

A STUDY OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN THE MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

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Organization of the Full Report

This monograph is an abridged version of the full report. The full report is organized around six sections: Introduction, Toward An Emerging Set of Best Practices, Methods and Procedures, Summary of Findings, Analysis and Interpretation of Findings, and Recommendations. The final section is followed by the Bibliography and Appendixes, which provides additional information on documents, tools, and procedures used in the project. Summative portions of each of the sections mentioned above appear in this document. For a copy of the full report, contact the Michigan Center for Career and Technical Education at Michigan State University at 1-800- 292-1606. *Purpose and Methods of the Study*

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Executive Summary

Purpose of Report and Methodology

Over the past half-century, education and training have been an integral component of the rehabilitative function of American correctional systems. While the overall focus, scope, and degree of these programs have varied over the years, many states have retained some level of academic and vocational education programming within their prisons. Recent studies, however, call into question the efficacy of many of these programs and suggest the need to attend to particular attributes in order to realize successful program outcomes. The effectiveness of academic and vocational programs within a prison context is associated with specific characteristics that can be addressed through careful policy-making, curriculum development, and instructional delivery.

According to the 1995 Education Action Plan of the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC), the mission of the Department's education programs is to offer incarcerated individuals an opportunity to gain academic, social, and work skills to become productive citizens while in prison and when released to the community. Specifically, these programs aim toward increasing: a) reading, math, writing, and critical thinking skills at least to the level of the General Educational Development (GED) certificate level; b) employment and job skills; and c) interpersonal skills. However, over the last 15 years, the prison population in the State of Michigan has more than doubled. During this same period, the cost to taxpayers of incarcerating individuals has more than tripled. Presently, over 40,000 individuals are incarcerated in more than 50 facilities around the state. This rapid growth has placed considerable strain on the ability of the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) to effectively meet the educational needs of this burgeoning prison population. About 10,600 individuals are enrolled, at any given time, in an MDOC educational program. Of these, approximately 1,800, or almost 20%, are enrolled in vocational programs. These programs are spread out across a variety of MDOC facilities and reflect 12 different occupational areas. The vast majority of these programs are located in prisons with a security level ranking of four or less.

While the academic focus of MDOC's education programs is critical to the overall success of their educational effort, it is not the primary focus of this report. Rather, the project reported on here concentrated on vocational programming within MDOC institutions. In our interpretation of findings and recommendations, the researchers speak to the *relationship* of academic and vocational programming within MDOC. The principal concern, however, is with the overall nature and quality of educational programs directed toward the development of specific occupational skills.

The rapid expansion of the prison population has created concern for consistency, continuity, and articulation within MDOC vocational programs. For this reason, a study was undertaken to determine how vocational education within Michigan's prisons might better contribute to the overall goal of providing inmates with marketable skills and, thus, reducing the "revolving door" syndrome so characteristic of the prison population.

The purpose of this study was to determine how vocational education within the Department of Corrections may be improved to more effectively contribute to the goal of providing inmates with employable skills. The study was conducted over a nine-month period, from June 1998 - March 1999. Specifically, the objectives of this study were to:

1. Assess vocational education programs within the Department of Corrections in terms of their overall purposes, intent, similarities, differences, and relevance to labor market trends and employability;
2. Assess the level of coordination and articulation across the state among existing and potentially new vocational education programs;
3. Determine the potential for aligning and integrating vocational programs with life skills and academic programs;
4. Develop a conceptual framework for use in assessing inmate success within the institutions' vocational programs.

The overall aim was not to *evaluate* the nature of vocational programming within the state but to provide specific information that may be useful to MDOC in considering and making decisions about changes in their statewide vocational program. The project was guided by a qualitative design, which included the use of in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. Site visits were made to 15 different facilities, which provided one or more vocational programs. Facilities were selected on the basis of geographical location, type of programs offered, and level of security. A total of 47 programs were visited, representing nine different vocational areas as well as ABE/GED and Pre-release programs. In-depth interviews were conducted with facility, regional, and central office administrators, vocational teachers, and potential employers.

In addition, a telephone survey of employers was conducted to determine if they would employ ex-offenders who were vocationally trained while incarcerated. The employers surveyed included small businesses, building contractors, large employers and corporations who employ skilled and semi-skilled workers in manufacturing, machine tool, building trades, health care, facilities maintenance, grounds maintenance, food service, printing, and retail sales. The overall size of the business ranged from very small, employing two or three workers, to large corporations, educational institutions and health care providers with several thousand employees.

