

The MacDougall Carpentry Program

Background

Commissioner Semple asked the CJPPD Research Unit to observe the vocational Carpentry Program at the MacDougall Correctional Institution in Suffield, CT and report on their findings. Improving and expanding efforts that better prepare the state's prisoners for their eventual return to society is a major goal of the Semple administration. Meaningful and practical programming is central to this aim.

The Carpentry class at MacDougall CI is perceived to be one of the Department's most successful programs, providing students with experience and the type of practical skills that might help them to find meaningful employment after prison. It is generally assumed that good programming, the kind that engages offenders, may also contribute to better institutional behavior and a safer prison environment.

Methodology

After meeting with DOC Director Lewis, the Research Unit planned for several days of class observation, at MacDougall CI, and interviews with offenders who were a) participating in the Carpentry Program, or b) on the Carpentry class wait list. Two short surveys were prepared that were designed to elicit information from both groups of offenders about either their experience in the class or their reasons for enrolling on the wait list. The survey also asked respondents about their work experience prior to entering prison and their post-release goals and expectations. In addition the survey asked about how and what offenders knew about specific programs.

Meetings were arranged with Deputy Warden Mudano and USD1 Principal Pirro to learn more about the Carpentry Program at MacDougall CI, to explain the objectives of our study and discuss requirements for facility access.

Between May 11th and May 15th, Research Unit staff (Baudoin, Bobula and Kuzyk) conducted four visits to MacDougall CI to observe the Carpentry Program. The visits were postponed for a week because the facility had been on lock-down status following a serious physical assault on a correctional officer.

Description of the program

Although the DOC webpage for MacDougall-Walker CI reports that six vocational education classes are available to prisoners at that facility, only three were actually offered when we visited; Carpentry, Electro-mechanical, and Micro-computers.

As of early May 2015, there were approximately 160 offenders at MacDougall CI on wait lists for a vocational class. Sixty-two offenders were seeking admittance to the Carpentry Program. Micro-computers had the second longest waiting list with 40 offenders.

Eleven offenders are currently enrolled in the Vocational Education Carpentry Class at MacDougall CI. The students range in age from 20 to 50. They are racially and ethnically diverse and come from a variety of backgrounds.

Carpentry students are required to complete 13 modules before graduating from the class. These modules include sections on workshop safety and practical mathematics. Once they have demonstrated proficiency in these two areas, students work on a range of hands-on projects that appear tailored to their interests and level of experience and expertise. Students in the class are at different levels of progress through the carpentry curriculum. While possibly making the instructor's job more complicated, it provides opportunities for students with more advanced skills to help guide newer, less-experienced students.

It can take up to two years for a student to complete all class modules. After graduation, some recommended students have gained employment in the prison industries program at MacDougall CI.

The Carpentry class is taught by Jamie Rainville, a former corrections officer with CT DOC. Rainville has extensive experience in carpentry and the building trades. With only eleven students, he spends a significant amount of time working with each student. He appears able to assess the particular strengths and deficits of every pupil in order to craft the most effective strategy to promote learning and develop carpentry skills.

The Carpentry is a full-day class with a longer session in the morning and a shorter session in the afternoon. The Electro-mechanical class, in comparison, has two groups of students, one in the morning and another in an abbreviated, hour-and-a-half session in the afternoon.

The instructor

The carpentry instructor, Jamie Rainville, followed an unconventional path to the classroom. His formal education stopped at 16 when he dropped out of Prince Tech High School, in Hartford, to work full-time with his father's construction crew. At the age of 21 he struck out on his own and during the next nine years, he built a construction company that eventually employed a crew of 20 workers.

As the housing market slowed in the last decade, Rainville decided to become a police officer. To do so, he completed his GED at the age of 30. After several years on the midnight shift with the Willimantic PD, Rainville joined the DOC, eventually working as a CO at Northern CI.

While at Northern, Rainville continued to accept construction projects 'on the side', earning a reputation for good work and craftsmanship among coworkers and supervisors. At the prompting of coworkers, when the voc-ed instructor's position for carpentry opened up at MacDougall, Rainville applied.

Rainville uses the lessons he learned as a CO and his experience managing a private construction company to lead his class. A key piece of advice gleaned from his father, to be a 'likeable SOB', serves him well. What it means in, terms of his teaching, is that he must find creative ways to keep his students motivated and engaged in a manner that keep them challenged and productive. This approach appears to be working. His students describe him as knowledgeable, demanding and fair.

Rainville conducts a "pre-interview" with every new student. He approaches these as if they were an actual job interview even though admission to the class is automatic. During the interview, Rainville conducts an assessment of the student's knowledge and skill level. He also explains his own expectations, in advance, so that the student understands, from the outset, what will be expected. From his days as a CO, Rainville understands the different relationships that can develop between prisoners. In his class, he demands equal treatment for all. He does not tolerate the type of dominant/subservient relationships that may exist in the housing units to penetrate the classroom. If he observes behaviors, such as one student cleaning up another's workspace, he intervenes, privately, and explains that this behavior is not acceptable in his classroom. He does this, he claims, to develop a sense of responsibility and personal accountability.

