Distance Learning in Incarcerated Populations

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INTRODUCTION

The United States Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that as of June 30, 2006, there are 1.6 million people serving sentences in state and federal facilities. This number does not include the roughly 600,000 additional inmates housed in local jails (AP, 2007). Inmate populations have been increasing in almost all states, with high numbers of recidivists. "The criminal justice system has frequently been referred to as a "revolving door" where offenders are released, only to be returned over and over again to incarceration" (Daniel, 2003, p. 3).

While many educators focus on bridging the digital divide for rural and disadvantaged students, few focus on a much more isolated population: those in the prison system. Research shows that educating incarcerated populations lowers recidivism rates at substantial savings to state taxpayers. Just as the advent of the Web has revolutionized education's reach, instructional Web technologies have the power to extend into the most dangerous and neglected schoolrooms in our country: America's prisons.

BACKGROUND

Serving prisoners through traditional teaching modes carries inherent drawbacks. Most facilities are purposefully remote and disconnected from cities by broad land expanses (Erisman & Contardo, 2005, p. 39). Few educators join the teaching profession intending to focus on prisoner education, and many do not want to be on-site. Of those willing to teach prisoners, policies have unintentionally conspired to limit the pool of educators. Nevada added a graduate degree requirement that left many active instructors ineligible under the new legislation (Erisman & Contardo, 2005, p. 39). Because of the security risk and low supply of available educators, bringing teachers in-house, or rather in-prison, can be costly. Lacking the resources to stimulate options,

course offerings for prisoners include a narrow range of subjects. Most programs center around job skills, manual trades, and literacy.

Despite the link between prison educational programs and recidivism, funding remains a perennial problem. The number of state-funded courses an inmate can take per term varies from state to state. New Mexican prisoners can take two courses per semester at the state's expense (Howard, 2003). Recent recidivism rates in New Mexico have been roughly 70% within 1 year of release. Prisoners who received some education while incarcerated showed a 50% lower rate of recidivism (Howard, 2003). A former warden in the Utah State system estimates that "80 percent of offenders routinely come back to prison. Among those who get a college education… fewer than 20 percent return" (Carlson, 2004, p. A33). Aside from the sociological and humanitarian impacts, the state cost savings is compelling. At an expense ranging from $22,000 to $35,000 per year to house an inmate, a lower recidivism rate can easily justify more funds for education.

In some states, educational benefits are available for only a small portion of the imprisoned population. Currently, only one quarter of California's inmates have access to educational opportunities. In 2004, California was poised to enact sweeping legislation to make education widely available to incarcerated populations. It called for an educational assessment within 90 days of incarceration, followed by programs tailored to convicts' specific needs. Successes in other state programs suggested, "for every $1 spent on education, at least $2 would be saved on food and cell space alone" (Warren, 2004). Despite the compelling net financial savings evidence and the legislature's support, SB 1399 was vetoed by the Governor for being "premature" and at cross-purposes with current efforts (Schwarzenegger, 2004). In addition to state funds being constrained, federal student aid was nearly abolished during the 1990s. Perhaps most damaging was Congress's 1994 legislative action that made "prisoners ineligible for Pell Grants" (Schmidt, 2005).

Dollars spent on educating prisoners can reduce incarceration costs. Anecdotal support shows that prisoners behave better while in educational programs. There may also be incidental savings through reduced inmate and guard injuries, as well as prisoners needing less intensive supervision. Lorna A. Rhodes, professor of anthropology at the University of Washington, cited an example in her book, *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison*, where educational programs were an important component of better inmate behavior. She studied the "'control units' or 'super maximum' wings within maximum security prisons" (p. A14). Four years after educational programs were introduced, along with graffiti cleaning and renovations to better protect prison staff, "the unit was experiencing dramatically less violence and use of force on prisoners. Many inmates, who had seemed doomed to spend their lives in control units, managed to graduate back to the general prison population" (Monaghan, 2004, p. A16). In addition to prison populations, youth offenders, such as the California Youth Authority (CYA) population, could benefit greatly from better educational opportunities. Sullivan found that "it costs society more than $1.7 million for each youth that drops out of school to become involved in a life of crime and drug abuse." Youths in the CYA have a staggering 91% recidivism rate (Sullivan, 2004, p. 1).

Felons who receive training or education while serving their sentences are much less likely to return to prison. In addition to the savings seen by states housing inmates, neighboring states may see a savings as well. The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that within 3 years of release, 7.6% of prisoners (18,460 of 241,810 studied in 15 states) had been rearrested for a new crime in a state other than the one they were released from (Langan & Levin, 1994). Ohio University's Independent and Distance Learning Programs serve incarcerated populations in Ohio correctional facilities. According to Don Sebera, Educational Advisor, "almost half of our students come from the following five states": California, Florida, Michigan, Ohio, and Virginia (2004). It is important for both the originating and state of incarceration to stem the recidivism rates. Upon release, some prisoners will move to local communities and some will return to their home state. In addition to neighboring states, those states exporting prisoners may experience lower recidivism rates.

MAIN FOCUS: LIMITATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

Limitations

Even when funding and the desire to educate prisoners are present, other technical limitations exist for using instructional technology, specifically learning management systems (LMS). Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU) received a contract with the New Mexico Department of Corrections (NMDOC) to deliver courseware using their LMS, Blackboard (formerly WebCT). The NM DOC prohibited student-to-student communication and Internet access. Course offerings were restricted; medical courses were explicitly prohibited. ENMU's program contrasts greatly with Utah State University's (USU) program. Utah State allows inmates to attend classes by "television monitor, microphone, and satellite receiver." The inmates can see and hear the instructor and the undergraduates at the university in real time. Though students in the university classroom cannot see the inmates, they can hear them through a speaker in the classroom; inmates identify themselves not by name but by the prison's city. The USU program mimicked the traditional learning modes of classroom instruction. Students listen to lecture with visual aids and may ask questions (Carlson, 2004, pp. A33-34).

The traditional set of student excuses rarely applys in a prison setting. Lockdowns can occur without warning and for the smallest rule infraction, lasting for indefinite periods. During a prison lockdown, all prisoners are escorted to their cells, and only let out for meals and 1 hour per day for exercise. Library and computing time is completely eliminated. Throughout ENMU's contract, they experienced lockdowns as short as 12 hours and as long as 10 days (Howard, 2003). Losing 10 days in a 16 week or less term can greatly impact a course, but worse; a student's opportunity to learn. Using the USU model of attending class in real time, a prisoner would need to have as predictable a schedule as possible to finish a course. The self-paced approach and fully online courses lend best to the constraints of prison life.

There are definite benefits and drawbacks to letting prisoners attend class in a video/teleconference mode. On the positive side, prisoners are able to listen to the material as delivered by the instructor, and are able to ask questions in real time. This could lead to

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