualitative, open-ended Interviews is available from:

- Muth (2004): Chapter 3 provides an overview of how the author designed his qualitative interviews
- Weiss (1994): This is an excellent primer on qualitative interviews. ❖

he could not read.

“... When I was a kid ... my sister...used to call me stupid. And then I started to think, hey ... something’s wrong with you, you know?

“... She called me this and then sometimes other people would call me it too ...

“... If she wanted something, [she’d say] ‘Get that!’ or ‘Do this!’ ‘Don’t ask me dork!’ ‘Stupid!’...you know.

“... [In second grade] I behaved bad because I couldn’t do the work ... I had to find a way ... when that work was being given out instead of being embarrassed because I couldn’t do it, to do something bad to get out of the way ... or sent ... to the office, put ... in the coatroom ... or stand out in the hall.”

Once Mark quit school, he experienced depression but eventually managed to get and keep a well-paying, meaningful job. He compensated for his inability to read by asserting himself and by having a strong memory. Unfortunately, after his mother died he started taking drugs, which eventually cost him his job, his marriage, and custody of his children. The habit also resulted in his imprisonment.

Mark reported ingesting lead-based paint as a child and being in a car accident that left him unconscious. Despite this troubling history, he was intensely motivated to learn to read. Since Mark entered the prison literacy program four years earlier, he had been enrolled in class for six to eight hours a day and reported reading for four hours every evening in his housing unit. He characterized his reading as labored and noted that he frequently had trouble pronouncing words, read very slowly, often forgot what he just read, and lost his place while reading, forcing him to reread the same passage over and over again.

Presented below is a profile of his reading test scores, represented in the chart by his scores on the Diagnostic Assessment of Reading (DAR):

	<i>Print Skill</i>	<i>Meaning Skill</i>
	Word Recognition GE	Word Meaning GE
Grade Equivalent	5.0	10.1

“They speculated about how their lives might have turned out if they had completed school, voiced their embarrassment about not being able to read or spell as well as others, and described unsafe prison spaces where ridicule (for being “stupid”) could lead to confrontation, which, in turn, could lead to more prison time.”

Despite four years of intense study, Mark’s print skills (Word Recognition Test) were far surpassed by his fairly extensive meaning skills, represented here by his Word Meaning Test score (a measure of oral expressive vocabulary). Mark’s oral reading was labored and slow. While his performance on the untimed Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE) Reading Comprehension test was equal to the strongest learners in the study (10.1 GE), his reading rate score was comparable to the lowest-performing inmates.

Mark’s learning profile across key component areas of reading provides

a much richer understanding of his actual strengths and needs than could be gained from a single reading comprehension test score. However, silent reading comprehension scores are sometimes the only data available to corrections educators to aid them in placing learners into programs and making initial instructional decisions. (See Strucker, 1997, <http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/fob/1997/strucker.htm>, for a compelling argument against this practice.)

Mark’s strong reading comprehension test score might indicate that he is ready to take the GED. If oral reading activities were not part of the classroom routine, his extremely slow reading performance might go undetected. His failure to complete tests might suggest to some that he was lazy or just gave up. Yet his learning profile demonstrates how difficult it is for Mark to decode, despite his strong vocabulary knowledge. His educational history suggests that this struggle with print has been going on since first grade. The qualitative data reveal Mark’s profound and sustained drive to learn to read.

When all the data — from tests, questionnaire, and interview — are reviewed, a picture of Mark Harrison emerges: a highly motivated, bright learner who has struggled with decoding and fluency his entire life. We learn that he continues to benefit from explicit instruction that builds on his hard-earned print skills, and that placing him in a GED preparation class (which he would resist, but, based on his reading comprehension scores, might happen) would almost guarantee that his need for intense support to gain print skills would be unmet. We also learn that careful selections of ability-appropriate, authentic texts (Purcell-Gates et al., 2002), such as *USA Today* and books about his hometown, are

excellent ways to reinforce his print knowledge and his budding image of himself as a reader:

“... I was raised on the TV. As soon as I got up in the morning [I] turned the TV on when I was a kid. It was like, that was the babysitter ... until it was time to go to bed or fall asleep in front of the TV ... And here [in prison] when the reading started coming to me ... I cut down on TV. I sit in the room and read a lot. I try to keep feeding the dog and feeding it, feeding it. Keep reading because that’s what everybody says. It’s like a bike. If you stay on it you get better and better every day ... By the time I get off of work, eat, and shower, and go through to the room, [I read from] eight to twelve — four hours a night ... I just bought my first \$35 book, *Small Town, Maryland* ... It’s got the pictures back from the forties, and thirties and everything. It is awesome.

