

# MAKING THE GRADE:

## Professionalizing the 21st Century Workforce Through Higher Education Partnerships

Ten years ago, did you use e-mail? If you had a cell phone, was it bigger than today's palm pilots? Did 911 symbolize anything beyond an emergency phone number? In the course of human events, a decade may be a mere "blip" on the radar screen. But the world has changed dramatically in that short period of time, just as it will again in the upcoming decades of the 21st century. Change has become an insatiable feature of our indeterminate future. The only question is whether we will be any better prepared to address its implications than we have been in the past.

### Education: Today and Tomorrow

In terms of envisioning the future and strategizing to meet its challenges, Americans have historically been strong advocates of education. From socializing newly arriving immigrants to stimulating widely admired inventions, the United States has traditionally relied on the educational process. Long heralded as the key to upward mobility in American society, education has become the "holy grail" of the nation's unquenchable appetite for occupational progression. No one wants to be left behind. As evidence, simply look at the statistics.

Ten years ago, only 15 percent of the U.S. population held a bachelor's degree or above.<sup>2</sup> Today, that figure has increased to 25 percent<sup>3</sup> and is continuing to escalate. If similar advancements are forthcoming in the next decade, more than one out of three U.S. residents will have postsecondary educational credentials by 2014. Having invested the time, effort and resources necessary to obtain a college degree, it is, on the one hand, unlikely that college graduates would be inclined to consider employment in positions that require no more than a high school diploma or GED.

But on the other hand, the mere fact that college degree holders are escalating in number somewhat diminishes the value of the degree itself. When college-educated personnel were in shorter supply, they were held in higher esteem. Like anything else that is subject to the laws of supply and demand, now that postsecondary education is far more common in the employment marketplace, its worth is declining. As a result of "degree inflation," two years of college today is estimated to have roughly the same market value as did a high school diploma 30 or 40 years ago.<sup>4</sup> In fact, an observation from almost 40 years ago rings no less true today: "No longer is higher education viewed ... as a means for getting to the top; it has now become insurance against being on the bottom."<sup>5</sup>

### Higher Education: How Much Is Too Much?

The escalating level of educational attainment among the U.S. population is, in and of itself, not adequate justification for routinely upgrad-

**ed-u-ca-tion** (ej'e-ka'shen) **n.** 1. The action or process of educating or of being educated. 2. The knowledge and development resulting from an educational process. 3. The field of study that deals mainly with methods of teaching and learning in schools.<sup>1</sup>

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ing the educational requirements of entry-level jobs. To the contrary, there are some positions for which a high school diploma is more than sufficient. For example, the following scenario, clearly illustrates the potential repercussions of hiring those who are overqualified for the job:

“The supervisor of plant security set, as hiring criteria, a high school education and three years of police or plant protection experience as minimal requirements for applicants. ... When these people began their jobs, which consisted simply of checking badges on the way in and lunch pails on the way out, boredom, apathy and lack of motivation soon characterized their performance. This resulted in a high rate of turnover. When the problem was evaluated, ... those with police or security experience were considered overqualified. Rather than experienced workers, applicants with ... lower education and job expectations were hired. ... Their performance was found to be much superior, and turnover, absenteeism and tardiness rates were cut to a minimum. Why? For these workers, a new uniform, a badge and some power were important.”<sup>6</sup>

The challenge for corrections is, therefore, not as simple as advocating increasingly higher educational criteria for entry-level employment. Rather, it embraces much more comprehensive issues related to projecting future staffing needs, restructuring and enriching existing jobs, targeting appropriate applicants and developing career ladders, none of which can be accomplished effectively in isolation. Thus, it also involves exploring avenues for promoting mutual objectives through collaborative partnerships with higher education.

## Addressing Mutual Interests: Collaborative Partnerships

In any collaborative partnership, both parties share mutual interests, and each contributes something of value to the interactive relationship. In that regard, corrections and higher education share a common interest in preparing the workforce to meet 21st century challenges, and each can benefit from drawing upon resources that the other has to offer. But each also has some homework to do before entering into such a collaborative relationship in order to make it more beneficial to the long-term interests of both.

