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To Zoom or not to Zoom:

The use of technology to further educational goals in the correctional setting during a pandemic and beyond

BY KIMBERLY COLLICA-COX, PH.D.

As COVID rates within correctional institutions soared, correctional administrators were tasked with not only trying to protect the health of their incarcerated population but attempting to simultaneously address their programmatic needs. Correctional-based programming faced many challenges — if non-essential staff, such as educators, were prohibited from providing in-person services during this time, how could educational programming continue? While most colleges, universities and public schools rapidly switched to online platforms, most correctional institutions lacked both the technological infrastructure and, based on

security concerns, the willingness to use Internet-based technology.¹ Despite the problems incurred by necessary lockdowns, the Westchester County Department of Correction (WCDOC), New York’s second largest county jail, located 20 miles north of Manhattan, employed innovative policies to maintain the integrity of educational programming by leveraging the use of technology. This article profiles two specific programs that continued successfully during the pandemic by employing technology-based platforms and a strategic change in pedagogy — first, Pace University’s Inside-Out Program, a program where Pace University students

take a college course alongside the incarcerated at the jail and second, the Parenting, Prison & Pups (PPP) program, an evidence-based parenting program provided to incarcerated women integrated with the use of animal assisted therapy (AAT). Their success implies modified pedagogies can be employed through internet-based services successfully and safely if correctional staff are open to its implementation and willing to work collaboratively with outside program providers.

Initial response to COVID-19 in New York

On March 7, 2020, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo declared a disaster emergency in New York as a result of COVID-related deaths, which at the height of the pandemic, caused roughly 800 New York deaths per day². High rates in the general population inevitably posed larger problems for correctional institutions, where social distancing was problematic, especially in the jail setting.³ Dealing with a transient population and the constant influx of new admissions, jail administrators faced significant challenges during this time — how could they balance protecting the residents' physical health while maintaining educational services during quarantine lockdown?⁴ During this time, the WCDOC was not only able to maintain significantly low COVID-19 infection rates but through the implementation of technology, was subsequently able to maintain a majority of its programmatic services. As rates fluctuated, policies changed rapidly regarding staff's ability to work onsite. For program staff, changes in pedagogical strategies needed to be adopted quickly and it was the flexibility of WCDOC administrators that allowed educators to leverage technology to maintain the integrity of services during an otherwise difficult and challenging time.

Using technology to maintain correctional programming

For many American correctional institutions, programming, along with visitation, was suspended during the pandemic, which left the incarcerated with very little to occupy their time, increasing their risk for depression, stress, feelings of loneliness and anxiety.⁵ When New York went on complete lockdown, many of the educational programs at the WCDOC, including those managed

by contractors and volunteers, were allowed to continue through the jail's video visitation system. As time passed and more extensive preparations could be made, the facility invested in smart televisions which allowed programs more flexibility in their delivery of services and program staff more frequent interactions with their incarcerated students. Not only were Pace University's two programs able to continue at the WCDOC, but multiple other programs, such as those involving students enrolled in high school equivalency degree programs, clients requiring cognitive behavioral interventions or substance abuse programming, etc., in addition to family video visitation, continued without issue. Yet, despite this success, correctional institutions are typically reluctant to utilize technology within the correctional walls due to obvious security concerns⁶. Nonetheless, based on programmatic success this past year, it was clear security concerns could be managed effectively and professionally by correctional administrators; program integrity can be maintained without jeopardizing security. Protocols used by the WCDOC could serve as a model for other correctional institutions which are hesitant to employ technology but want to expand their programmatic offerings far after the pandemic is over.

A tale of two programs

Inside-Out

The first session of Inside-Out, where traditional college students learn alongside incarcerated students in a correctional setting, was implemented in 1997 between a lifer, Paul Perry, and Temple University's Lori Pompa. Inside-Out class offerings are diverse, and classes are offered all over the world from colleges and universities to all correctional institutions of all types and security levels.⁷ Inside and outside students work together collaboratively, which is an integral component of the course, allowing for the equal exchange of ideas. Research finds this model is beneficial, allowing inside students to gain additional knowledge of the criminal justice system, while debunking many of the myths outside students possess about corrections.⁸ Overall, the model provides for significant engagement for both student groups. Pace University offered an Inside-Out course during the Spring semester of 2020 and 2021 — CRJ 242, Crime and Public

Policy — which is a course that examines criminological theory, crime typologies and crime policy. Upon successful completion, both inside and outside students earn three college credits. The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the instructional pedagogy for both semesters but with the incorporation of technology, both classes concluded successfully.