“[Now, for the first time in my life] in my spare time, any time I can [I read]. I’ll find myself in the bathroom with the toilet paper wrapper that somebody threw down and I’ll [notice the wrapper] and say ‘Hey! This is made in Maryland! ...’ ...The reading, I wanted to read! I wanted to read! I wanted to see if I was stupid [like] my sister and people call me, [or if] something else is causing it [because] I wasn’t learning right. So, I don’t think I was just stupid. I guess I wanted to prove people wrong. I want to be able to read. I want to be able to look at things and, you know, and read it!

Anne Blanchard

Anne was a 33-year-old African-American woman serving time at a minimum-security camp. She was born in upstate New York but moved throughout the South as a child. Her mother was a migrant worker, and her schooling was frequently interrupted. She reported that she repeated the fourth grade and was enrolled in numerous elementary schools. She left school in the middle of the sixth

grade in part because she became pregnant, and in part to escape the embarrassment of being placed in special education classes with second graders. Anne described herself as a “slow learner.” (For more details about Anne’s story, see the *College Reading Association’s Twenty-Seventh Yearbook*, in press.)

Despite participating in the prison’s literacy program for four years, Anne’s scores remained quite low across print and meaning component areas:

	<i>Print Skill</i>	<i>Meaning Skill</i>
	Word Recognition GE	Word Meaning GE
Grade Equivalent	1.5	2.0

Anne’s flat learning profile and modest gains contrast surprisingly with the literacy practices she described during the qualitative interview. Since she entered prison, she read for pleasure at least 30 minutes every day, and she engaged in letter writing and reading as a primary way of remaining connected to, and at the center of, her family of six children. “... All [family news] comes through me. It comes from a letter. They want to write me a lot. And then I write and tell them what they were saying.”

In the interview Anne revealed other strengths. She described the self-control it took to put worries of prison and home beside as she prepared mentally for class.

“Well, when I come in the classroom, I say ‘Okay,’ and some of them have been a lousy day ... like [when] I had just lost my mom [in] August...It gets frustrating because, you know, we have a lot of stuff on our minds ... especially home ... But ... me, I’m a calm person that I would calm it off, and I wouldn’t show my true feelings [in the classroom] ...

Anne described her role as a counselor to new women entering the prison camp. She explained the

‘mother’ and ‘sister’ roles that the female inmates adopted at her prison camp.

“... We have prison mommas, we have prison sisters ... Somebody that you can go to and talk to, and finally show you ... a shoulder to cry on. And somebody who’ll be there for you always ... ain’t gonna never leave your side ... make sure you do well ... won’t lead you in the wrong way ...”

Anne herself was a prison sister; she described how she helped another prisoner by counseling her to let go of a family problem that was beyond her control.

Anne described how the caretaker of three of her children was also going to assist her when she was released. Travis and colleagues (2001) reported on the numerous logistical hurdles (in addition to other, more fundamental, needs such as literacy, job skills, and drug treatment) that ex-offenders must face from the moment of their release from prison. Anne’s last sentence reflects a good deal of wisdom in this regard.

“He [the caretaker of three of her daughters was a preacher] seem like he’s very nice ... He loves the kids ... He came from the ghetto, too ... He’d say, ‘You kids are living good, you know. They got their own rooms ...’ He say, ‘I don’t want your kids, when you get out, me and my wife are gonna try to help you, get you some work so you and your kids can be together.’

“... I need his help, and I’m gonna accept his help because I do need to get back on my feet. Maybe he can find me a job. I can try to get back on my feet and get a nice place to stay ... When you get out somebody else has got to lead you.”

