

PATHWAY TO SUCCESS: CREATING INDIVIDUALIZED CAREER PATHWAYS FOR INMATES AND REENTRANTS

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ABSTRACT

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) has implemented a 60-hour “Pathway to Success” course for inmates who wish to enroll in vocational coursework. The purpose of this course is two-fold: to ensure that PADOC inmates are enrolling in vocational courses for which they have both the aptitude and the interest to excel, and to better prepare inmates for workplace success upon release.

Course design took into account several unique factors, including creation of a career plan unique to each inmate; limited availability of technology in a secure institution setting; and consideration of the realities of employment for those with criminal records while at the same time encouraging this population to pursue career goals. The 60-hour curriculum was designed to present units and lessons that scaffold, so that each lesson builds upon what was learned in the previous lesson. Units also include regional information, including local labor market information and workforce development system “one-stop” services. All lessons are aligned to the Pennsylvania Department of Education K-12 Standards, the College and Career Readiness Standards, and Pennsylvania’s Foundation Skills Framework.

BACKGROUND

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) incarcerates approximately 48,500 individuals in Pennsylvania who have been sentenced to two or more years in prison. The average inmate is 39, male, and has an 8th grade reading level. 82.6% of male inmates are unskilled or possess no skills, and 27.1% have less than a 12th grade education. While 95% of inmates will be released back to society, over 60% will return to prison at some point.

PADOC has long been aware that programming to increase job readiness leads to better inmate outcomes. As part of these efforts, PADOC is spearheading an effort to build a career pathways framework “inside the walls” that prepares inmates with in-demand skills while incarcerated, and that connects those individuals to jobs, support services, and ongoing education upon release. This work is funded by a FY15 Improving Reentry Education grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

All state correctional institutions (SCIs) house education facilities that offer academic and vocational programs, including secondary diploma and high school equivalency preparation programs. Education programming is staffed by a principal, academic guidance counselor, and instructors who report to the Director

of the Bureau of Correction Education (BCE). BCE is responsible for the oversight of all PADOE academic and vocational programming, institutional libraries, and barber/cosmetology schools. Previously part of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, BCE was brought under PADOE in 1998, but remains a separate line item in the state budget. The majority of the Bureau's funding comes from state allocated monies, but a small portion of federal grant funding is also present.

BCE has been an integral piece of creating a career pathways framework within the SCIs, especially in ensuring that PADOE offers inmates relevant vocational courses. As PADOE began examining the vocational courses offered, instructors repeatedly expressed that it was important to get the "right person in the right seat." Staff cuts over the years had eliminated the vocational guidance counselor position; thus, it falls to one academic guidance counselor to provide career advice and appropriate education placement for 1500–2500 inmates per institution.

Previously, there was little vetting before enrolling an inmate in the vocational course of his or her choice. The inmate's TABE score was considered by the counselor prior to placement, as well as any high school credential earned. Institutions provided the pre-vocational, or "pre-voc," class to those inmates that were interested in enrolling in a vocational program but did not have their high school diploma or equivalency. The course was designed to be an introduction to the vocational setting and what would be expected when applying for jobs. Students did put together a working resume, but it was never updated, nor was it saved for future use. The course also lacked the teaching of soft skills to the inmates. At no point was aptitude or interest in the desired vocation taken into account.

The need to update the pre-voc class dovetailed with the need to create a solution to have the "right people in the right seats" for vocational programs. PADOE brought together current pre-voc instructors for two separate day-long focus groups to discuss what was working with the current curriculum and what updates were needed. Overwhelmingly, instructors stated that students needed a "reality check," and that they had unrealistic expectations of the types of jobs (and wages) they would be able to obtain with their current education level. Instructors also expressed the need to keep modules on mock interviews and resume development.

Based on these discussions, PADOE made the decision to replace the existing pre-voc course with the "Pathway to Success" course that would be required for all inmates who wished to enroll in a vocational course. A scope of work was created to procure a curriculum that would be based both on the topics identified by BCE staff as vital to providing a basic overview of job-readiness, as well as topics that would guide inmates in selecting the appropriate vocational path. Central to the curriculum would be a career pathways approach, emphasizing the skills and credentials needed to enter and advance in specific jobs and careers. The curriculum had to allow the BCE instructor to assist the inmate in considering his or her skills and interests, jobs not available to those with a criminal record, labor market information from the area where the inmate would be likely to reenter, available opportunities within the SCIs (such as available education programs and inmate work detail opportunities), and opportunities after reentry.

