

# Corrections in the Classroom: A Recruiting Tool

By Carter F. Smith

In today's challenging economy, career decisions for many have changed from the most desirable to the most dependable to the most available. Though the starting pay may not be as high as other careers, positions in corrections offer challenges and opportunities not found in other fields. Today's college graduates are likely to look to corrections as they explore opportunities in criminal justice after graduation.

Although some entry-level corrections positions require little more than a high school diploma, many job classifications require a bachelor's degree at a minimum.<sup>1</sup> Some organizations offer tuition assistance in addition to other benefits, and the ability to receive assistance paying for college while on the job promotes longevity.<sup>2</sup> This benefits both the employee and the employer, with an improved work force.<sup>3</sup> This practice may be risky for employers, but a repayment provision in the employment contract can be used to limit long-term losses of the investment in education. This offering can still be costly, however, and may not be able to continue with the increased costs of other benefits.<sup>4</sup> With baby boomers who have weathered the recent fiscal storms and are due to retire soon, combined with anticipated cutbacks in government spending, corrections professionals may have to do even more with even less. If that happens, recruits who already have a college education may be the best candidates. So how should the field recruit them?

## Teaching Corrections

This article includes findings from a survey given to students taking a criminal justice course in 2009. The course, required for the major in criminal justice administration, was well-received by students, many of whom left the course with more enthusiasm about the prospects of entering the corrections profession.

Removing the image of the low-paid correctional officer is central to influencing student enthusiasm for both the course and the profession. The methods used in the class to shine a light on working in the corrections field included highlighting many positive experiences, and discussing a wide variety of situations and showing video documentaries that outline select issues in corrections. However, students in neither class were taken on field trips to correctional facilities to be shown how corrections is performed in practice, nor were guest speakers with correctional experience invited to present to the classes. The primary reason for the lack of field trips is the limitations brought on by the size of the class — often the equivalent of two regular classes, averaging 65 students — and the logistics involved in organizing an off-campus trip for such a group. However, there is no good reason for the lack of guest speakers, and this void in the class will be filled in future classes.

As an alternative to these options, the use of the author's social networks has created a connection to corrections professionals, most of whom would be willing to engage in written conversation with individual students. Virtual communities make an important contribution to an individual's social, educational, political and business lives.<sup>5</sup> Developing and capitalizing on the use of social networks, it appears, would strengthen the ties between students engaged in an active learning process and those engaged in the field in which the students hope to work. Social networks are a powerful foundation from which to develop group identity and cohesion. Using social networks to establish contact with students increases the value of the faculty-student relationship, and provides networking opportunities beyond graduation.

## Social Networking

Many in higher education are using, or to some extent evaluating the use of, contemporary social networking technology such as Facebook.<sup>6</sup> Though the reasons for such exploration are varied, the essence appears to be that learning always occurs in a social context.<sup>7</sup> The technology allows groups with similar interests to form and share information and ideas in both synchronous and asynchronous communication.

So how useful would social networking be in recruiting for corrections professionals? Are prospective correctional employees likely to have access to and regularly use this technology? On the first day of college, 85 percent of college students have a Facebook account.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the first semester, 94 percent of college students have a Facebook account.<sup>9</sup> A sampling of the Facebook site was taken on May 13, 2010, with a search for corrections professionals. There were more than 500 individual matches (Facebook stops counting at 500) with a search of the keyword "corrections," though some appeared to be duplicates and a sampling indicated some were inactive. Most of these individuals appeared to have used Facebook's privacy settings to keep information beyond their name, photograph and select keywords from being accessed by people outside of their social network. A keyword search for corrections also yielded more than 500 group matches (individuals can form groups on Facebook). A few appeared to be outreach-oriented.