Each party, for instance, has to work at narrowing the unmistakable gap that has emerged between practitioners and academicians.<sup>7</sup> Inasmuch as the mission of two-year community colleges is more directly targeted toward serving specific occupational needs of the immediate area, they are potentially more likely than four-year schools to be receptive to bridging this gap by building an interactive partnership with corrections.<sup>8</sup>

One step in that direction might be through membership on a college advisory committee, whereby corrections is represented among criminal justice practitioners providing guidance and program development direction to the institution of higher education. Another could be working together to develop meaningful internships, through which students obtain an opportunity to apply their learning in the “real world,” (and corrections, in turn, has an opportunity to screen and recruit talented college graduates). But since this article is primarily directed toward a practitioner audience, the remainder will focus on what the correctional community can do to take bet-

ter advantage of the resources available in the academic community.

## Proactive Planning: Knowledge Is Power

Virtually every proactive correctional administrator realizes that the optimal time to begin planning for release is the first day that an inmate enters the facility.<sup>9</sup> Just as it is too late for release planning when the inmate is about to walk out the gate, it is likewise too late for initiating staff replacement strategies by the time that drastic employee shortages are already driving up overtime costs.

The American Correctional Association’s Building a Correctional Workforce for the 21st Century initiative is in the process of projecting future correctional staffing needs throughout the country.<sup>10</sup> Similar techniques can also be used on a smaller scale by individual organizations. For example, based on initial dates of hire, it is a relatively simple mathematical formula to project likely retirement dates. In fact, when the Federal Bureau of Prisons conducted this exercise several years ago, it realized that a sizeable percentage of its mid- and upper-level administrators could be expected to retire within a brief time span in the relatively near future. As a result, it promptly embarked on an aggressive effort to identify, develop, mentor and train subsequent leaders to take their places. More recently, the National Institute of Corrections has projected that nearly 60 percent of executive-level personnel in local and state correctional agencies throughout the country are eligible to retire in the next four years.<sup>11</sup>

Regardless of whether future employment deficits are projected among entry-level officers or upper-level executives, the point is that with knowledge comes power. Agencies that are most keenly aware of their upcoming staffing needs are also most knowledgeably empowered to address them proactively — before such shortages create panic and affect performance.

## From Chain of Command To Collaborative Partnerships

Once future employment demands are determined, the question then becomes how best to accommodate them. Based on the title of this article, one might assume that the obvious answer is through higher education. But as is apparent from the previous plant security illustration, college education is not necessarily appropriate for every position. In that regard, corrections faces serious overall organizational development issues, along with such specific challenges as job restructuring and enrichment.

Much like other public services, correctional agencies adopted the paramilitary organizational structure that was congruent with 20th century industrialization, urbanization and bureaucratization. Within this structure, operational practices reflect the classical model of organizations: top-down communications, pyramid-shaped structures, rank-based authority. This command-and-control approach fit well with 20th century demands for efficiency, objectivity and standardization. It was also consistent with the work-related values of “traditionalist” employees who staffed correctional facilities at the time: “Unlike the generations to follow, they were will-

ing to take orders. Knew their place in the chain-of-command. Respected their superior officers. Were accustomed to deferring the pursuit of personal autonomy to the power of institutional authority.”<sup>12</sup>

But things have changed dramatically in the 21st century, in large part as a result of the changing nature of the workforce. With the current workforce composed of generations ranging from the post-World War II “baby boomers” to “gen-xers,” and now even “millennials,”<sup>13</sup> today’s employees embrace values that not only differ from one another, but also may differ radically from the organizational culture of corrections. In essence, “Traditionalists are classified as coming of age in a ‘chain of command’ environment, whereas for boomers it was ‘change of command,’ for x-ers, ‘self-command,’ and for millennials ‘don’t command–collaborate!’”<sup>14</sup>