In order to measure course outcomes, all students were given a pre and posttest survey to assess their experiences in the class. Outside students were given a specific scale (ATP — Attitude Toward Prisoners scale) to measure their attitudes toward the incarcerated.⁹ Differences from the pre and posttest were examined to determine if changes in perception occurred. It was believed that innovative technological methods could be utilized to produce positive experiences for both student groups if correctional administrators were amenable to its implementation.

Technological Changes to Inside/Out Spring 2020

Pace University's first Inside-Out course took place at the WCDOC during the Spring 2020 semester, which began at the end of January 2020. The WCDOC allows both incarcerated women and men to participate in the course; hence, correctional officers remain in the classroom during instruction. 11 inside students participated in this first class, with two being female, and 11 outside students participated, with one being male. The ability to include jailed women in this program is so important. There are not enough eligible women to hold a separate

college course (i.e., only two women in the jail were eligible during the Spring 2020 semester) based on educational level (i.e., inside students must have a high school diploma or equivalent) and time remaining at the facility (i.e., the semester is 15 weeks long). However, allowing women to participate with the men gave them an opportunity they would not have otherwise been able to have. Furthermore, if an inside student was inadvertently released prior to the class' conclusion, which was possible considering many of the inside students were unsentenced, the WCDOC administration provided approval for these students to return to the jail during class time in order to finish the course.

Since the course started before the pandemic shut-down, the class initially functioned as customary with outside students being transported to the facility each week to learn with the inside students. Students attended class in person for seven weeks; the first week is always reserved as a separate orientation for both groups. Rules and regulations can be discussed, and questions can be answered without the other student group's presence. Outside students also use this time to attend an orientation with the WCDOC and receive their volunteer ID badges, which helps in easing entry into the facility each week. During the six weeks of combined instruction, students had the opportunity to work together in smaller groups before and after lecture instruction. The group work is what really differentiates this course from other types of college-based courses and it often proves to be the most enjoyable portion of the course for all students. Inside and outside students sit next to one another — sometimes in a



Photos courtesy Westchester County Department of Correction (WCDOC)

The Westchester County Department of Correction (left) and students in the Inside/Out Program in the classroom (right).

circle and other times at smaller tables. Most group activities allow for the development of team building skills and it is an opportunity for both groups to become better acquainted. Considering corrections is often the least preferred major of criminal justice students, any opportunity to immerse them in the corrections setting can help to change their views of the correctional system and alter their career goals.¹⁰

Maintaining good working relationships with correctional staff and administrators is essential to the success of any outside correctional-based program.

By week seven, the students were really making progress; there was a real sense of community among the group as inside students were taking the class more seriously and felt more comfortable participating. In fact, one inside student, who was concerned that he might be released prior to the class' conclusion, asked the professor to write a note to the judge overseeing his case to see if he could stay at the jail a few weeks longer. This was

a testament to how invested the inside students were in completing the class. When the professor and outside students left the jail after week seven, they would not return. Pace University announced, as the outside students were traveling back to campus, that classes would be remote for the next several weeks. The outside students were so upset and were willing to forfeit their spring break if they would be allowed to continue class with the inside students. Unfortunately, classes were remote for the remainder of the semester and a few days later, New York went on lockdown. The students were never able to return and it was at this point that this one class divided into two classes.