Corrections recruiters who want to develop relationships with students might find it easier (and more likely) if they do so with communication methods used by students. While e-mail is still the most widely used means of correspondence in the world,<sup>10</sup> many students prefer messaging on sites like Facebook over campus e-mail.<sup>11</sup> Though many recruiters will likely find Facebook a great place to look for prospective employees, only a few recruiters appear to have made such an effort. A search of the Internet for "cor-

rections recruiter Facebook profile" yielded only the Federal Bureau of Prisons and Corrections Corporation of America in the first page of search results.

## Method

This study examines the results of surveys to a 2000-level course offered in spring and fall of 2009. Both offerings of the course were listed in the course catalog as an introductory, sophomore-level course entitled, "Corrections." The course is three credit hours, and is described as "History of the development of corrections in Europe and America; survey of current prison conditions and operations, including pre-release, probation, and parole." The university has 16-week semesters. The Spring 2009 class had 47 students, and was offered at 8 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The average grade for the class was 76 percent (C), with a median of 76 percent and a standard deviation of 14.52 percent.

The Fall 2009 class had 88 students, and was offered at 11:30 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. The average grade for the class was 84 percent (B), with a median of 85.85 percent and a standard deviation of 10.52 percent. Fifty percent (67) of the students completed surveys.

In order to see how students perceived corrections prior to a formal introduction, a survey link was e-mailed to the students in the final week of the course. The students were asked four non-demographic questions:

- Why did you take this course?
- Describe your knowledge at the beginning of this course regarding the corrections field.
- What is your career objective?
- Have you ever considered working in the corrections field?

In addition, three Likert-scale statements were included:

- My knowledge of corrections has increased because of this course.
- My respect for the corrections field has increased because of this course.
- This course was more interesting than other criminal justice courses I have taken.

## Results

The students in the class were primarily criminal justice majors (78 percent; n=53), with more than half of them male (66 percent; n=45). The respondents' age ranged from 18 to 50, and the average age was 23.1. Most students (91 percent, n=62) stated that they took the course because it was required for their major. A smaller group of students either took the course to learn more about corrections

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(one student) or just thought the course would be interesting (four students). Few of the students reported that they were familiar with corrections prior to the course (5 percent; n=3), with the majority indicating they were not too familiar with the field (49 percent; n=33) and the remainder stating they were only somewhat familiar (46 percent; n=31). Though none of the students indicated that his or her career objective was to work in corrections, when asked if they ever considered working in corrections, more than half (57 percent; n=39) stated they had.

A striking figure was the appreciable increase in respect for the corrections profession. Most (85 percent; n=58) of the students reported an increase in their respect for the corrections field as a result of completing the course. About 66 percent of the students rated the course as more interesting than other criminal justice courses they had previously taken. Considering the small number of students who participated in the surveys, this is obviously just a preliminary look at how students view corrections before and after taking a corrections class. As is the case in nonexperimental studies, it cannot be determined that the students' views were solely influenced by taking the course. However, there is reasonable confidence that the students who took the course did not leave with any additional negative images of the corrections profession.

## Reasons

For those students who were so inclined, an open-ended response to the question "If you have not considered working in the corrections field, please identify the primary reason why" was recorded. The more noteworthy responses follow:

- "Does not sound fun. More dangerous than a normal police officer. I would feel like I am a prisoner because I am working in a jail/prison eight hours a day, five days a week."
- "I just never considered it before. It is certainly not out of the question at this point."
- "Because the pay is not good, and there is too much stress. It's not worth the time and effort you put in to it."
- "I simply believe that I'd find it more appealing being slightly more proactive in preventing crime and helping others."
- "The only way I would truly like to work in the corrections field is to either represent a certain facility or the agency that operates the facilities such as the Federal Bureau of Prisons."
- "I cannot picture myself, a small-framed woman, making a large testosterone- and anger-filled man to do as he is told."
- "It seems like a tough job to hold when dealing with the kind of people most criminals are."
- "Working within a prison environment does not sound appealing to me. After graduating from police academy and being on the streets, it is hard enough to deal with one offender at a time, let alone work with large groups all at one time."

