

## Developing Student Interest In Corrections:

### A Role for Universities And Correctional Organizations

*By Calvin R. Edwards*

College students in criminal justice programs tend to have more exposure to careers in law enforcement than corrections and typically seek to major in areas associated with traditional law enforcement. The visibility of police-oriented TV programs and crime scene investigation drama series generally provides a positive appeal to potential criminal justice students. However, the limited visual media exposure of corrections typically does not provide a similar appeal.

Policing also is more visible than corrections in communities. In addition to the traditional proximity of police stations and police patrols in communities, the practice of community policing has brought police officers closer to residents and has served to enhance a more positive law enforcement image with citizens. Recent technology has improved the accuracy of linking evidence to offenders and accordingly heightened the use of forensic investigations. Corrections has not enjoyed the community familiarity of policing nor the notoriety of forensic criminal investigations. By design, correctional institutions are secure and inaccessible to community residents or intruders. This contributes to a more remote relationship with citizens and potential students.

The field of corrections is often misunderstood and perceived by students as an occupation that merely guards

inmates. Students typically are unaware of the various occupations associated with prison operations and correctional organizations, generally viewing correctional officers as poorly trained and less educated than other law enforcement professionals. Students often appear to believe that most inmates are dangerous and, therefore, show a reluctance to work in an environment that confines offenders. They often see little value in majoring in corrections because of this lack of understanding and recognition of general inmate characteristics and the broad activities associated with the operations of correctional systems. Therefore, the field of law enforcement, rather than corrections, seems to be much more attractive to criminal justice students.

It is important for colleges and universities to offer opportunities for criminal justice students to concentrate in corrections because the corrections field must continue to attract well-educated employees with the potential to advance the field in every occupational area. For example, innovations are needed in the areas of security, case management, counseling, education, recreation, medical services, food services, leisure-time activities, community relations and correctional administration.

College students represent the future of correctional innovation and leadership. The sustained quality of the corrections field is dependent on producing highly qualified and trained correctional practitioners. Therefore, criminal justice degree programs should play a role in developing student interest in corrections. Criminal justice faculty in colleges and universities can help facilitate the enlightenment of students.

## Role of Universities

Criminal justice degree programs with numerous areas of concentration that include corrections are more successful in motivating students to choose correctional career paths. A college's criminal justice department with several faculty members who have significant background experience and expertise in corrections contributes to debunking the myths and misinformation about the corrections field. Faculty should create an academic concentration that provides a knowledge base to sufficiently ground students in the corrections field. The curriculum should include the following components.

**General Introduction.** It is important for the introductory corrections course to provide initial information that depicts the progressive movement of the field and offers information on the diverse occupations inside correctional institutions, which is essential to understanding the mission and responsibilities of correctional departments. Field trips to correctional facilities, if practical, should be required as a part of the introductory course, providing students the opportunity to personally observe the environment and gain more insight into corrections.

**Safety and Security.** In addition to the introductory course, the curriculum should address safety and security issues in correctional institutions. Students need to learn that the courts are responsible for issuing punishment to offenders for law violations, that corrections personnel are responsible for confining them as ordered by the courts, and that the responsibility for prison security rests with the correctional departments. The curriculum also should address:

- The necessity of security for the safety of staff and inmates as well as citizens in the community;
- The role of intelligence gathering, investigation and collaboration between corrections and law enforcement agencies;
- The use of technology in prison operations;
- Critical issues and challenges regarding custody and security in prisons; and
- Modern security techniques.

Study should also include objective classification schemes, such as the relationship of classification systems and safety and security, and inmate behavior and policies of discipline.

**Behavioral Change.** Additional emphasis on the idea of behavioral change for offenders should include a study of activities associated with successful offender reentry and the effectiveness of behavioral science theories and correctional programs as related to offender rehabilitation and reentry.

The role of correctional treatment professions should also be studied to help students understand how the roles of such professions are linked to programmatic activities associated with inmate behavioral change. Specific treatment modalities should be analyzed, especially in the areas of maladaptive behavior and drug treatment in correctional facilities. Research methods that show relationships between certain treatment programs and recidivism rates should also be introduced to students. And correctional programs should be examined along with related data to determine the effectiveness of desired outcomes. For example, the relationship between inmates' completion of secondary education and their acquisition of employment upon release is an area for examination, as is their completion of vocational training and acquisition of employment upon release. The relationships of correctional programs aimed at changing maladaptive behaviors with the reduction in inmate misconduct also should be analyzed.

**Administration.** Correctional administration is another area that must be addressed in the curriculum. Theories of leadership, administration, motivation and organizational behavior are important in preparing future correctional leaders. Budget and personnel practices are also important in a curriculum associated with correctional administration. The role of the warden and other senior-level administrative staff inside the prison must be studied, as well as issues of ethics and professional standards of conduct. In addition, the quality management of correctional institutions must be highlighted as an integral part of the criminal justice system in the United States.