The lockdown occurred suddenly, with no time to plan, and although the outside students could switch to Zoom, the inside students, who were under strict quarantine, did not have access to such technology. In order for the inside students to complete the course, a plan had to be developed with correctional staff quickly. It is important to note maintaining good working relationships with correctional staff and administrators is essential to the success of any outside correctional-based program. The WCDOC has custodial program staff consisting of a program warden, sergeant and two correctional officers, which made this process easier. While the professor worked with the outside students on Zoom, she worked with the inside students remotely through the program sergeant. With quarantining in place, inside students could not be in one room to take an exam and there was no one available to proctor individual exams. Moreover, inside students did not have access to library resources; they only had their textbook. Hence, all assignments



Photos courtesy Westchester County Department of Correction (WCDOC)

Inside/Out students receive instruction (left) and Inside/Out students proudly display instructional certificates (right).

needed to be revised. The professor wrote detailed instructions and emailed them to the program sergeant. The program sergeant printed those instructions, made copies, and hand delivered the assignments to the inside students. Once the assignments were completed, the program sergeant went to each of the housing blocks, collected the assignments and submitted them to the professor. Within a week of the lockdown, the professor had permission to schedule face-to-face video visitation visits with her inside students to continue instruction. Although not ideal, without it, the inside students would not have been able to complete their coursework.

Fortunately, the WCDOC has been amenable to innovative teaching methods, including the use of technology, and they have utilized video platform technology for many years to allow for virtual visitation (i.e., for family visits, court appearances, meeting with probation/parole, etc.). It was the availability of technology, coupled with the assistance of the program sergeant, which allowed the inside students to successfully continue their studies. Although the system was never used previously for educational purposes, the professor, as well as several other community-based agencies, were able to utilize it to maintain a continuity of services during the lockdown. The professor was able to schedule her visits in advance with the inside students from her home computer and then could meet with them independently to answer questions or discuss concerns. This proved to be extremely helpful in clarifying assignments and in motivating inside students to remain focused, while providing positive feedback for work that was already completed. During this time, nine of the 11 inside students were released early as a result of COVID-19-related policies to reduce the jail population and minimize COVID-19 transmission. Not all released students followed-up with the professor, resulting in seven of the 11 students completing the course. As inside students were released, many of them joined the outside students and professor via Zoom. The two student groups came together once again, albeit, in a different way.

Effectiveness of technology changes on Inside/Out Program

Even with this abrupt change in instruction, it was clear all students enjoyed the course and although they were upset by the midsemester change, they were grateful for the opportunity to complete the class. All outside

students said they enjoyed the class because it was a great experience outside of the classroom (n=9) or because they enjoyed working directly with the inside students (n=2). Inside students felt the experience was rewarding because they learned new material (n=2), they had an opportunity to go to college (n=2), they liked being with the Pace students (2) or they discovered they were able to do the work (n=1). Both inside and outside students reported the part of the class they liked best was working with one another. Inside students reported feeling much more confident in their ability to perform college level work:

“I definitely feel more confident. At first, I was nervous going back at a college level after being [out of school] for 10 years. Also [coming to class] without drugs involved was a huge achievement.”

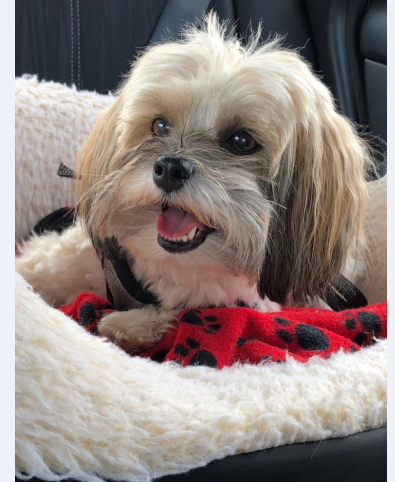
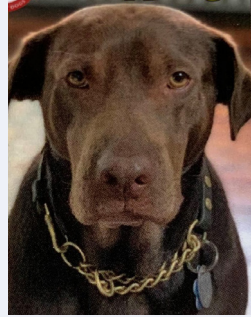
All of the inside students, except for one, said it made their time at the jail easier:

“[It] made me feel like time wasn’t just wasting away. [It] gave me something to look forward to each week. And having projects to do were fun.”

For outside students, statistically significant changes in their attitude toward their incarcerated classmates were reflected in the ATP scale. As one outside student noted:

“I expected the inside students to participate minimally. I assumed they would just come to the class at the scheduled time to get their credits and go. I was completely wrong. Most of the inside students were very vocal in a good way. They participated in class discussion and group discussion. I also expected it to be a much different experience. The inside students were very nice to be around and all around fun people.”