To maintain motivation, Rainville tries to balance each student's personal projects with curriculum requirements. He pays special attention to keeping students engaged, using the prospect of future rewards – the ability to work on a valued project, for example - to get the theoretical classwork done. He also prepares back-up tasks for each student so that idle time is minimized. Each student is assigned several projects, simultaneously, so that no one stands around waiting to use equipment. On larger, more-challenging projects, Rainville organized the work so that a single group of students does not derive all the advantages from that project. Despite being relatively new – he has held the position for less than a year – Rainville has a developed long-term vision for his class.

Rainville's class has simple, easy-to-follow rules that are consistently and universally enforced. He conducts daily meetings to review ongoing projects with the whole class, giving direction to everyone so that they understand the day's goals. Given a churning enrollment, students of varying skill levels are always in the class. Rainville selects advanced students to work with less-experienced students on basic projects to create "ad hoc" mentorship relationships. Finally, strikingly, Rainville avoids focusing on what he doesn't have. He understands the necessity of resourcefulness in the current prison environment.

Participants in the class

The Research Unit staff performed individual interviews with each member of the Carpentry Class in a closed resource room adjacent to the classroom. An open-ended questionnaire was used to elicit information about why the offenders had applied for the class, how long they were on a waiting list, their level of satisfaction with the class, the quality of the instructor, class projects and the equipment. The questionnaire also asked about the students' expectations after completing the class and what sources of information they relied on or trusted when enrolling for the Carpentry class.

Among the 11 students, there were three general pathways into the class. The youngest offender was fast-tracked into the class after completing his GED studies. Several students who had been in Graphic Arts, a class that had been discontinued, appear to have been placed in the Carpentry class ahead of others. Similarly, bumping appeared to benefit offenders who had spent time on the waiting list for a no-longer-offered Electronics Repair class. Finally, there were offenders who had spent many months on the waiting list, one for as long as 14 months.

Following the interviews, the researchers were pleasantly surprised at the degree of satisfaction they encountered among all of the students in the class. Although the students had different levels of experience and were in various stages of class-completion, every student reported

that they were being challenged in a positive way in their learning and in the projects they were assigned. One student said that during the 3-hour morning session, he sometimes forgot that he was in prison.

Although they were satisfied with the curriculum and with the projects, the students' highest marks were reserved for their instructor, Mr. Rainville. A number of students in the class had not completed formal education. Several admitted that they had experienced difficulties in school as youngsters. A few specifically mentioned a fear of mathematics prior to being accepted in the class. Rainville was considered by all students to be a fair but demanding instructor who went out of his way to help them to succeed in their studies. Rainville was also credited with creating an environment in the class that was conducive to learning; one in which teamwork, learning and collaboration were actively encouraged.

During the interviews, Rainville was described as a good or excellent instructor, 'non-judgmental', knowledgeable about woodworking and serious about challenging students to perform at a high level. One student said that in the class he was never made to feel that he was asking a dumb question. Another student stated that Rainville was more concerned with teaching than with making friends.

Most offenders expressed the belief that they would leave the class with new skills that would help them moving forward, although not all thought that they would pursue carpentry in the future. Some thought the class would help them to land an industries job while completing their sentences. Some thought that the skills they learned might help them in either property management or general construction work after prison. Several offenders suggested that the Carpentry class had made a more significant impact on them as people, providing them with meaningful, intellectual challenges and a new personal sense of accomplishment.

Students in the Carpentry class were engaged on a wide range of projects. Several were working on a scaled mock-up of a home where they could learn about different aspects of homebuilding like framing and roofing. Some students were working on complex scale models where they were required to design and work from a set of plans to build a scale-model home. One student was working on a model airplane where he was required to design, fabricate and assemble each piece. On complicated and involved projects, more-advanced students worked with less-experienced students.

All voc-ed students at MacDougall CI are housed in the same residential unit, H-Unit. This unit also houses some offenders who are on the waiting list for a voc-ed class. Sharing a residential unit with offenders enrolled in other classes has allowed the carpentry students to listen to the

experiences of students in other classes and to evaluate the benefits of one class versus another. From this interaction, several students mentioned that they considered the Carpentry class to be the best voc-ed class at MacDougall CI.

When asked what they would be doing if they were not enrolled in the class, the students said they would be reading, drawing, exercising or working on their legal cases. Several indicated they would be working in industries. One student said that without the class he would be sitting out in the housing unit waiting for his security level to drop. Because MacDougall is a high-security facility, offenders generally look forward to having their security level reduced so that they may be moved to less restrictive facilities. One indication of student satisfaction was that everyone in the Carpentry class claimed that they would opt to temporarily waive transfer to another facility in order to complete the Carpentry program.