Just as two co-workers may find that they are incompatible, an entire cohort of employees may feel equally uncomfortable within the cultural parameters of the correctional work environment. Raised in a society quite unlike their more traditionalist predecessors, today’s generations are less willing to follow orders without question. They are also less likely to accept decisions in which they did not participate, more likely to ask “why?” and more likely to leave jobs that are unfulfilling to them. In fact, many are more likely to leave because of lack of satisfaction than lack of compensation.<sup>15</sup>

They also are more likely to have at least some college education. And if there is one thing that higher education is notable for encouraging, it is critical thinking. But critical thinking undermines paramilitary discipline.<sup>16</sup> Thus, as long as the paramilitary model remains the dominant organizational structure, college-educated officers are unlikely to embrace correctional work with great enthusiasm. Moreover, no student wants to work hard for a four-year degree, only to enter a job that requires no more than a high school diploma.

## Developing Response Strategies: One Size Does Not Fit All

Clearly, if corrections is to become serious about attracting college graduates and further professionalizing the workforce, it is not as simple as setting up a booth on campus during “career day” or speaking to academic clubs about job security and retirement benefits. Rather, it first and most fundamentally requires some “homework” on the part of correctional agencies in terms of restructuring, enlarging and enriching the job itself.<sup>17</sup> Since there is no “one job” of a correctional officer, this requires analyzing the officer’s innumerable job tasks and determining which merit higher educational preparation. As a no-less-notable figure than researcher Hans Toch pointed out more than 25 years ago: “For the corrections officer assigned to the tower, the job is a residue of the dark ages. He requires 20/20 vision, ... a high threshold for boredom, and a basement position in Maslow’s hierarchy.”<sup>18</sup>

Requiring college credentials for that position would no doubt result in much the same situation as the plant security supervisor encountered in the earlier example. Despite the fact that operational work in corrections spans a wide continuum ranging from staffing perimeter towers to counseling despondent inmates, they are all combined into one job with one educational requirement. But that is not how it has been done as other occupations professionalized their workforce.

## Jobs can be enriched, enlarged and upgraded by encouraging:

- More “elbowroom” — giving employees a sense that they control their own destiny, (but not so much elbowroom that they do not know what to do next).
- Chances to learn on the job — and keep on learning.
- Variety on the job — to avoid boredom and fatigue.
- Teamwork — counting on co-workers for help and respect.
- A sense that one’s work is meaningful — and contributes to social welfare.
- A desirable future — a job that allows for personal growth.

Paraphrased from: Emery, F. and M. Emery. 1974. *Participative design: Work and community life*. In *Democracy at work*, eds. F. Emery and E. Thorsund, 147. Leiden, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.

Lawyers now have paralegals. Dentists have dental hygienists. Teachers have teaching assistants. Police have public service aides. Radiologists have X-ray technicians. In fact, the health care field has developed an impressive array of “allied” occupations in order to more efficiently maximize the resources of staff with higher levels of education, skill and experience, thereby reserving them for higher-order tasks. In this way, increasing levels of education are not only organizationally justified, but also personally rewarded.

In contrast, corrections is still in the “one-size-fits-all” mind-set in terms of the work of entry-level officers. Such fundamental tasks as conducting counts, patrolling perimeter fences and controlling gates are not distinguished from the types of interpersonal challenges that truly separate “guards” from “correctional officers.” Yet it is these challenges that represent the type of work requiring the analytical insights, interpersonal skills and critical thinking that are primarily developed through advanced education.

## Job Restructuring: Breaking Down Bureaucracy

Certainly, there are components of a correctional officer’s job that might justify a four-year degree. Likewise, there are other aspects of the job that might demand no more than a two-year associate’s degree. And still others would be most suitable for, and perhaps best performed by, high school graduates. The initial challenge, therefore, is to differentiate officer tasks and determine the level of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that they require. (Moreover, such job restructuring need not be limited to sworn personnel. Other units, such as classification, counseling, case management,

prerelease, etc., while substantially smaller in numbers, might equally benefit from job differentiation and redesign.)

