



Case Study: Networking Academies at Prisons

Colorado State Department of Corrections (CDOC)

Female Inmates Lead the Way in Technology Training for Re-Entry

About 10 years ago, the Colorado State Department of Corrections (CDOC) wanted to implement an IT and networking education program to give inmates a better chance at good paying jobs after release. The champions for the idea were Carl Wotowis, Assistant Director for the CDOC Offenders Program, and his colleagues, John Jubic from the Governor's Office of Information Technology (OIT), and Ross Kimbrel, Assistant Director of the CDOC Division of Education.

The team contacted Cisco to learn how to establish a Networking Academy program at their facility. They were excited to learn that Cisco Networking Academy had a program for assisting prisons to establish academy courses. Cisco introduced them to nearby Arapahoe Community College and Red Rocks Community College to identify instructors who were interested in teaching in a prison environment.

John's OIT team took on the challenge of creating a secure classroom and computer lab at the pilot site—which was the Denver Women's facility. The CDOC was not only one of the first U.S. state prison systems to offer Cisco Networking Academy courses, it was also the first to offer the program to women inmates.

Selecting a Women's Prison for the Pilot Program

Out of approximately 1,000 women inmates who applied, 12 were accepted for the first class. Carl said, "This was a tremendous commitment for these inmates. It was a demanding 20-week program, and participants signed a waiver that delayed possible early release until they completed the courses."

It was a surprise to the team how much the inmates in the pilot program worked hard to support each other. The women knew they were pioneers whose success would lead to opportunities for other inmates in future classes. The dedication and perseverance of these students exceeded everyone's expectations.

For purposes of a correctional facility, Cisco Networking Academy courses can:

- Be delivered in a completely secure, offline environment, including hands-on skills practice
- Prepare inmates to earn worldwide industry-recognized certifications for their resume
- Help them obtain entry-level IT jobs after their release

Karin McGuire works for the CDOC Division of Education. She recalls observing a class: “We heard the women talk about how they cried when they thought they weren’t smart enough, and how they helped each other through when it was tough. The Cisco courses have given these women hope, encouragement, and greater self-esteem, and provided a bridge to successful re-integration.”

Eleven of the 12 women completed the Cisco “IT Essentials” class and earned a CDOC certificate to validate their skills and knowledge. Word of the women offenders’ achievement touched many in Colorado, including Executive Directors from the Departments of Corrections and Public Safety, the Secretary of Technology, and Cisco staff, who attended and spoke at the graduation. Pride and tears were apparent around the room, as the women listened to speeches praising their landmark accomplishment.

Second Chance Act Technology Careers Grant

The CDOC Division of Education, including Karin and her colleague, Melissa Smith, spent months preparing an application for the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) grant through Second Chance Act Technology Careers Training Demonstration Projects for Incarcerated Adults and Juveniles.

Shortly after the women from the pilot program graduated, the CDOC received the news that it had been awarded the grant. The grant enabled the CDOC to bring classes to more prison facilities across the state. The division of education expanded the curricula to include CCNA and A+ courses. John and his team worked around the clock to prepare 21 new classrooms at 7 additional prisons, graduating over 500 inmates (both women and men).

In response to the scale and scope of the new program, it was moved under the CDOC Division of Education, which works in parallel with John’s OIT team to set up relationships with additional community colleges.

The CDOC successfully applied for another DOJ grant, which enabled the CDOC to expand the program even further. One of the most significant advances since the inception of the program is that the CDOC has become an Academy Support Center (ASC). Among other benefits, this means that the CDOC can now certify its own instructors.

The CDOC also partners with Pearson VUE, the global leader in computer-based testing, to build a system to allow students to take their CCENT certification exams. Prior to this, students would have to pay for and complete exams after leaving prison. Now they have the opportunity to re-enter society with a coveted certification already in hand. The CDOC says that former inmates with the CCENT certification have a better chance of employment.

The OIT Service Center, which is responsible for call center operations, is routinely staffed by inmates who have completed the basic computer courses. One of the academy graduates from the pilot program, Valerie, joined the OIT staff. According to John: “There was a clear difference between Valerie’s confidence and knowledge compared to other inmates. I routinely heard how she solved problems that other call center staff couldn’t. She is getting ready to take the first Cisco CCNA class under the new grant. We know first-hand the quality of the training that these inmates are getting through Cisco Networking Academy.”

“We’ve fundamentally changed the vision and direction of correctional education in the state,” says Melissa. “The results speak for themselves: we’re successfully providing more opportunities for inmates who need—and demonstrated that they deserve—a second chance.”

Video

Watch a video of CDOC women offenders working at the Service Center (4:21):
http://www.cisco.com/web/learning/netacad/us-can/videos/ServiceCenter_Video.wmv

More Information

Learn how Cisco Networking Academy’s flexible learning program can support your training goals:
www.netacad.com