**Occupation Diversity.** It is also important for students to learn about specific job responsibilities among the different occupations working in prisons. This includes the relationship of these jobs with the lawful confinement of inmates and the mission and responsibilities of corrections in the context of the jobs.

## Role of Correctional Organizations

Correctional organizations and practitioners should be stakeholders in making corrections attractive as an occupational field for criminal justice students. The role of corrections in the criminal justice system must be accentuated, and the professional and societal expectations of corrections must be achieved. This means not simply confining inmates for established periods of time but also impacting their behavioral change for eventual release into the community. This concurrent challenge should be ever-present in all correctional organizations.

The role of  
corrections in the criminal  
justice system must be  
accentuated, and the  
professional and societal expectations  
of corrections must be achieved.

The opportunity to change human behavior should be a dominant theme in the corrections field. The idea of boldly focusing on engaging offenders in effective programs that lead toward behavioral change reinvigorates the field and excites the imagination of students who are eager to make contributions in criminal justice and society.

Correctional organizations and practitioners should include rehabilitation as a goal and articulate specific initiatives that provide pathways for the rehabilitation of offenders. Correctional administrators should not fear critics of rehabilitation or de-emphasize organizational efforts but, rather, seek to find new and improved methods of changing counterproductive behavior. As a result, students will embrace the potential of corrections as a future career field.

It is important for correctional administrators to always establish an evaluation component to correctional programs associated with behavioral change, deriving empirical data that are made available to justify sustaining or discontinuing programs. It is also important for correctional organizations to routinely publish findings associated with successful outcomes to promote opportunities for others to engage in identified best practices. This information should be routinely published in professional journals to promote academic learning, heightening the visibility of the progressiveness of corrections and influencing others, including students, to participate in this occupation.

Students majoring in corrections should have made available to them a variety of internships designed to provide them with a substantive learning experience. The internships should be broad enough to accommodate the career interest of students, identifying various occupations both inside prisons and in community corrections. An evaluation criterion must be established for assessing the performance of students, with close collaboration between the university faculty and correctional agency staff.

Collaboration between correctional organizations and universities should occur not only to establish internships but also to coordinate job placements, workshops, conferences, student tours and guest lectures. Specifically, good working relationships between correctional organizations and university criminal justice departments can improve the visibility of corrections at universities and help to develop student interest in the corrections field.

It is important for correctional organizations to conduct workshops periodically to discuss and debate issues critical to the mission of corrections, with experts in the corrections field leading and participating in the discussions and debate. Personnel from other criminal justice agencies should be invited to participate along with the correctional agency staff. And students also should be invited to observe and participate. This type of activity can expand the critical thinking of correctional agency personnel and expose them to new ideas that can lead toward progress. Students can benefit from this kind of exposure and learning experience.

Correctional organizations also should proactively interact with the media to establish media visibility, which can provide a more balanced perception of corrections by citizens and college students. Correctional leaders should meet periodically with local media representatives and brief them on general correctional issues and local institutional operations, reinforcing the mission of the institution to ensure adequate understanding by the media. An accurate depiction of the correctional facility can serve to debunk many of the negative myths associated with corrections.

The involvement of corrections personnel with their alma mater is important in the promotion of corrections at universities. Alumni can assist in the promotion of corrections by serving as role models and mentors for students interested in criminal justice. Further, alumni can help convey the accurate role of corrections by volunteering to serve on university criminal justice advisory boards, represent correctional agencies at university-sponsored job fairs and participate in other activities associated with promoting corrections. Involved corrections alumni can help students become more enlightened about the field of corrections.

Positive community relations also can be helpful for providing balanced information about corrections. Typically, correctional organizations experience more visible adversarial than supportive activity. They should not allow the negative visibility provided by adversaries to overshadow its positive initiatives. Correctional leaders should develop closer professional relationships with local agencies and organizations to facilitate receiving community feedback about the correctional institution. These agencies and organizations can become knowledgeable of local correctional operations and issues through close interaction with the institution leadership, helping provide correct and balanced information to the community. University students can have a better opportunity to assess the activities associated with a correctional operation when more than one perspective is conveyed.

## **Criminal justice faculty must develop a relevant curriculum for students concentrating in corrections — one that presents a modern, professional perspective of the field.**

### **Summary**

Both the universities and correctional organizations can play a vital role in generating student interest in corrections. Criminal justice faculty must develop a relevant curriculum for students concentrating in corrections — one that presents a modern, professional perspective of the field. At the same time, a correctional facility's organizational focus will challenge the curiosity of students and generate a heightened interest in corrections.

Through the effective implementation of specific programs, both universities and correctional organizations can influence the career interest of students and kindle a desire to enter the field of corrections.

---

*Calvin R. Edwards, D.P.A., is associate professor and chair of the Department of Justice, Law and Public Safety Studies at Lewis University in Romeoville, Ill., and a retired assistant director for the Federal Bureau of Prisons.*