Employability skills, or "soft skills," had to be built into each of the modules. Common employability skills include personal initiative, communication, dependability, scheduling and time management, getting along with supervisors and co-workers, resolving conflict, giving and receiving feedback, stress on the job, and diversity in the workplace.

COURSE DESIGN

The 60-hour Pathway to Success curriculum consists of 11 units. Resources for instructors include lesson plans, all required supporting materials, and supplemental ideas for extended learning. The units and lessons scaffold so that each builds upon what was previously presented. This strategy enables students to finish the

course with a clear understanding of work opportunities that are available to them, an action plan that lays out concrete steps to be followed in order to achieve short-term and long-term goals, and knowledge about and practice in key employability skills needed to get and keep a job. Ultimately, this new curriculum functions as a career planning activity that results in a practical understanding of how to identify a realistic and achievable short-term and long-term career goal for a career pathway and steps for advancing that plan.

The curriculum was designed using a variety of resources, including information from PADO, PADO partners, Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry's Center for Workforce Information and Analysis, and Pennsylvania Department of Education Division of Adult Education. Lessons and associated resources are written at a seventh grade or lower reading level.

To achieve the goal of identifying a career pathway, a target occupation, and skills that support the individual in successfully moving toward their target goal, each of the 11 units results in a product that ultimately provides students with a comprehensive plan that identifies a career pathway and a plan to achieve their goal. Lessons offer individuals the opportunity to explore occupations that align with their skills, abilities, interests, experience, and suitability for employment. In addition, students consider resources that expose them to tools, such as O*NET, that address the practical aspect of choosing a target occupation.

Participating students learn about local labor market information, including Pennsylvania's High Priority Occupations, job outlooks, associated skills, and earnings outlooks. They have the opportunity to contextualize their outlook for a target community in order to ensure a realistic understanding of their goal and how to achieve this goal. Skills, training, and educational needs are assessed to help students define their goal and create a career plan to achieve this goal. Other considerations are also included in the career planning, such as budgeting, to evaluate individuals' day-to-day financial needs and plan for items such as enrolling in educational or skills training.

While developing their individual career pathways, each student researches and documents, through portfolio products, the following:

- Module 1: Completed O*Net Interest Profiler and 3-5 jobs within the student's Job Zones
- Module 2: Review of previously identified jobs to identify any barriers imposed by the student's criminal record
- Module 3: Use of county-level labor market information to determine if previously identified jobs are in-demand, and to determine average wage. Creation of a personal budget based on the average wage
- Module 4: Use of O*NET job profiles to explore wages, job outlooks, and demand; inventory of personal strengths and areas of improvement needed for the identified jobs
- Module 5: List of inmate jobs within SCI that may provide the student with relevant work experience to meet his or her goals
- Module 6: Creation of SMART goals to follow a Career Pathway for the student's goal job(s)
- Module 7: Information on the PA CareerLink (Pennsylvania's name for American Job Centers, or "one-stops") resources and services
- Module 8: Cover Letter and Resume
- Module 9: Mock Interview information, including how to address conviction questions, resulting in an Interview Script
- Module 10: Parole Hearing script that reflects positive language, behaviors, and discusses skills learned while incarcerated
- Module 11: Final Career Pathway Plan

Additionally, the classes include a focus on employability skills, or "soft skills," using the Pennsylvania Department of Education Division of Adult Education's "Foundations Skills Framework." The Framework is a resource guide designed in conjunction with employer and educator input that identifies key employability and lifelong learning skills. Students use this information to assess their current skill levels in areas such as clear

communication, responding to feedback, thinking critically, and decision-making. Students are also able to create a plan to improve specific skills that are needed for their target occupations, and to chart their progress.

All students who complete the 60-hour curriculum exit the course with a portfolio that the student can take with him or her to assist in future career planning and job search activities. This portfolio consists of key items that both remind the individual of why and how they have chosen a target occupation and the pathway that will lead them to that occupation. The portfolio also provides potential tools that the student can use to plan future career goals should the goal that was identified in the course change. This portfolio provides a communications tool to maintain continuity among PADOE staff as inmates advance through educational and vocational programming. PADOE staff can easily access information that the individual has identified as aspects of his or her career plan. Examples include target occupation, key skills needed for that occupation, assessment of the individual's interests and skills and how these align to the target occupation, goal development, and training or educational needs.