Twenty-five employers of skilled and semi-skilled workers in fields traditionally associated with vocational training were polled regarding (1) their policy toward the hiring of ex-offenders, (2) the existence of cultural barriers to the hiring of ex-offenders, (3) the level of technical skills required for entry-level placements, and (4) workplace readiness skills needed. We recognize that this survey is limited in size, and that responses provided in a telephone interview may not necessarily reflect the actual actions of an employer in a specific hiring situation. However, the information obtained through this survey provides some information as to the needs and attitudes of employer groups within certain labor market areas.

Observations were conducted, when possible, of instruction and materials and equipment were examined. Curricular, instructional, and assessment documents related to each facility program and the statewide program were reviewed. Within this category, there were numerous documents and sets of materials, such as statewide progress plotters developed by the different curriculum groups, the MDOC 1995 Education Action Plan, and the organizational structure of MDOC, that were made available to us through the curriculum committee and the MDOC central office. Investigators also participated in statewide curriculum committee and principal meetings, and orientation sessions for the INVEST computer software. To provide perspectives on vocational programming from other states, a site visit

was also made to Fox Lake and Oshkosh Correctional Facilities in Wisconsin and personnel from the Orlando and California departments of corrections were interviewed. Finally, a comprehensive review of the literature related to vocational programming in corrections education was conducted to add perspective and provide insight for best practices and recommendations.

Analysis of the Data

All transcribed interviews, observations, notes, documents, and other materials were subjected to content analysis procedures. Interviews and notes were initially analyzed to inductively identify “key variables” characterizing important issues or factors within vocational programs. These variables were then used to construct an analytic framework, informed by the literature and review of program descriptions from other states. This framework was then employed in a more comprehensive analysis and review of the data

Framework for Discussion

Education has been a part of the U.S. correctional system since at least the 1800s, when it focused primarily on religious instruction. In the 1930s, however, it became more closely aligned with a rehabilitative function and began to focus on academic and vocational preparation. In the 1960s, many prisons began to offer post-secondary education (Gerber & Fritsch, 1995). Recently, however, there have been sharp funding reductions in many states for prison education, with college-level and vocational programs being hardest hit with these cutbacks. These cuts reflect, in part, a response to growing public skepticism regarding the role of education in achieving its rehabilitative function.

Within the U.S. most prisons continue to provide some form of education or training to inmates. Of the individuals participating in these programs, most are enrolled in adult basic education (ABE) or GED preparation programs. About 60% provide some form of post-secondary education and 79% offer life and social skills training (Kirshstein and Best, 1996). Prison education programs serve multiple functions, including reducing prisoner idleness, contributing to prison population control strategies, and helping provide trained individuals to staff the work that needs to be done in prisons.

Most educators who work in prisons and most officials responsible for supervising these programs, however, stress the rehabilitative function of educational programming. That is, education is provided to incarcerated individuals with the expectation that it will contribute to the person’s ability to stay out of prison once he or she is released. This goal is achieved by helping them acquire the necessary life and employability skills they will need to obtain decent employment or to continue their education. Returning individuals with low levels of basic skills to the community is a recipe for recidivism; and many states, such as Michigan, have developed aggressive policies to at least provide individuals leaving prison with a GED certificate.

Given the relatively low levels of academic and vocational preparation that characterize much of the incarcerated population (particularly the male population), there is considerable need for multiple levels and kinds of education and training within prisons. Providing individuals with basic skills, through ABE and GED preparation programs, can contribute to the reduction of recidivism (Anderson, 1995). There is also a strong need, however, to foster employability skills that reflect labor market needs and trends. Equipped with such marketable skills, incarcerated individuals released into the community are more likely to obtain employment that will eventually provide them with at

least a living wage and, hopefully, keep them out of the “revolving prison doors” that characterize the lives of so many inmates.

In many states, vocational courses augment basic skills and GED preparation programs. Not all correctional education programs, however, are created equal. From the research over the last 10-15 years, we have learned that certain characteristics, structures, and processes contribute to the overall effectiveness of these programs. The following is a framework of “best practices” that might be used to interpret the present state of practice within Michigan correctional vocational education.