- "I just think it would be a little bit boring for me. I want a job where I am physically and mentally challenged, and I think working in corrections would be settling for less than my expectations."
- "I worked in a county jail for a year and could not see myself doing that for the rest of my life."
- "I intend to go to law school, but I do not personally have a problem with working in corrections."

These observations are fairly typical to the themes and content in class conversations. The challenge for the field appears to be in providing themes that counter or inform these objectives, or render the issues moot.

## Discussion

The findings show how these students initially felt about corrections and how taking the course transformed their perspective of the field. This suggests that one key to getting students interested in corrections is getting them enrolled in a related course. At the most basic level, this can be facilitated by ensuring that it is offered at a desirable time slot. In addition, if the finding that students find corrections classes more interesting than other criminal justice courses holds true elsewhere, there should be little concern about enrollment. On a larger scale, criminal justice faculty and administrators must be educated to the vastness of the field, as well as the opportunities for students.

Social networking sites for professionals are a likely extension into the professional world for use by faculty and alumni to maintain contact. The technology sector has embraced this phenomenon, and many in traditional professions are following suit.<sup>12</sup>

Academics should invite corrections professionals to the classroom, either in a face-to-face or virtual setting. For those not in close proximity to a facility or probation/parole office, incorporating video conferencing into the classroom could be done at little additional expense. The data reveal that exposing students to corrections courses has a potential additional benefit. Since students indicated that their respect for corrections increased dramatically after taking the course, this could stave off future tensions between public criminal justice professionals and those in the field of corrections. This would be a welcome change to the corrections profession considering it is often looked down upon by public law enforcement agencies and other criminal justice professionals.

Challenges for correctional leadership include finding opportunities to give individual attention to students, providing timely and thorough feedback, and encouraging problem solving.<sup>13</sup> Recruiters who want to develop relationships with students might find it easier (and more likely) if they do so with communication methods used by students. Using preferred methods, such as e-mail and Facebook, to communicate with students may mean the difference between identification and engagement. The use of traditional e-mail communication and the presence on social networking sites such as Facebook indicate the willingness of recruiters to communicate in this environment, and these efforts show a modicum of technology adaptability. Implementing the use of social networks while students

attend college would allow recruiters to maintain contact with those students as they go out into the work force following graduation.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Harris, T. 2009. Investing in employees through tuition reimbursement. *Corrections Today*, 71(2):50-52. Alexandria, Va.: American Correctional Association.

<sup>2</sup> Harris, T., 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Black-Dennis, K. 2009. Professional development: Taking responsibility for your own career. *Corrections Today*, 71(2):6-7. Alexandria, Va.: American Correctional Association.

<sup>5</sup> Finin, T., L. Ding, L. Zhou and A. Joshi. 2005. Social networking on the semantic web. *The Learning Organization*, 12(5):418-435. Bingley, United Kingdom: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

<sup>6</sup> Carnevale, D. 2006. E-mail is for old people. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53(7):A27. Washington, D.C.: The Chronicle of Higher Education.

<sup>7</sup> Lamb, A. and L. Johnson. 2006. Want to be my "friend"? What you need to know about social technologies. *Teacher Librarian*, 34(1):55. Seattle: Kurdyła Publishing.

<sup>8</sup> Lenhart, A. and M. Madden. 2007. Social networking websites and teens: An overview. *Pew Internet & American Life Project memo*, Jan. 7. Retrieved from [http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/198/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/198/report_display.asp).

<sup>9</sup> Lenhart, A. and M. Madden 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Carnevale, D., 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Aggarwal, A.K., V. Adlakha and T. Mersha. 2006. Continuous improvement process in web-based education at a public university. *e-Service Journal*, 4(2):3-26, 85-86. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

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*Carter F. Smith, JD, is a doctoral student specializing in gangs and other organizations at Northcentral University.*