Conclusions from this data suggests even minimal contact between inside and outside students can produce beneficial outcomes and technology can be used to further educational goals for the incarcerated when in-person instruction is not available.



Photos courtesy Parenting, Prison and Pups/Facebook



A few of the faces of the Parenting, Prison and Pups Program.

Parenting, Prison & Pups (PPP)

PPP utilizes the evidence-based *Parenting Inside-Out* (PIO) curriculum, reviewed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMSHA), and included on the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP). Research correlates program participation in PIO to reduced depression, parental stress and substance use and increased contact with one’s child and child’s caregiver¹¹. When integrated with animal-assisted therapy (AAT) (i.e., the PPP program) research finds statistically significant lower rates of parental stress and anxiety and higher rates of self-esteem and parental knowledge; the integration of therapy dogs appear to increase communication, trust and connectedness between group members increasing the effectiveness of the course¹². Women participants of PPP have the ability to engage with the therapy dogs (which are provided by a community-based organization called Hudson Valley Paws For A Cause), before, during and after class. There are two therapy dogs per session and parenting classes are offered to women at the jail twice per week, 2 hours per class, for approximately 2 months, for a total of 14 classes. The dogs are integrated into the lessons and serve as examples to build upon more difficult concepts; the dogs also serve as a source of emotional support for women while discussing difficult topics (i.e., their separation from their children,

past abuse, etc.). PPP takes place at the WCDOC during the fall semester with Pace University students serving as teaching assistants. These Pace students are enrolled in a 300-level undergraduate class — Strategies in Corrections Administration — as a civic engagement course, which requires they perform 20 service hours outside of the classroom in the PPP program.

Altering PPP to deal with COVID-19 protocols

As the fall 2020 semester began, and COVID-19 transmission still a major concern, many universities remained on a remote or hybrid model. Nationally, transmission rates remained very high among college students¹³. Policies implemented prior to the pandemic, such as communicable disease procedures by the WCDOC and bail reform by the New York legislature, coupled with WCDOC policies implemented during the pandemic, such as video visitation (i.e., for programming, court access and family communication), consistent testing and quarantining, the availability of PPE and meticulous cleaning, helped place WCDOC in a good position to manage the complexities of COVID-19 and maintain a zero positivity rate with its residents during this time period. As a result, the PPP instructor and the therapy teams were allowed into the facility to provide direct services to incarcerated mothers but there was concern about allowing undergraduate university students direct access to the incarcerated

women. With positivity rates high among college students, although rather low among Pace University students, it was not a risk the jail or the PPP director felt was worth taking. Yet, the Pace students are an integral component of the program and the program could not continue without their participation. Fortunately, WC-DOC staff began preparing for a challenging year ahead during the summer of 2020 and purchased smart televisions to allow for the safe facilitation of programs. PPP was allowed to use these televisions in their program to Zoom Pace students into the jail to work with the women directly, albeit, remotely. Although in-person tends to work better for facilitating services, this was an excellent alternative that allowed for minimal health risks to the incarcerated women and successful completion of the course, a course which would have otherwise been cancelled. Those in person, such as the PPP instructor, therapy teams and women participants, wore masks and maintained proper social distancing. The class remained small with only eight participants to adhere to social distancing requirements. Although the course always concludes with a graduation and an opportunity for the

women to reunify with their children, due to COVID-19, PPP was unable to facilitate mother-child reunification but was able to hold a small graduation to celebrate their accomplishments. As one woman noted about her participation in the graduation:

“I felt good, smart and appreciated. It will help me to get my kids back. I am taking steps toward getting them.”

With small modifications, which included the integration of technology, the program was successful. Data was collected utilizing a pre- and post-test quasi-experimental design where women were interviewed before and after the conclusion of the course. The design of the study evaluated whether these women experienced differences in psychological factors, such as depression, anxiety and stress, after program completion. Upon analysis, the data confirmed there were statistically significant reductions in depression and anxiety, as well as statistically significant increases in self-esteem and parental knowledge. The women worked on communication skills the most in attempting to mend relationships with their families and their children; women continued to be very introspective. As one woman stated:

“[PPP] helped me with the guilt factor of not being there. I recognized that my priorities are off. My role in her life (her daughter’s life) is more important to her than her role in mine.”