The specific characteristics and attributes of individual programs, as well as inter-facility factors and statewide policies and procedures all contribute to the overall quality of a state’s prison vocational education system. In addition, articulation with statewide career prep systems, such as the Michigan Career Prep System, enhances communication among both educators and potential employers around what particular programs represent and how they might contribute to the state’s overall workforce needs.

Based on a study of emerging practices, the researchers propose the following framework of nine best practices be used as a guide to interpret the findings derived from the assessment of vocational education programs in the Michigan Department of Corrections:

1. Statewide leadership, policy, and direction

- Insures adequate and equitable funding policies through state leadership
- Designates individuals responsible for coordinating vocational programming in the state
- Clearly delineates roles of Central Office education staff and makes these roles known to local program staff.
- Maintains effective lines of communication between state office and local programs
- Uses State Education Plan to guide policy and curricular decisions at the state and local levels
- Seeks to articulate statewide programs with the state’s Career Prep system components to more effectively meet the demands of a changing labor market

2. Inter-facility cooperation and communication

- Demonstrates structures and processes for education staff from different facilities to communicate with each other and share information
- Provides information on transferring students related to needs, interests, and progress within the respective programs

3. Partnerships with local education agencies and employers

- Establishes and actively uses formal relationships with local educational agencies for planning and implementing vocational programs
- Establishes and actively uses formal relationships with local area employers for planning and implementing vocational programs
- Uses employer groups to design school-based experiences to enable students to gain skills needed in real workplace settings

4. Facility leadership and policies affecting educational programs

- Demonstrates clear mission and vision for educational programs
- Demonstrates agreement among wardens, principals, and classification directors with policies and procedures affecting educational programs

- Uses data for identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses to incorporate in school improvement plans

5. Training, experience, and professional development of education staff

- Provides opportunities for professional development on a regular on-going basis
- Provides incentives for staff to avail themselves of training
- Provides options for updating staff on educational policies and practices initiated by Michigan Department of Education

6. Intake and assessment procedures

- Identifies needs and interests of individuals related to educational programming
- Places inmates within appropriate vocational programs, based on identified needs and interests

7. Program Curricula

- Designs and utilizes competency-based curricula
- Reflects within the curriculum the needs of individuals and labor market trends of the community and state
- Insures consistency across facilities within any given curricular or program area
- Involves community agencies and employer groups in the design of curricula
- Uses statewide systems, such as curriculum committees, to review and update program curricula
- Articulates with and makes use of state Career Pathways, as part of the Career Prep System, in overall curricula design

8. Instructional delivery system

- Employs principles of adult learning in the design and implementation of instruction
- Uses state-of-the-art technology and other equipment
- Provides for materials and resources necessary and appropriate for effective instruction and training
- Provides for experiential, hands-on training appropriate to the vocational area
- Provides for job-counseling

9. Assessment and follow-up

- Monitors and documents student progress and program completion effectively
- Documents number of program completers
- Obtains follow-up information on employment placement after release

Findings

This section aims at developing an overall picture of vocational education programs within Michigan adult correctional facilities and not any one institution or program. The findings are summarized in three broad categories: a) program-level findings, b) inter-facility-level findings, and c) statewide-level findings. While it is recognized that some overlap exists among these three categories, this summary of findings reflects increasingly broader and more diverse domains of involvement and responsibility. In addition, recommendations to address any issues within these different levels will require different kinds of interventions.

Summary of Program-level Findings

In the first broad category, a summary of program-level findings was presented in the complete report as a series of nine separate program descriptions, which focus on key variables that help to organize and frame the findings. An example of a program description can be found below:

Program Title: Business Education Technology

Program Overview

The purpose of the Business Education Technology program is to provide students with the knowledge and experience they need to work within the business technology area both inside and outside of the prison setting. Students who participate in the Business Education Technology program will understand and apply:

- *Basic Office Communication and Computation Skills*
- *Basic Customer Service Skills*
- *Word Processing Software Applications*
- *Database Software Applications*

Within the Michigan Department of Corrections, Business Education Technology programs are offered in Carson City, Crane, Hiawatha, Ionia, Lakeland, Mid-Michigan, Muskegon, Riverside and Scott.