Upon completion of the curriculum, six SCIs were selected to pilot the program. A comprehensive training, developed and delivered by the authors of the curriculum, was offered to teachers and appropriate staff from the six SCIs. The training consisted of an overview of each unit followed by modeling the lessons. This strategy was selected so that teachers could sense the activities from the perspective of the students. It also allowed for first-hand experience with all of the curricular resources and established an opportunity for real time feedback. All pilot SCIs were provided technical assistance throughout the implementation of the Pathway to Success curriculum. Included in the technical assistance were site visits and conference calls with the training providers and curriculum authors. Other than administrative revisions, implementing teachers requested a student survey of the course to provide feedback to the teachers so that they could revise delivery methods, if appropriate.

RESULTS TO DATE

Initially, some staff were reluctant to implement the change in curriculum. This new curriculum required hours of direct interaction with the students and teacher-led discussions. Many felt there would be too much prep work involved and that they would not be able to cover all modules in the allotted 60 hours.

Through staff training and guidance from PADOE Central Office staff, the pilot SCIs began offering the course and staff began to understand the flow of the modules, especially the importance of completing them sequentially. Many staff are now excited about providing the O*NET Interest Profiler and showing the inmates what jobs are available in their areas and providing hope for those getting ready to return to society. Staff have taken an active role in assisting the inmates with preparing their working resumes and ensuring that resumes are saved and passed along to the reentry specialists at the SCIs. This allows work history and schooling information to be continually updated and provides the inmate with a true "working" resume to present to potential employers upon release.

Inmates report that they have learned a great deal and feel more confident in applying for positions prior to release. Below are quotes pulled from inmate surveys of the course:

"At first I just chose the highest paying job that sounded good. Then as the class went on, I found jobs that I can see myself working and making a career out of. The more information that I was given in this class, the more it started to open my eyes and mind to wanting to know more about a job that I am now focusing on." – SCI Camp Hill Inmate

"Because of (this class), I can do better than just wash dishes." –SCI Cambridge Springs Inmate

"This class opened my eyes and gave me direction, skills, and budgeting plans that I didn't have before. There is no excuse for me to live illegally. I know I can contribute and earn an honest living in

society.” –SCI Mahanoy Inmate

“I have worked construction 25 years but never had a resume. After writing my first resume in this class, I sent six (resumes) out and got two job inquiries back.” –SCI Mercer Inmate

“The career I wanted to do was just an idea. Now it’s an actual realistic goal. I know more now about my career path than I did before this class.” –SCI Rockview Inmate

“The things I learned in the class taught me how to maximize my potential, how much I could make, and what’s actually attainable for someone in my position.” –SCI Houtzdale

The Pathway to Success course is now being offered at each of the 25 SCIs. Since inception in Summer 2017, 3,666 inmates have been enrolled and 2,260 have completed, a 61.6% completion rate. Next steps for evaluation include determining job placement rate for inmates who took the course, attended a vocational course, and subsequently re-entered the community.⌘

Note: The content of the Pathway to Success course was developed using a grant from the United States Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and endorsement by the Federal Government should not be assumed.

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Kelly Martini is the Executive Policy & Grants Specialist for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. Kelly has been in Pennsylvania municipal and state government for 13 years, and previously worked for 8 years at the Department of Labor & Industry in workforce development. She holds a Master of Public Administration degree from Penn State University and degrees in Professional Writing and History from York College of Pennsylvania.

Terri Fazio is the current Director for the Bureau of Correction Education. Terri has worked within the Bureau for 28 years. She began her career at SCI Waymart as an Adult Basic Education (ABE) teacher. She also worked as the evening Education Guidance Counselor and was eventually promoted to Principal. In 2014, she was promoted to Western Region Division Chief for the Bureau and then became Director in 2016.

Dorenda Hamarlund is the PADOE Career Pathways Program Manager. As such, she manages implementation of a career pathways framework within state correctional institutions. Dorenda joined the PADOE in February 2017 after 17 years with the California Department of Corrections. Dorenda has extensive experience in implementing training and certifications for inmates and working with outside organizations and companies to increase employability skills within Corrections.