Jobs for the Future

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Navigating the Approval Process for Prison Education Program Technology

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Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of corrections education, integrating technology can enhance learning outcomes for students who are incarcerated and prepare them for success in today's world of work. However, getting approval for the technology and equipment necessary to operate high-quality postsecondary education in prison programs presents challenges.

Having worked in corrections education for more than five years, I have experienced these challenges—and learned how to overcome them—firsthand. For example, when introducing our in-cell devices, we had to present and answer questions from multiple stakeholder groups who all had a different point of view. This included procurement, tech, safety, and wardens as well as site educators. We tailored each presentation to the focus we anticipated from the audience. We attempted to preview difficult questions and answer them before they were asked.

While every program and facility is different and no one process brings necessary technology to students in prisons, there are best practices for engaging stakeholders and gaining buy-in from corrections leaders to get approval for the technology and equipment needed to transform education for this population of students.

The following steps can help postsecondary and corrections education leaders develop a strategic approach to gaining buy-in for, implementing, and growing the use of technology to enhance and expand opportunities for quality postsecondary education in facilities.

Be Specific and Empower Education Directors

Clearly articulating how your requested technology will serve your program's goals and support student learning outcomes will go a long way toward empowering your partnering education director(s) to effectively communicate your requests to the stakeholders who will ultimately make the decision.

If you only offer access to tech-enabled education in an education building in the prison, you have different options than if you provide in-cell or housing unit access. Each environment changes how you might consider tech use. For example, if you want to offer one-on-one virtual video access to instructors, tutors, etc., you must consider a device. Cameras, microphones, and speakers have different and obvious use parameters in a cell or housing unit versus in an education building.

To kickstart the process, provide your partnering education stakeholders with a detailed plan outlining the specific needs and compelling reasons behind each request. A good way to approach this task is to consider: What do we want students to know, understand, and be able to do? How will the proposed technology solutions support these learning outcomes and goals? When outlining specific goals and benefits, align them with the mission of the corrections agency.

Be wary of the natural tendency to see what others have and decide you like and want that without first doing any due diligence. For instance, many corrections education departments seek new or additional options for a learning management system (LMS) but selecting the right fit requires several steps. First, education directors must decide where students will need to access different devices (such as in education buildings, in housing unit day rooms, or inside their cells). Depending upon the answer, they must then identify the resources needed to deliver the LMS, including network resources (such as Wi-Fi or hard-wired only), devices and hardware (including where they will need to be located, installed, or stored), and the software allowing instructors to build and deliver course content and let students access the tools and features required to complete course activities and assignments successfully.

The availability of more advanced tools often included in an LMS depends upon operational and security considerations (such as the ability to provide video-based synchronous options on the platform or support for student-to-student communication within the platform). And an LMS that works in one location may not be a good fit for another location based on the operations or overall security disposition of different facilities within the system.

In my experience, education directors armed with precise information can articulate the value of the proposed technology, making it easier for corrections leaders to see the potential impact on individuals' education and rehabilitation during incarceration. You don't need to be a tech expert to make these decisions, but you will benefit from engaging experts from the college or corrections tech department as thought partners and ensuring a full and complete understanding of what students need to be able to do.

Address Security Concerns Proactively

Security is a top priority within correctional facilities. Therefore, adopting a proactive approach to addressing security concerns is essential.

Security staff working within each corrections agency—and within each facility—will have their own view of security and risk. You should understand the concerns of these security partners before selecting a technology plan or solution.

Start by reviewing each item in your detailed plan through the lens of those partners, anticipating concerns they may raise. Then be prepared to speak to those concerns and emphasize the enhanced security features of the proposed technology compared to traditional methods.

To bolster your case, identify similar implementations in other correctional facilities. Engage with corrections personnel who have supported or approved similar initiatives to gather insights and advice. Completing this due diligence first will not only validate and strengthen your proposal but also help build a network of support within the corrections community.

Remember, there is still always risk, so rather than trying to dismiss the risk, focus on anticipating where challenges or issues could arise and how you will respond when they do. Here in Wisconsin, we initially allowed students to offload created content to a flash drive for permanent storage. A security issue arose that required us to disallow flash drives and change our method for this task.

Before that occurred, we took several mitigating steps. We were honest about the risks upfront, responded in partnership with security staff, and moved swiftly to implement mitigation strategies. We first limited the size and types of files that could be loaded, which worked for some time. Next, we modified how we "wiped" devices each semester. In the final step, we completely eliminated the use of flash drives. Because we have broad support and open dialogue, we work through issues such as this as they come up rather than simply canceling the use of the devices at the first sign of trouble.

When a situation like this arises, talk it through with security staff to determine why it happened, explore options for mitigating it, and decide on a workaround. It is likewise critically important to maintain an open dialogue between education and security partners as you consider, develop, and initiate solutions.

Use the Expertise of Your Academic Community

Drawing on the expertise of the academic community is another valuable strategy for educators working at a partnering postsecondary institution or within corrections.

As a starting point, explore the technology used on campuses for relevant programs and seek recommendations from academic contacts for potential security-friendly alternatives. Collaborating with experts from the academic community brings a fresh perspective to the table and strengthens your case by aligning it with practices other educators have found successful.

You may also be able to share success stories that showcase instances where campus-built equipment designed specifically for corrections programs has yielded positive outcomes to inspire creativity on the part of the academic community and demonstrate good-faith efforts to find options suitable for a corrections environment. In Wisconsin, we used two colleges that downloaded an LMS behind their firewalls for the first five years of our online programs. This provided a static, direct, and protected channel for data that folks outside of corrections and the college could not access directly. These partners had to manage both our LMS and the one they use for campus students. While this became unsustainable for multiple college partners, it opened the door to create a cloud-based LMS that we control.