Information below is based on data gathered from site visits:

Context

Business Education Technology programs have a maximum of 15 students in a class. Different sites have different requirements for admittance. One site requires at least a six-month sentence and reading level on the TABE of 7 or 8. Another requires students have a GED, but reports students enter the program with very low academic skills. Instructors interviewed reported little or no standardization of program across the state and say students in one site may complete the program in six months while students in another site may complete in a year and a half. Transfers reportedly affect student success in some of the business programs. One instructor reported only one in 45 students likely will complete the program. In addition to transfers, the teacher cites employment as a reason students drop the program. Policies that allow students to get a job after six months of school may contribute to the dropout rate.

Program Outreach

None of the instructors interviewed reported significant interaction with the community in relation to program development. One instructor reported a need to be aware of community services which can help ex-prisoners adjust and find work.

Curriculum

Instructors reported the business education technology curriculum is outdated. Curriculum plotters exist but some instructors have added new activities to the plotters in an attempt to keep students up to date. Instructors reported the plotters are not used in the same way across the state, creating programs that differ in content and length. The business education technology curriculum is self-paced. Students use textbooks, videos and computer programs to build skills. In addition to curriculum materials, some

teachers bring in magazines and books in an attempt to update the curriculum. Some instructors were responsible for a pre-release course and spent considerable time searching for community resources.

Professional Development/Quality of Instruction

Instructors report little professional development activity. One interviewee said it has been three years since business education instructors came together to meet on curriculum. Others report the design of the programs were developed by individual instructors who visited other programs in corrections and gathered resources on their own. Instructors claimed they would benefit from meetings with other business education instructors. One instructor expressed interest in adding a work-based component to the program and would like to discuss possibilities with other instructors.

Technology

The Business Education Technology program uses computers, but the computers being used are reportedly outdated. One instructor reports having new computers in the classroom, but because of a lack of technical support and training, the computers have not been set up. The state's system for programming computers also restricts instructors' ability to update instructional tools.

The limited use of technology and the lack of ability to update technology also hinders the curriculum.

Evaluation/Assessment

Without a standardized business education technology program in the state, students who transfer from one site may not be able to transfer their skills into a similar program thus delaying completion of a program. In a self-paced curriculum, once students pass written tests they can move on to the next unit. Instructors report that as students go through the progress plotter and do all the lessons, each section is scored, dated and marked complete. Seventy percent is the minimum passing grade.

The following themes emerged from a content analysis of these data as significant dimensions of vocational education at the program level: program context, program outreach, curriculum, professional development, quality of instruction, technology, and evaluation and assessment. Within program context, waiting lists, classroom space, transfer, and employment within the facility emerged as issues that are potentially influencing a student's ability to complete a given course of study.

Most of the programs exhibited progress plotters which specified what is to be taught within the program. These plotters are the result of a statewide effort to standardize the curriculum within a given program area across facilities. Yet, there remains considerable variation from what is taught within these programs and the resources and materials being used to implement these curricula.

For the most part, instruction consists of some combination of didactic and hands-on experiences. Didactic instruction often reflects reliance on texts or other printed materials and audio-visual materials. Direct instruction, involving the teacher providing instruction to students, usually involves one-on-one interactions with students. Hands-on or more experiential instruction was also utilized, involving demonstrations, simulations, and apprentice-like experiences. Considerable variation was observed within the study in proportion to these two forms of instruction utilized in any given program across facilities.

Most vocational programs involve teaching the appropriate use of tools and other

equipment appropriate to the area. The use of computer-assisted technology in the vocational classrooms, however, is minimal. Exceptions to this observation are graphic arts and printing and the optical program. In the ABE/GED classes computers are used for reading, writing, and math programs. EDL is the prominent software used for these purposes but more sites are gradually adopting Invest software as well. In some instances, INVEST is replacing EDL, while other sites are using the two together. Most vocational teachers were not aware of INVEST or, if they were, knew very little about it.

Student progress is usually documented using the progress plotters. Procedures for assessing student progress include written tests and observation of performance. Use of observation of student performance on specific tasks also varies within a given program across sites. Certificates are provided upon completion of the course but requirements for completion also varied by facility.

Most of the teachers included in this study participate in a nominal amount of professional development, but the nature, quality, and effectiveness of these experiences varies considerably. Many are not members or active in the association for correctional educators in Michigan. A few teachers have visited teachers at other sites but these opportunities seem lacking. While 40 hours of professional development per year is required of instructors, they must often pay for and find their own trainings, opportunities for certification, and so forth.