Through the availability of a resulting career ladder, those with advancement ambitions and educational motivation would have a clearly defined path to upward mobility. No one would need to feel “locked into” a dead-end job, with promotion through the supervisory ranks the only potential for growth or upward mobility. At the same time, those who are satisfied with the entry-level work they are performing and are not attracted to occupational or educational advancements would likewise have a secure place to fit within the organization.

Creating meaningful career development options is not, however, as simple as breaking down existing job tasks according to the KSAs they require. It also calls for enlarging and enriching those college-level positions that emerge higher on the career ladder. Jails and prisons that are practicing direct supervision and unit management concepts already have taken steps in this direction. They have begun decentralizing bureaucratic structures, pushing authority farther down the chain of command, opening two-way lines of communication and trusting lower-ranking employees with expanded decision-making.<sup>19</sup> (See insert box for additional job enrichment ideas.)

Ultimately, to the extent that such job redesign identifies progressive career steps, integrates higher education and decentralizes organizational decision-making, there are potential benefits for everyone involved. Officers would obtain the advantages of expanded career choices, enhanced educational recognition and greater likelihood that the work they do will more closely match their needs, capabilities and credentials. Organizations would gain more efficient, productive and cost-effective operational practices, as well as the higher morale that could be expected to emerge as staff are assigned according to their interests and capabilities, and granted commensurate trust and responsibility. But perhaps most importantly, significant progress would be made toward professionalizing the correctional workforce.

Nevertheless, “progress” is not synonymous with “success,” and in that regard, there is still a long way to go: Professionalism cannot be issued like a uniform, provided like a training program, awarded like a promotion, or decreed like a policy. It cannot be mandated, forced or shouted into practice. It is not something with which to comply, but rather, to be committed to. It is a calling rather than a job. It is learning rather than accruing educational credentials.<sup>20</sup>

## Attracting the Best And the Brightest

Correctional agencies that have done their career development homework are subsequently in a significantly better position to maximize the benefits of a collaborative partnership with educational institutions. In fact, that partnership should actually begin at the secondary school level. Corrections would be well-advised to work with high schools in the surrounding community to establish a career path that would attract graduates into entry-level work (e.g., in a supportive, nonsworn capacity or as the first step on the sworn career ladder), perhaps combined with a co-op arrangement where

by students obtain job experience and academic studies concurrently.<sup>21</sup>

Unlike more traditional recruitment approaches, the key here is not to try to “sell” potential candidates on job security, health benefits or pension plans, but rather, to recruit “outside the box.” That includes familiarizing them with the wide-ranging opportunities available in corrections, particularly for those who are motivated to continue their educational advancement (but, given career path options, even for those who are not). Every high school graduate will not pursue higher education, just as every paralegal does not intend to become a lawyer, and every teaching assistant does not aspire to instruct. However, just being aware that higher education is rewarded through alternative career paths can do much to attract bright students lacking funds for college tuition yet brimming with future potential.<sup>22</sup> (For such applicants, it would be especially attractive if the agency offers a tuition reimbursement plan for employees.)

But well beyond any such extrinsic benefits, the best recruiting tool that corrections has is one that actually involves no financial resources. That is, quite simply — its reputation. Look no further than the FBI, where the recruiting office is flooded with thousands of applications for every opening. Nevertheless, it is a little-known fact that the FBI itself once suffered from a negative reputation and recruiting difficulties in the years before educational requirements were established and serious efforts were undertaken to enhance its image.

In essence, the most powerful “outside the box” recruitment advantage that any agency enjoys is simply being known as a great place to work: A place where employees are treated fairly and valued for their contributions, where higher education and hard work are rewarded, where bureaucratic regulation has been replaced by collaborative participation, where relationships between management and workers are characterized by mutual trust and respect, where only the best will fit.