The data from the interview give us a new understanding of Anne, quite distinct from the information gathered from the reading tests. Anne’s reading scores might lead even the most caring teachers to believe that her literacy practices would be infrequent. Her education history might reinforce this, since she

dropped out of school in sixth grade while functioning at the second-grade level. Yet the qualitative data reveal how Anne views reading and writing letters as essential to her role as mother: a role she strongly, even defiantly, identifies with. Anne's story suggests that she has numerous assets: the capacity for great self-control; an ability to help other women; social networks that have supported her children and will also be used to help Anne as she re-enters society. Further, she strives to remain a good parent to her children; and she has a strong desire to learn as much as she can (both to prove to others that she is reformed, and to gain a skilled job once she is released).

With this rich knowledge base, we might decide to place Anne in a literacy program with a life-skills orientation. The program might provide support for letter writing, job seeking, and coping with the vast array of forms and other texts she will be encountering in the year ahead (housing applications, bus schedules, legal documents, etc.). Her literacy purposes are well-defined and have immediate importance to her children and her efforts to prepare for release.

"My dream is getting a good job...I want to sit there and be somebody and know how to do things and type [things]. That's why it's very important when you got to prison you don't just sit down and wonder what it's like in here ... Get out there and do something with your life! ..."

Reflections

When only a single test score is used to place learners like Anne and Mark into programs, when we do not have sufficient knowledge of their educational histories, their strengths and needs across the component areas of reading, or their personal beliefs about literacy and learning, we lack the rich base of data required to meet their literacy needs most effectively. When we are equipped with this understanding, our own views might

change, as we notice that inmates are both learners with specific needs and whole human beings capable of guiding their own learning. 

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An Active Advisory Board Meets Via Interactive Television

by Marianna Ruprecht

Admitt it: Haven't you been part of an advisory board that was no more than a rubber stamp, meeting because of some mandate, traveling for half a day for what seemed like nothing more than coffee and a fresh chocolate chip cookie? It doesn't have to be that way. These county jails' experience proves it.

—The Editor

Northcentral Technical College (NTC) and Marathon County Jail (MCJ) in Wausau, WI, have been partnering to provide basic education and career services to inmates since the fall of 1989. At that time, the Adult Education Act (AEA) provided

funding for incarcerated individuals with matching funds coming from local jails. In 1994, the grant required that the grantee, MCJ, form an advisory council consisting of the following: a judge, a district attorney, representatives from the public defender's office, probation and parole departments, law enforcement, the community, jail officials, and instructors and officials of NTC.

Over the next few years, the rest of the county jails (Taylor, Lincoln, Price, and Langlade) and the Menominee Tribal Detention Facility in the NTC district requested basic education services at their jails. As these jails were added to the grant, we were faced with this issue: Do we form six separate advisory committees (one for each jail) or do we group all the jails together and find a way to meet so that we have representation from each? If we combine, how can we