Program outreach differs by program area, ranging from no contact with outside agencies in the ABE/GED programs to significant outreach with outside vendors in the custodial maintenance program and community agencies in the horticulture and building trades program. Instructors indicate that it would be beneficial to have contact with outside agencies as a connection to employment for inmates upon release. Program staff has very little contact with secondary schools and community colleges. Instructors indicated that it would be beneficial to meet with other instructors teaching the same courses in corrections, and food services instructors were currently benefiting from this arrangement.

Summary of Inter-facility, Statewide-level and Employer Findings

The overall quality of vocational programs within the Michigan Department of Corrections is effected by structures and processes that extend beyond the parameters of a program at any given site. In this report, we group these factors as inter-facility and statewide. Factors that are evident at the inter-facility-level include varying interpretations of security needs, the role that institutional needs for workers plays in what is offered and taught within any given program area, transfer policies and procedures, the degree of articulation across sites within any given program curriculum, and variations in availability of funding and other resources to support vocational programming. Vocational offerings and curriculums are not standardized across facilities. In addition, facilities vary in terms of: vocational resources, admission standards, restrictions on inmate enrollment, handling inmate transfers, movement of records accompanying inmate transfer, contact with the larger vocational community, and security procedures.

At the statewide-level, turnover at senior levels within positions directly responsible for educational programming within the Department has made it more difficult to initiate, sustain, and follow through with efforts aimed at improving the design and delivery of vocational education within the prisons. There is no explicit and clear philosophical perspective to frame and justify vocational education evident at the state level. Although a statewide Education Plan exists for the Department, it is not clear the extent to which it guides the day-to-day decision-making of Central Office staff or local program staff. Variation and lack of standardization within vocational curricula remain a considerable

challenge for the educational staff within the Central Office. State-wide curriculum committees have been organized to develop consistency in progress plotters. Beyond these, however, not much else is being done to improve articulation of curricula across sites. Lack of standardization is attributed to decisions being made at the facility level, over which Central Office staff feel relatively powerless. There is virtually no follow up in place for determining the extent to which vocational education is helping former inmates obtain gainful employment and avoid the “revolving door” characteristic of the lives of so many inmates and former inmates.

The findings also suggest that there is considerable awareness among Central Office personnel and facility personnel regarding these issues. There is also considerable interest in addressing these issues, which they believe have a direct and significant bearing on the overall mission of the Department. Central office and prison staff believe that education is a necessary ingredient to combat recidivism. Moreover, there is a general sense that, while security is the central focus of both the Department and the facilities, it should not be a reason to restrict educational and vocational offerings. Expansion and possible revision of the vocational curriculum are considered appropriate avenues for future consideration.

A modest survey of potential employers of former inmates suggests that explicit policies or hiring procedures do not necessarily adversely affect a former inmate’s chances of obtaining employment. Each person is generally considered on a case-by-case basis. Having specific technical skills needed by the employer and the attitudes necessary to perform one’s work consistently and at a high level were considered to be very important in making decisions to hire former inmates. Thus, potential employers look to the corrections vocational programs to provide inmates with specific marketable skills and attitudes and interpersonal skills needed for quality employment.

Recommendations

The major findings of this project and the recommendations which follow are summarized below. This summary is organized around the nine Best Practices, which served as the analytic framework for the project.

1. Statewide Leadership, Policy, and Direction

Interviews indicated that central office personnel and facility administrators did not clearly understand the roles of central office personnel. In addition, turnover at senior levels within positions directly responsible for educational programming has made it more difficult to initiate, sustain, and follow through with efforts aimed at improving the design and delivery of vocational education within the prisons. There was no explicit and clear philosophical perspective to frame and justify vocational education evident at the state level. Central office staff appeared uncertain about various aspects of vocational programming and procedures. Many indicated this uncertainty was influenced by the political environment and a lack of leadership reflective of constant change in upper-level management.

The findings suggest the need for a comprehensive educational strategy that clarifies goals, missions and roles. For these reasons, it is recommended that MDOC undertake a systematic review and revision of the 1995 Education Action Plan. Subsequent implementation strategy should assist in increasing program standardization, delineation of staff roles, enhance communication, reduce funding disparities, and provide a strategic approach that will enhance effectiveness and efficiency throughout the central office and across facilities.