Offenders on the carpentry wait list

After interviewing Carpentry class participants, the Research Unit staff performed interviews with a sample of offenders on the Carpentry class wait list. On May 19, 2015 there were sixty-eight (68) offenders at MacDougall CI on the wait list. The average wait time for these offenders was 150 days.

Wait listed offenders are housed in both the H- and I-units. Interviews were performed in closed office spaces adjacent to each unit. Interviewees were picked at random from the wait list. We used an open ended questionnaire, similar to the one used with class participants, but tailored to gather responses related to class choice, expectations and experiences.

After speaking with five offenders in I-Unit, we discovered that offenders there had little or no practical information about the Carpentry program. Hoping to interview offenders who were better informed, we moved to H-Unit, where Carpentry class members are housed with wait listed offenders. Even with H-unit offenders we continued to register null responses to most questions and because the responses were so uniform, we stopped.

No one that we interviewed on the wait list knew anything substantive about the Carpentry program. They could not name the instructor, describe the curriculum or any of the projects students were working on. From this, it appeared that wait listed offenders had no practical knowledge of the Carpentry program. As a result, they had no realistic expectations of the class.

Some offenders at MacDougall CI joined the vocational education wait list to get off the Green Mile and improve their housing situations. In addition to better housing,

some wait listed offenders hoped that voc-ed classes would help to alleviate boredom, and possibly allow them to earn a useful vocational certificate.

With a limited availability of slots and the long waiting lists, most offenders reasoned that they would never actually be accepted in a class. Since some offenders feel compelled to register for a class and there are currently only three options, choosing carpentry was generally based on the class description provided in the program handbook. We elicited the following responses to questions about why offenders registered for carpentry: 1) I'm not a computer guy 2) What I learn about technology in prison will be obsolete when I go home 3) I don't want to repair floor buffers, and 4) I don't know what jobs are out there, but I think carpenters find work.

We found that the decisions and choices most offenders made about voc-ed classes were based on very limited knowledge obtained almost exclusively through the printed material provided by the DOC. Going into the interviews with wait listed offenders, we expected some of them to have some prior, second-hand knowledge about the quality of the carpentry program. None did.

Observations

- Alleviating boredom was cited by both class participants and persons on the waiting list as a major challenge that prisoners face while incarcerated. Although students in the Carpentry class came from a range of pathways into the class, all seemed happy to be involved in productive work that was practical, hands-on and challenging.
- Several students observed that the Carpentry class was one of the few positive outlets that exist for prisoners at MacDougall CI.
- Although the selection process into the Carpentry class appeared random, it is not clear whether an invisible, hand was not directing more motivated offenders into the program. In addition to efforts of the instructor, the apparent success we observed may also be a result of the right offenders being channeled into the program because they were identified, elsewhere, having exhibited qualities that would allow them to benefit from a rigorous and challenging environment.
- Mixing older and younger offenders together in class appears to balance out and diffuse certain issues with discipline and learning. One student spoke about a positive classroom chemistry, where older offenders informally mentored younger offenders and how without that mix, the class might exhibit the unruliness he had observed in some MYI classes.
- One student had served time in the federal system. He preferred it to the CT system since in federal

institutions everyone had to have a job. He suggested it cut down on boredom and petty drama.

- Students thought that the class size was appropriate because it allowed Instructor Rainville to give “quality time” to each student.
- Instructor Rainville exhibits three outstanding qualities. It is clear that 1) he enjoys teaching 2) he has a solid, practical understanding of the building trade, and 3) he is comfortable and self-assured operating in a prison environment.
- Given the size of the waiting list for entry and the limited number of spots available in the Carpentry class, it is unlikely that most offenders will make it into the class before they EOS or change facilities.
- Not surprisingly, the quality, caliber and commitment of the instructor is a critical ingredient to a successful class. Offenders throughout the system complain about DOC staff who seem disinterested and unenthusiastic about their jobs and about offenders.
- Many CT prisoners had difficulties in grammar and high school. Among the students in the Carpentry class, several described this class as a transformational experience, one that broadened their horizons and instilled a genuine curiosity about learning.
- Offenders often perform poorly in a traditional educational setting. The Carpentry class is structured differently; a rolling enrollment guarantees that students learn at their own pace, relieving some of the stigma they might have felt about falling behind. Students are also given significant one-on-one attention by the instructor.
- Rainville believes that that offenders tend to be hands-on learners. Focusing on theory alone, hinders their ability to learn and develop.
- Many students expressed a desire for larger, more-challenging projects, the kind that would be more directly applicable to either prison industries or post-release employment.
- While students displayed a strong sense of pride in their projects, they regret not being able to display their handiwork to family and friends. A student suggested taking photos of their projects, so they could be kept as mementos and shared.
- There appears to be ample space to expand the carpentry class at McDougall CI. Next door is a large empty space that was formerly the cabinetry shop. It is now used for storage.

*This report was produced by the Research Unit in the Criminal Justice Division at CT OPM – May 28, 2015.
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