## Higher Education And Correctional Partnerships

Although efforts to encourage correctional careers are most proactively initiated among the high school population, that does not preclude developing more aggressive partnerships at the postsecondary level. There are any number of avenues of mutual interest that such partnerships could explore, just a few of which are outlined below:

***Internships and Co-operative Education.*** With few exceptions, the typical full-time college student is often indecisive about career choices, and even those who firmly believe they are committed to becoming lawyers, criminal profilers or forensic scientists often find the stringent educational demands and graduate admission criteria beyond their reach. Internships and co-ops, therefore, become mechanisms through which they can gain extended job insights and explore realistic career alternatives. At the same time, the host agency obtains a unique opportunity to observe students on a firsthand basis in the work environment. Essentially, each gets to become more intimately acquainted with the strengths and weaknesses of the other. This creates an ideal opportunity for corrections to attract well-qualified appli-

cants, while at the same time provide indecisive college graduates with a viable career option, but again, only to the extent that the agency presents itself as a place where college graduates would want to work and would find their educational credentials rewarded.

**Entry-Level Training.** For far too long, criminal justice has maintained an artificially inflated distance between training and education. Yet education is only meaningful when applied to the real world, and training is only effective when based on sound educational concepts. The two are closely intertwined, and each would do well to capitalize upon the other. One way to promote this would be to establish a partnership with a local institution of higher education to provide basic training, and potentially, advanced in-service training as well. Through such a partnership, the college could incorporate pre-service training requirements into its degree program, so that when students graduate, they would have both an academic degree and the training credentials required for employment.<sup>23</sup> In fact, such an arrangement would substantially reduce training costs since applicants would come into correctional employment with all (or at least most) of their training requirements fulfilled through college coursework, especially if the correctional agency is able to provide trainers to the college for the more technical, “hands-on” components of the curriculum. It would also enable the agency to upgrade entry-level training requirements at little (if any) expense, inasmuch as students would not be on the payroll until their studies were completed.

**Promotional Preparation.** Similarly, correctional agencies could look to their local university to assist with the development of promotional exams, along with related college-level course work that could be established as a prerequisite for promotional application. In this regard, it makes little sense to develop career ladders based on academic credentials for officers without also addressing the higher-educational requirements for supervisory, management and administrative ranks. By requiring the successful completion of specified college course work for promotional consideration, agencies can send a clear message about the value of higher education, as well as ensure that candidates have a foundation of knowledge in such contemporary practices as participatory management, total quality management, situational leadership, transactional leadership and similar visionary concepts. Again, this is a win-win situation for all stakeholders in the partnership — colleges increase their enrollments, candidates improve their capabilities (as well as get academic credits), and corrections enhances its professional image and management capabilities.

**Certification Development.** ACA has established a national process for certifying correctional officers, supervisors, managers and executives through its Correctional Certification Program. While the details involved are beyond the scope of this article, it is noteworthy that correctional certification presents a number of opportunities to develop collaborative partnerships with higher education. For example, varying amounts of postsecondary education are required to apply for certification as a correctional supervisor (two-year degree), manager (two-year degree) or executive (four-year degree). Thus, institutions of higher education could be encouraged to develop course work that would not only qualify candidates to take the certification examination, but also provide them with the substantive knowledge to enhance their potential for

successfully passing. Additionally, to retain certification status, certain continuing education recertification requirements are mandated at each level, which can be met through college-based education and training. Here again, corrections has a golden opportunity to team up with higher education in pursuit of mutual goals.

## Into the 21st Century: Where Will Your Agency Be?

Whatever form it takes, higher education is an essential ingredient in the movement toward professionalizing the 21st century workforce. Moreover, if corrections does not take advantage of this resource, educational institutions can be expected to turn their attention to other disciplines where the academic community is more enthusiastically embraced. But no occupation has ever become a profession without the intimate participation of higher education. Corrections will not be the first exception.

Ten years from now, where will your agency be on the road to professionalism? Will it have risen above the paramilitary, command-and-control model of management? Will your employees reflect educational credentials that are commensurate with the general population? Will your local secondary and postsecondary schools be well-aware of the wide-ranging employment market in your facilities? Will they be working in a collaborative partnership with you to provide entry-level training, attract well-qualified applicants, prepare candidates for certification, groom personnel for promotion, and help certified employees achieve recertification? Will you have helped to bridge the gap between theory and practice?