2. Inter-facility Cooperation and Communication

The findings suggest that several factors affect vocational programming that reflect inter-facility cooperation and communication. Among these issues are varying interpretations of security needs, transfer policies and procedures, and admission standards, lack of curriculum articulation across sites, variations in availability of funding and other resources to support vocational programming, and little or no contact with the larger vocational community.

Prison administrators and teachers indicated concern for a lack of a standardized curriculum and procedure. Many believed that a standardized curriculum would reduce the "down-time" or delay experienced by inmates who are transferred while enrolled in a vocational program. There is also a need to transfer or receive an inmate's file in a quicker, more efficient manner.

It is recommended that MDOC develop and maintain statewide and regional advisory panels, which could assist in improving communication and the flow of information across prison facilities.

3. Partnerships with Local Educational Agencies and Employers

The findings suggest relatively little formal involvement of "outside" agencies and groups in the planning, design, and implementation of MDOC vocational programs. While some programs and individuals have developed informal relationships with some employers, there is no evidence of a systematic, statewide effort in this area.

There is an expressed need among staff to have contact with other educational agencies or organizations that could assist in the development of programs, training of staff and reintegration of inmates into society. Employer groups as well expressed interest and willingness to work together with corrections officials in enhancing their vocational programming. To that end, establishing linkages or networks with various educational and community resources agencies should assist in programming and rehabilitation efforts.

It is recommended that MDOC aggressively foster the development of partnerships among vocational programs with educational agencies and prospective employers. Evidence from programs in other states suggests the need to develop relationships with various educational and community resource agencies that can assist in areas of programming, training and inmate reintegration support. This finding is supported by MDOC's central office. In other states, external agencies are often involved in certification of vocational programs and staff. Thus, the establishment of an advisory committee would enable the MDOC to follow suit.

4. Facility Leadership and Policies Affecting Educational Programs

For the most part, the findings reflect a clear sense among facility administrators and teachers of the overall mission and goals of their vocational programs. In general, there is agreement among facility leaders regarding a vision for vocational education. Facility personnel believe that vocational education is important to the work of their facilities. Operationalizing these beliefs in the form of specific policies, procedures, and funding, however, varied considerably. It is also not apparent that processes are in place for systematically determining the overall effectiveness of facility programs or how well the students understand the process in which they are involved.

It is recommended that the Department encourage each program to develop orientation materials, which can provide to both staff and students a common understanding of program policies, goals, and procedures. Orientation booklets are needed for new students and visitors to learn about what programs are offered in the facility, and the basic skills required for each program. Furthermore, MDOC should

develop processes of continuous program improvement, which can be implemented within each program at each facility, and at the state level as well.

5. Training, Experience, and Professional Development of Education Staff

Credentials of the teachers varied, from on-the-job experience to certification and licensure by the state or accrediting professional association. A large percentage of vocational education staff has been with the Department for many years. Over the next five to 10 years, MDOC will, in all likelihood, be facing substantial vacancies among principals and teachers. In addition, considerable variation exists in teachers' access to and opportunities for professional development.

It is recommended that MDOC develop specific policy guiding the hiring of new personnel that requires certification or formal endorsement by an outside agency. Policies should also be established that increase teachers' access to and participation in professional development. These opportunities should focus on providing them with training in technology, strategies for teaching adult learners, and updating them in their respective vocational areas.

6. Intake and Assessment Procedures

Current intake and assessment procedures are providing principals and teachers with basic information on their potential students. It was not evident, however, that these processes provided specific information on an inmate's career or vocational interests, presence of learning disabilities or learning styles. In addition, the use of individual education plans, which should guide and follow the progress of any given student within the vocational system, was infrequent or nonexistent.

It is recommended that strategies be developed to identify learning disabilities among individuals being placed within the system, and the instructional accommodations necessary to address these disabilities. The use of individual education plans for each inmate should be encouraged in order to identify their needs and interests when placing them within appropriate vocational programs.

7. Program Curricula

The Department has recently taken steps to increase the articulation of vocational program curricula across facilities. Statewide curriculum committees in several areas have been meeting to determine competencies to be included within particular programs. This work has resulted in the production of progress plotters, which provide a means of documenting student progress within a program.