Engaging with academic partners to understand how they collect data on students and programs and working collaboratively with them to determine how to collect the data necessary to advance postsecondary education in prison initiatives is also a crucial next step in our field. In Wisconsin and

across the country, one of the chief challenges we face is determining how to approach data collection for postsecondary programs. We seek to gather data that will support the federally required best interest determinations, track program participation, and identify what program completion rates reveal about efficacy at both a programmatic and individual level (what is the student gaining or what is the program providing to the carceral setting; that is, does it offer conflict resolution, confidence, teamwork). Tapping into the expertise of institutional research professionals at partnering colleges and universities will be critical for finding solutions to these challenges.

Speak Clearly and Tailor Your Points to Your Audience

As the first three strategies demonstrate, regular communication and dialogue between partners play an essential role in the success of these efforts, and it is likewise essential to use a clear and effective mode of communication when discussing technology with corrections partners. For instance, you will want to be prepared to discuss the security features of the proposed technology in clear, understandable terms. Many correctional personnel are not IT experts, so you must convey information in a way that resonates with a broader audience.

I often find analogies helpful in these conversations. For instance, when we talk about extending technology to some of our rural prison sites, we must consider bandwidth. We also need to convey the need to prioritize certain computer systems (such as security and health). When articulating the challenges of extending bandwidth to and throughout correctional facilities to others, I often use the analogy of a highway. I suggest my audience imagine that the capacity of a typical bandwidth pipe is roughly the equivalent of a 12-lane highway, but it tightens to a four-lane highway when it reaches the wall of the facility. In some cases, the highway gets even narrower as it winds throughout the institution and may even be reduced to a one-lane dirt road. This analogy helps my audience better understand the specific challenges we face in correctional environments.

Ultimately, everyone can and should find their own way to understand and communicate the needs and challenges of any given technology solution to achieve better understanding and collective problem solving among stakeholders. For technical discussions, lean on campus or corrections IT experts for support in facilitating these conversations. Their expertise can help bridge the gap and put all stakeholders on the same page.

Consider the Logistics of Implementation

Addressing the logistics of implementing new technology is similarly vital for a smooth approval process. Talk through the procurement and authorization processes, especially if the corrections agency is making

the purchase. You will also want to clarify budget responsibilities, payment arrangements, and fiscal year considerations to avoid any roadblocks.

You should plan for the involvement of the IT teams who will ultimately configure devices and accessories and ensure compatibility. Coordinate with the facility's buildings and grounds team to ensure infrastructure readiness, including electrical work and cabling.

In each of these logistical areas, patience is a virtue, as the more you pre-plan, the easier it will be to actually implement technology solutions that work. By proactively addressing these logistical considerations in advance, you set the stage for a much more seamless implementation process.

Understand Licensing Procedures

Navigating the complexities of licensing is yet another critical step in the approval process. Determine which partner will obtain the necessary licenses, how they will be registered, and who will deploy them within the corrections facility. Investigate the possibility of using the college's existing site licenses for students who are incarcerated to streamline the process.

This can present unique challenges. For example, almost every college partner has an institutional license for a word processing system. The college receives the software license and can email the license code key to students. Often, these utilities work differently in corrections as individual students don't have an email address and cannot download software from the internet. There must be a specialized path to test and launch software to users.

Manage Expectations for Adding New Tech Vendors

Finally, set realistic expectations when making the case to introduce new technology solutions and/or new vendors. The approval process for a technology vendor can be especially time consuming (a reasonable estimate would be two years). Clearly communicate this timeline to all stakeholders involved to manage expectations and encourage a more patient and cooperative approach to the new technology's implementation.

This is the timeline for selecting and launching our LMS, which includes some pandemic-related delays:

- → **October to December 2019:** Decide to create LMS following issues with allowing each college partner to use their own.
- → **January to October 2020:** Use college partners, site staff, and student voice to assess potential LMS providers and review existing ones while working with procurement, tech, administration, and budget.

- → **November 2020 to January 2021:** Issue requests for proposal and review presentations from four qualified vendors, with a second presentation for security and tech staff.
- → **February to April 2021:** Select and set the framework for the contract process.
- → **May 2021-Jan 2023:** Engage in contract negotiations delayed by COVID-related resource shifts.
- → **February to June 2023:** Receive OK from decision group and await IT resource availability.
- → **July 2023 to October 2023:** Activate proposal and establish implementation and training plan with vendor.
- → **October 2023 to January 2024:** Onboard and launch LMS for one college partner at eight prisons serving 140 students in up to 22 courses.

The example involved a complex and large initiative with multiple moving parts complicated by COVID issues. In other cases, we anticipate a 12- to 18-month procurement process depending upon many variables. In addition, once we have a purchasing decision, we may take 12 to 18 months for resources from our tech teams to implement (depending upon how many teams from IT are involved, the complexities of the initiative, how the initiative is prioritized, and how many other business units have projects they are waiting for). Sometimes the procurement process is done concurrently with the IT resource process.

Conclusion

Gaining approval for educational technology that can support quality postsecondary programs in correctional facilities requires a strategic and collaborative approach. By being specific and proactive and using your academic community's expertise, you can build a compelling case for the integration of technology in corrections education. Speaking knowledgeably, considering logistics, understanding licensing procedures, and managing expectations will contribute to a successful approval process.

Every small step to enhance technology integration translates into full strides in increasing the quality of these programs, better preparing folks for post-release success in our technology-centric society, and paving pathways to quality jobs and better lives after release. While no two systems are identical, these general recommendations can help you get started.

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