As found in previous classes, the therapy dogs provided the women with a sense of comfort, decreased feelings of loneliness and created a normalizing effect:

“They took away my anxiety. They are relaxing. I was just petting them while listening and that was a nice touch.”

“They made me feel wanted.”

“They made me feel appreciated.”

“Sometimes it felt like I was less in jail. They took me out of this place.”

Parenting, Prison and Pups



Image courtesy Parenting, Prison and Pups: <https://ppp.blogs.pace.edu>

Parenting, Prison & Pups (PPP) is an evidence-based parenting program initially provided to incarcerated women in jail, the most underserved of all corrections populations, to help them reinvest in their relationships with their children. See how the program works and what benefits it brings.

<https://ppp.blogs.pace.edu>

The outcomes from this data suggests changes in pedagogical instruction, which can be supplemented by the use of technological instruction, can be very beneficial. Rather than cancel the program, the use of Zoom allowed for the delivery of services to incarcerated mothers.

Inside-Out — Second Round

Spring 2021

By the following spring, many lessons were learned regarding the use of technology in the correctional setting to further educational initiatives, in addition to safely providing programming while the pandemic continued. The smart televisions purchased during the summer of 2020 helped to improve the delivery of educational services, especially when compared to the video visitation system used during the initial shutdown. Although program staff were allowed to work directly with the incarcerated during the fall of 2020, COVID-19 rates rose after the winter holidays, and the jail was closed again to non-essential staff. The professor worked with WCDOC correctional staff to determine whether technology could be used to facilitate the Inside-Out course, while maintaining the integrity of the programming. As mentioned, the most important component of the program is the collaborative smaller group work, but even with a smart television, that would not be possible. The only way to facilitate group work remotely was through the use of breakout rooms but without individual computers for the inside students, it was not possible. With permission from the WCDOC administrators, Pace University donated four laptops to the jail for the semester. All files on the laptops were deleted prior to being brought to the facility. They were checked by facility IT staff and once cleared, they remained secured in the jail for the entire semester. During class, one laptop was shared by two inside students to allow for social distancing (i.e., the inside students would each sit at the opposite end of a rectangular table with the laptop between them). The class was kept smaller than usual to allow for social distancing, with only six participating inside students. Comingling of housing blocks was prohibited during this time to keep transmission risk minimal. Therefore, all six students had to reside in the same housing block. This unfortunately precluded

women from participating during the spring 2021 semester.

The laptops, which were set-up and monitored by correctional staff, were used to place inside and outside students in Zoom “breakout” rooms where they were all able to complete the small group work essential to the integrity of the course. Although they could not physically be together, the more time they spent in these smaller groups, the more connected they felt. The use of this technology allowed the class to function normally and all group activities, which would normally be conducted in person, were easily facilitated by leveraging the available technology. Similar to the first class, all of the students enjoyed their experience in the course and reported working with one another was the best part of the class. Although everyone would have preferred to be in-person, this alternative model proved to be very beneficial. One inside student stated:

“It was my first experience attending a college course. The class was very eye opening for me.”

Another inside student discussed how this experience made him feel more confident:

“I do feel more confident in my ability to perform at a college level now because now I know what to expect of a class and I also know how it feels to be in a college course.”

Statistically significant changes for the outside students, in their attitude toward their incarcerated classmates, were reflected in the ATP scale once again. An outside student recounted her experience:

“I got to meet new people who I may have not met and got a better understanding of how the criminal justice system [works] from individuals who have current first-hand experience. Also, after getting to know these [inside students], any preconceived notions I may have had about inmates, well they definitely don’t exist any longer.”

The outside students felt that the most rewarding part of the course was witnessing the growth in their inside classmates:

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“The most rewarding part of this course was being able to connect with the inside students and find out that they were actually applying what they learned in class to their lives; it feels like the class is making a difference in their lives.”