Yet, this study suggests that much work remains to be done in order to achieve more consistent, articulated, and coherent vocational education curricula across facilities. Curriculum committees in all program areas need to be engaged in a process of continuous program improvement, meeting on a regular, continuous, and on-ongoing basis. This effort should insure that program instructors are teaching skills and knowledge relevant to the latest technological trends within their respective areas. These skills and knowledge should be specified in performance-based or competency-based terms.

Education staff within the central office and curriculum committees should align program curricula with labor market trends and the curricular framework provided by the Michigan Career Prep system. This would insure greater continuity among educational providers and the needs of Michigan's workforce. To contribute to the overall effectiveness and quality of its programs, the Department should pursue formal certification of vocational curricula with appropriate educational agencies.

While adult basic education and GED preparation were not a primary consideration of this study, the investigators recommend that academic and vocational curricula be more fully integrated. This would involve teaching or reinforcing basic skills within vocational areas, and making basic skills and GED preparation more contextualized within the world of work.

Finally, the overall content and quality of pre-release programs varies considerably across facilities. The Department needs to encourage a more consistent and coherent curricular practice in this area. The Department should give serious consideration to integrating the concept of cognitive restructuring throughout its curricular and instructional processes.

8. Instructional Delivery System

The teachers who staff the vocational programs for the Department are, for the most part, very experienced in both their occupational area and in teaching. They are knowledgeable practitioners and seasoned teachers. Much of the instructional process used in these programs is individualized and students usually proceed at their own pace. Instruction usually consists of a mixture of didactic and hands-on experiences.

With the exception of a couple of areas, most program teachers make relatively little or no use of current, state-of-the-art technology within their teaching. In some cases, what teachers are using is hopelessly out-of-date and sometimes not even functional. There is a serious need to update instructional technology in all program areas, particularly where up-to-date technology is critical to marketable skills, such as in business technology education.

The Department needs to work toward greater consistency of instructional materials and resources available to all program teachers. Common materials to be used in each of the respective program areas should be specified by the curriculum committees and the Department should insure that all programs are able to obtain and use these materials.

Most of the instruction provided within the observed programs consists of some hands-on experiences for students. Curriculum committees should specify minimal standards for these experiences and insure that students in all programs have adequate access to hands-on learning experiences. To increase the potential that their students will develop marketable skills, teachers within these programs should strive to ground their instruction more fully within current work-based contexts appropriate to their occupational areas.

Finally, the Department should give serious consideration to the use of distance education formats, when appropriate, within both academic and vocational programs, and for the delivery of professional development for educational staff. A number of national examples exist that are successfully implementing distance learning in one or more of these areas and can serve as useful models for the Department.

9. Assessment and Follow-up

Assessment and documentation of student progress and follow-up of student success once they leave the prison system are critical to insuring effectiveness of vocational programs. There is currently considerable variation in standards and procedures used for assessing progress within the vocational programs observed. In addition, completion rates in many programs can only be considered, at best, modest in nature. These disappointing levels of completion are due to multiple factors but current Department policy on transferring inmates is clearly contributing to this problem.

For the most part, programs in all the vocational areas need to be developing and using better, more standardized and uniform systems for assessing, documenting, and

certifying student progress. To help alleviate the problem of transfer, curricula within program areas needs to be more standardized. Processes of communicating information across facilities about student progress need to be improved. Departmental policies need to be reviewed and revised to decrease the effect of transfer of inmates on their ability to complete vocational training. Consideration also needs to be given to increasing the number of allowable programs for each inmate to at least two, with particular emphasis on those nearing their release dates.

Finally, the Department needs to give serious consideration to developing and implementing methods to follow former inmates' success once they are released into the community. Data should be obtained on their success in obtaining gainful employment, retention in any given job, and their efforts at continuing education.

Conclusion

The Michigan Department of Corrections has recently initiated several efforts to address the needs of vocational education within state prison facilities. In addition to the development of an Education Action Plan in 1995, statewide curriculum committees have been created in a number of program areas. Several of these committees have been meeting to develop more systematic and consistent approaches to their respective curricula. Attempts have also been made to update technology in some areas.