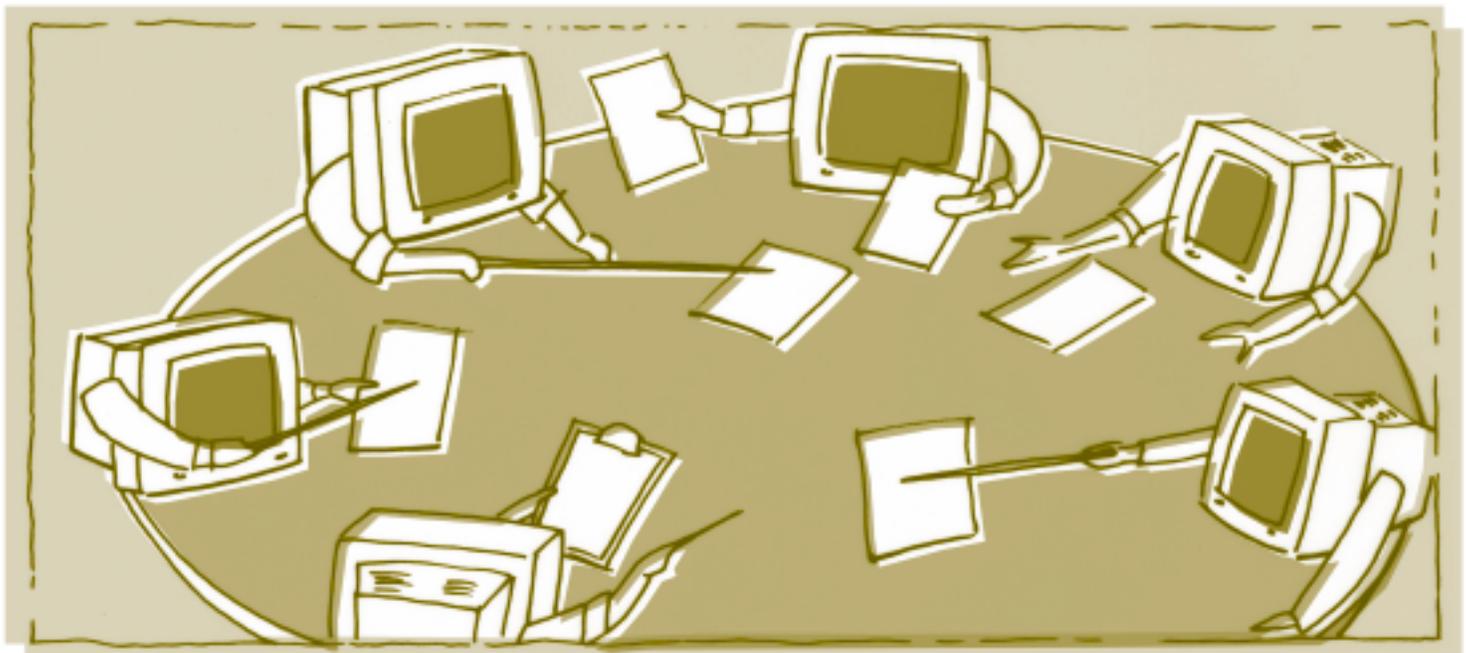
share information and resources when some of our jails are 80 miles apart?

We decided that it would be difficult to coordinate six separate advisory groups throughout the district. NTC uses a communication system called interactive television (ITV) to conduct classes so that students can attend classes at campus sites near their homes. In 1999, we combined all the jails into one group and since then have used this ITV system to hold joint advisory meetings. It is cost-efficient and has allowed jail administrators, judges, district attorneys, instructors, NTC staff, and others to attend the meetings near their places of work rather than traveling for several hours to one location.

Cross-Institution Benefits

The convenience factor was not the strongest argument for a district-wide jail advisory council. The strongest argument was that national, state, and local issues would be discussed by a diverse cross-representation from each jail. All members would benefit from the input of others, and then be able to translate the ideas and decisions to fit their situations.

The decision to hold one cross-



institution advisory meeting has had a positive impact upon funding. Funding is continually being reduced, and during the 1999 advisory meeting, funding issues were brought up. The chairperson asked if anyone had ideas about how we could get more funding to expand services at MCJ, since that jail needed to add basic education and career services to its newly built addition. One of the advisory members, the justice system's coordinator, said that she would look into some possibilities. She did some research and discovered that the Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance had a Request for Proposal (RFP) out for the Edward Byrne Law Enforcement Assistance Program to provide funding for education in the county jails. However, that funding could not be used to supplant any activities already in place: it had to be for new activities. Because MCJ was the only jail at that time in a position to expand its services, it was the only institution eligible to apply. The justice system's coordinator, the MCJ jail captain, and the NTC instructor/coordinator collaborated to write a new proposal that would enhance and expand basic education and career services at the jail. The funding started in 2000; the grant application and funding were renewed every year for the four-year maximum allowed. The advisory council member not only alerted MCJ to the availability of the grant but she also made the collaborative writing of the grant proposal easy to do.