If so, your agency has a good chance of “making the grade” in the 21st century. If not, do not count on high-tech gadgetry to get you there. E-mails, cell phones and palm pilots only enable us to communicate the status quo more efficiently. They do nothing to ensure that we will compete in the future more effectively.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition. 2003. Springfield, Mass.: Merriam Webster.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics reflect 1994 census data, available at the U.S. Census Bureau Web site, [www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/cps94data/tab-14.pdf](http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/cps94data/tab-14.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Statistics reflect 2000 census data, available at the U.S. Census Bureau Web site, <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFPeople?>

<sup>4</sup> Baro, A.L. and D. Burlingame. 1999. Law enforcement and higher education: Is there an impasse? *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*. Spring, 1999:60.

<sup>5</sup> Stinchcomb, J.D. 1966. The community college and its impact. *The Police Chief*, August, 1966:30.

<sup>6</sup> Hersey, P., K.H. Blanchard and D.E. Johnson. 1996. *Management of organizational behavior: Utilizing human resources, seventh edition*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

<sup>7</sup> Baro, A.L. and D. Burlingame. 1999.

<sup>8</sup> However, if the need is for program evaluation or other types of studies, four-year colleges and universities would be the more likely

resources, since empirical research fits more directly with their missions.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Schiro, D. 2000. Correcting corrections: Missouri's parallel universe. *Sentencing and corrections: Issues for the 21st century*, 1-7. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice.

<sup>10</sup> See "Committee Report," *Human Resources InfoLink* (a publication of the American Correctional Association's Building a Correctional Workforce for the 21st Century project, January, 2004:1-2.)

<sup>11</sup> Corrections workforce and management/leadership development. 2003. Unpublished briefing to the National Institute of Corrections Advisory Board, 23 June in Houston.

<sup>12</sup> Stinchcomb, J.B. 2004. Police stress: Could organizational culture be the culprit? *Law Enforcement Executive Forum* 4(3)151-163.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Karp, H., C. Fuller and S. Danilo. 2002. Bridging the boomer-xer gap: Creating authentic teams for high performance at work. Palo Alto, Calif.: Davies-Black Publishing; and Lancaster, L.C. and D. Stillman. 2002. *When generations collide: Who they are. Why they clash. How to solve the generational puzzle at work*. New York: Harper Collins.

<sup>14</sup> Lancaster, L.C. and D. Stillman. 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Additionally, fields such as nursing and social work have traditionally not been well-compensated, yet have maintained rigorous educational requirements. See Stinchcomb, J.B. and V.B. Fox. 1999. *Introduction to corrections*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

<sup>16</sup> Baro, A.L. and D. Burlingame. 1999.

<sup>17</sup> See Stojkovic, S., D. Kalinich and J. Klofas. 2003. *Job design in criminal justice organizations: Administration and management*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth.

<sup>18</sup> Toch, H. 1978. Is a 'correction officer' always a 'screw'? *Criminal Justice Review*, 3(1978):20. See also Toch, H. and J.D. Grant, *Reforming human services: Change through participation*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage.

<sup>19</sup> See Parrish, D.M. 2000. The evolution of direct supervision in the design and operation of jails. *Corrections Today*, 65(6):84-87,127; Kerle, K. 1999. Jails of the future and enriched job design. In Stojkovic, Kalinich and Klofas. 2003. 142-143; and Levinson, R.B. 1999. *Unit management in prisons and jails*. Lanham, Md.: American Correctional Association.

<sup>20</sup> Paraphrased from Stinchcomb, J.B. 2000. Developing correctional officer professionalism: A work in progress. *Corrections Compendium*, 25(5):4,18.

<sup>21</sup> Under a co-op arrangement, jobs are divided so that college students can attend classes on a part-time basis while they also work part time.

<sup>22</sup> Additionally, it is noteworthy that current military veterans can obtain college tuition under the GI Bill.

<sup>23</sup> For more details, see Stinchcomb, J.B. 1999. Jails and academe: A partnership made on Wall Street. *American Jails*, 23(2):85-86.

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