Our findings suggest, however, that much work remains to be done with respect to the overall goal of helping inmates develop more marketable skills, to improve the overall effectiveness of vocational programming within the Department. The Department needs to foster a strong and consistent vision for vocational education throughout its facilities. A number of current policies adversely affect vocational programming, in terms of inmate participation, completion of programs, updating technology, materials, and resources, and determining program outcomes. A lack of explicit and formal partnerships with employer groups and educational agencies external to MDOC contributes to problems of communication, cooperation, and currency and standardization of curricula. Progress plotters do exist for many programs but the quality of these plotters and their use varies considerably both across programs and facilities, as do instructional materials and resources available to the program instructors. In addition, the level of hands-on, work-based or contextual learning also varies but, in most cases, is modest at best. Many programs also suffer from out-of-date or nonfunctional technological resources. Finally, few programs have on-going continuous program improvement processes in place or procedures for obtaining information on their students once they leave the prison system. Due to a variety of factors, most vocational programs experience relatively low completion rates.

Summary of Recommendations by Best Practices

Statewide Leadership, Policy, and Direction

- Develop structures and processes to insure stability of statewide leadership related to vocational education.
- Revise and update 1995 Education Plan.
- Clarify roles of education staff in central office.
- Clarify lines of communication between education staff in the central office and facility staff.
- Reduce disparity in funding and other resources among different facilities with similar programs.
- Insure that similar vocational programs all use the same program title.

- Increase the allowable number of vocational programs that inmates can complete to at least two, with particular emphasis on those nearing their release dates.
- Develop specific policies and procedures to significantly reduce the effect of transfer of inmates enrolled in vocational programs.

Interfacility Cooperation and Communication

- Improve process for communicating information about inmates enrolled in vocational programs transferring from one facility to another.
- Develop a statewide advisory committee for vocational education, composed of representatives from the Department of Education, Chamber of Commerce or Jobs Commission, community colleges, higher education, central office and facility administrators, principals, and vocational teachers from each program.

Partnerships with Local Education Agencies and Employers

- Encourage development of advisory committees at regional levels, consisting of individuals from local Workforce Development Boards, area community colleges, regional and facility administrators, principals, and vocational teachers from each program.
- Explore formal certification of vocational curricula by local community colleges or skill centers associated with the ISDs.

Facility Leadership and Policies Affecting Educational Programs

- Develop orientation booklets for academic and vocational programs available at each site, modeled after those used at Fox Lake Correctional Facility and other sites.
- Develop processes and procedures for continuous program improvement and implement these processes for each of the vocational programs being offered within the institution.

Training, Experience, and Professional Development of Education Staff

- Require certification or formal endorsement of all vocational teachers hired in the future.
- Increase resources for and access to professional development for vocational education teachers.
- Encourage staff development in the area of teaching strategies for adults.

Intake and Assessment Procedures

- Specify basic skills requirements for each vocational program offered in competency terms, rather than GED completion, and develop standardized methods for assessing these requirements.
- Develop strategies to identify presence of learning disabilities among individuals being placed within the system.
- Encourage development and use of individual education plans for each inmate participating in vocational education.

Program Curricula

- Make active use of statewide curriculum committees for each of the vocational areas offered.
- Work toward statewide, competency-based curricula, which specify explicit minimal performances in all vocational programs.

- Align the curricula in each of the vocational programs with the Michigan Career Prep system and current labor market projections.
- Require all vocational education curricula to be certified by an appropriate educational agency external to the Department of Corrections.

Instructional Delivery System

- Update instructional technology in all vocational areas, with priority on those areas where up-to-date technology is critical to the development of marketable skills.
- Develop a common set of instructional materials and resources, such as texts, videos, CDs, software, and cassette tapes, from which vocational teachers can select for use in their respective programs.
- Insure that all vocational programs utilize a minimum of hands-on instruction within each program. The specific amount will vary from program to program and should be determined by teachers within these given areas.

Assessment and Follow-up

- Develop uniform standards, which reflect both theory and performance, for measuring and certifying satisfactory completion of vocational programs.
- Develop and implement processes, based on available national models, for following former inmates in terms of their employability and retention in employment.

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The vocational education sector has changed considerably over the last fifteen years. The increased involvement of employers in designing competency-based programs, the reconfiguration of the list of available programs, and the major investments made in buildings and material resources at vocational education centres are some examples of the changes made. They were implemented to offer a better response to the needs of the labour market and to prepare a qualified work force able to find and keep employment in a constantly-evolving working environment. Given this context, it is important to ens