One Thing Leads to Another

The grant at MCJ, in turn, had an impact on other programs via the advisory group. With additional instructional staffing provided by the grant, MCJ initiated a recognition ceremony to honor students' successful completion of the certificates of General Educational

Development (GED), Wisconsin's high school equivalency diploma (HSED), and other learning accomplishments. The ceremony has been used as a model by other regional jail sites. The additional staffing

“The convenience factor was not the strongest argument for a district-wide jail advisory council. The strongest argument was that national, state, and local issues would be discussed by a diverse cross-representation from each jail.”

enabled the jail to start new classes such as financial literacy classes. Information about these classes has been shared with the other jail instructors in the NTC district via the advisory meetings, and the Taylor County Jail instructor has already launched her own financial literacy class. These financial literacy classes have been very successful at MCJ. The jail instructors have been requested to present at conferences including the state-called jail conference in February, 2005, and curriculum conference for all adult basic education instructors in the Wisconsin Technical College System in April, 2005. Without the additional staffing support, the instructors could not have spent the time required to create the new enhancements to the programming. When MCJ was no longer eligible for this funding, advisory council members had its history, reports, and grant proposal to draw on when crafting their own proposals.

Generating New Ideas

Collaboration and the different perspectives from the six sites greatly benefit the students we serve in other ways as well. Throughout the years, ideas shared via the advisory council have included parents reading books on audiotapes, which they send home to their children; piloting a financial literacy program; group reading and discussion of current events; and finding ways to recognize our students' successes, such as holding a Recognition Ceremony.

Other benefits of the advisory meetings include opportunities to discuss the appropriateness of individualized vs. group sessions, especially for certain topics such as financial literacy and careers; computer-based instruction; and instruction for limited English proficient (LEP) individuals. In addition, the meetings provide a time for jail staff members to share

and compare their jail guidelines and rules, for community representatives to share outside resources that may be available for the inmates, and for the sharing of resources among the jails and NTC. We are very fortunate to have advisory council members who are team players and are very willing to share their expertise to assist us in providing the best education possible for our institutions' inmates.

In summary, partnering with other local jails throughout the NTC district generates new ideas, reinforces the guidelines of the grant, and communicates information to all advisory council members. After these meetings we are a little more energized to help our students. 

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“**Current Issues in Correctional Education**” by Gail Spangenberg, February 2004, published by the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, available at http://www.caalusa.org/correct_ed_paper.pdf, is the compilation of discussions held with 15 leaders in corrections and adult education on topics such as critical public policy issues in corrections, funding issues in corrections education, and the relationship between the Departments of Education and Corrections at the state level. Issues deemed critical by this group include the need to prepare inmates for everyday functioning and jobs after their release, the need for better public relations on the part of corrections education, and the importance of evaluating program impact and appropriateness.

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■ NCSALL works to improve the quality of practice in adult basic education programs nationwide through basic and applied research; by building partnerships among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners; and through dissemination of research results. A joint effort of World Education, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Portland State University, Rutgers University, and the Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, NCSALL is funded by the US Department of Education's Institute of Educational Sciences.

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builds on the proposition that a reader's comprehension performance is largely determined by his or her abilities in two areas — print components and meaning components — and that learners' skills and, therefore, instructional needs, vary depending upon their relative strengths and weaknesses in these component areas.

“One Day I Will Make It”: A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs by John Comings, Kristin E. Porter, and Sondra Cuban, with Valerie Chase. This brief provides findings from the last report in the Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) initiative, which was established in 1996 with the goal of helping public libraries around the country come up with new ways to increase adult learners' persistence. In the study, the planning and implementation of strategies to improve student persistence were investigated in well-established library literacy programs in nine branches of five libraries. This Research Brief is adapted from the MDRC-produced Executive Summary of the same title. The complete report can be downloaded from MDRC's web site at: <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/401/full.pdf>

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NCSALL Research

Becoming Adult Learners: Principles and Practices for Effective Development, by Eleanor Drago-Severson, offers a way to support adults in adult basic education (ABE) and English for speakers of other languages programs (ESOL). The book grew out of the NCSALL Adult Development research (see <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=258> and related articles on the NCSALL web site) and provides practical suggestions for applying adult development theory in the classroom, curriculum, program design, and policy. It's available via Teachers College Press, at <http://www.tcpress.com>.

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