The outcomes from this data suggests with the proper technology, equipment and assistance from correctional administrators, an Inside-Out college course can be provided effectively via remote instruction. This has significant implications for correctional institutions that want to provide such programming to their incarcerated population but have been unable to previously facilitate such programming, possibly because the nearest college/university is too far away.

Security concerns — what are they and how can they be managed?

The WCDOC can serve as a model to other correctional institutions that may fear the use of technology. And although in-person instruction is preferred, when in-person instruction is hindered or unavailable, correctional facilities can utilize technology to maintain or enhance their educational course offerings far after the COVID-19 crisis is over. In order to do this safely, there are several recommendations derived from the last year. First, educators must work closely with correctional staff to understand security concerns and to understand how to best support security practices and protocols. These relationships are essential and cannot be understated. Technology can be properly monitored and effectively used when outside agencies work together with correctional staff to ensure security protocols are the highest priority. Second, if outside students are involved, an orientation regarding security protocols is vital to the success of the program. Even though outside students were not physically in the jail, they still had to dress appropriately and maintain appropriate behavior while online. They were encouraged to use virtual backgrounds or blank wall space when Zooming so inside students could not see personal belongings. They had to sign consent forms agreeing to these rules, in addition to agreeing to maintain confidentiality, to not take any pictures, to not Zoom with anyone else in the room, to remain on camera at all times, etc. A violation of these rules would result in immediate dismissal and possible course failure. Outside students who

Correctional facilities can utilize technology to maintain or enhance their educational course offerings far after the COVID-19 crisis is over.

agree to take these classes are often very committed to the process. It requires more work and time than a traditional class, so professors are likely to have more serious students. Students must understand any indiscretion could jeopardize the program; they need to understand the level of responsibility they maintain. From the professor’s point of view, they all took their commitment quite seriously. Having students on Zoom can create new concerns but it also alleviates other issues, such as the introduction of contraband into a correctional setting, the need for escorts, the time it takes for processing visitors, etc. Third, for programs like this to work effectively and consistently, there should be dedicated staff that are assigned to a program post. Correctional staff have to know how to set-up the equipment for each and every class and how to secure it after each class. They also need to know how to manage and oversee the use of technology during the class to make sure it is being used appropriately. Inside students should never be alone with this equipment; correctional oversight is mandatory. Since WCDOC has designated program staff, this was not an issue. But, if such staff were not available, it would be a long and arduous process, losing quality class time, while new staff learned how to use the technology. Before the semester began, the professor and program sergeant, along with two student volunteers, tested the technology and worked through technological issues. Last, course links should be password protected with only outside students and correctional staff having access. This minimizes the risk of non-participants from entering the class and subsequently prevents Zoom bombers.

Conclusion

The use of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic at the WCDOC was without incident. This is not to say there are not risks. There will always be risks but

the concerns are not more serious than the ones regarding outsiders physically entering the facility. The implementation of video technology could expand programming for other correctional institutions, even post-COVID-19. For facilities that want to expand programming but may be too remote to partner with an educational institution, this type of technology can bridge that gap. College programs, as well as a host of other types of programs, could be offered. Colleges/universities from all over the country could provide course offerings to correctional institutions in various states. For example, this would allow a college in New York to offer programming in a correctional facility in Colorado. This could be instrumental in enhancing educational resources for correctional institutions all over the country. Such technology can also be used when there is another reason the professor may be unable to be physically present at the correctional institution (i.e., inclement

ENDNOTES

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weather, sickness, etc.). Class would not have to be cancelled if technology was available. For those incarcerated in facilities far from the towns they will be released, discharge planning could be facilitated with case managers in their localities more easily. The possibilities are limitless.

It is clear why correctional institutions are reluctant to have outside technology behind the walls. If in the wrong hands, it could prove to be quite dangerous. However, more facilities are allowing video visitation for families and many facilities allow their incarcerated population to utilize tablets. The introduction of technology is already there; this would be the next step. With careful management, effective training for staff, and solid partnerships with outside agencies, the benefits far exceed the disadvantages. Correctional facilities should begin to consider how the use of technology can expand service opportunities for the incarcerated without jeopardizing security.

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