



COFFEE CREEK CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

Certification Prepares Offenders for Employment

Certiport offline-testing capabilities provide participants of correctional facility's Computer Technology course opportunity to earn certifications and succeed in employment and college

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A Federal Bureau of Prisons study discovered a 33 percent decrease in recidivism among individuals who participated in vocational and apprenticeship training while incarcerated¹. At Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (CCCF) in Wilsonville, Oregon, offenders have access to such training via a Computer Technology program, which offers computing skills relevant to employment and academia outside of the prison system. With certification of these employable skills made possible by Certiport® offline-testing technology, participants are encouraged to achieve, contribute to society and improve their lives.

To help correctional institutions like CCCF meet their employability program objectives, Certiport provides a comprehensive approach to developing digital skills while providing industry-recognized credentials such as Certiport Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC³®) for digital literacy and Microsoft® Office Specialist for desktop productivity.

BACKGROUND

Five years ago, computer technologies trainer Sara Hargrave designed the Computer Technology program at CCCF, the only all-female prison in Oregon. Her objective was to prepare her students to transition back into their communities and into the workforce upon release from prison. She focused the program on both the skills required to use information communications technologies (ICTs) and on providing behavioural and emotional training; employability skills such as resumés, cover letters, job applications, interviewing skills and felony explanations; and communication skills. IC³ and Office Specialist certification are included in the program to provide students credentials with which employers are familiar.



"A certificate of completion from my course is one thing," she said, "but a certificate from Microsoft is another."

PROCESS

Hargrave first defined a set of qualifications required of participants in the CCCF Computer Technology program. Individuals must have at least 18 months left in their sentence, must have a general equivalency or high school diploma, must have a misconduct-free record for at least six months and must meet reading- and math-skill requirements. Prior computing experience is not necessary. "Usually they don't have prior experience with hardware, networking or computers," Hargrave said. "Some have never seen the Internet and have no idea what I'm talking about. That's what they're here to learn."

Hargrave said when seats in her program are open, she asks prospective students to complete a program application, write an essay about why they seek ICT skills and interview with her. After this phase of the screening process, current students in the program interview prospective students. Based on the recommendation of current students and Hargrave's own feelings about an offender, she grants acceptance into the program. Unfortunately, many are turned away. "We have approximately 500 inmates in minimum security and only 15 seats in my program," she said. "Although there is another work-based education program in the minimum security facility, not all inmates get an opportunity to acquire employability skills."

Hargrave's program consists of six courses of study: Microsoft Word, PowerPoint®, Access™, Excel®, Web-page development and hardware. During each 12-week course, a mixture of new and existing students mentor and interact with each other for five hours each Monday through Friday morning. After instruction by Hargrave, a Microsoft Office



Specialist Master Instructor, students have one hour of homework each day and can use any of the 15 computers in the facility's lab for one-on-one tutoring and other projects from 12:30 to 2:30 p.m. The lab is networked to provide an Intranet experience that enables students to practice in an online environment.

"As students progress through the courses, they obtain skills they will utilize in every day life after parole," Hargrave said. "They graduate when they've completed all six courses. IC³ and Office Specialist certifications are part of the process."

After completing a course, students use practice exams to review course material and, if they wish, schedule time to take certification exams at CCCF, a Certiport Center. Because CCCF—like most correctional facilities—does not offer students access to the Internet, new Certiport technology has allowed them to take their exams in an offline-computing environment.

Previously, Hargrave stored a modem in a locked box for security. Before administering an exam, she unlocked the box, removed the modem, hooked it up to a standalone computer, administered the test, disconnected everything and locked up the modem again. The process changed dramatically when Certiport introduced its exclusive offline-testing technology.

"I no longer have to worry about Internet access," Hargrave explained. "I don't have to worry about security or the potential security risks. I can load more than one exam at a time on portable drives provided by Certiport. The process is less stressful and more convenient as I prepare to administer an exam. In addition, we're saving the costs associated with paying an Internet Service Provider each month for Internet access."

Students pay a \$20 portion of the certification exam fee; certification is not required because not everyone can afford it. "By paying for a portion of their exam, students feel like they are investing in their own education," Hargrave said. "Most students will find a way to pay for it. They budget for it, or their family will send them money."

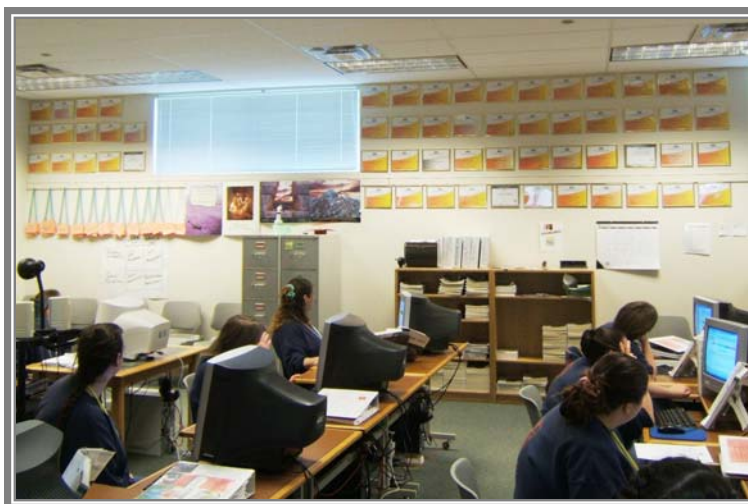
Melanie Christenson is a Microsoft Office Specialist Master with Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint and Access certifications. She jumped at the opportunity to participate in the Computer Technology program and earn Office Specialist certifications while incarcerated at CCCF. "I figured that if I'm going to do the training and a certification is offered, I'm going to certify," she said. "Paying the fee there was better than waiting and paying more when I was released. If you're willing to go the distance, want to improve and are willing to learn, you should be willing to take the tests."

Indeed, Hargrave tells her students the extra knowledge required of Office Specialists proves "you don't just know your way around the program, you can make it dance."

Since CCCF began offering Certiport IC³ late last year, five students have demonstrated their current and relevant skills by earning IC³. In the past three years, Hargrave's students have also earned 19 Microsoft Word certifications, 19 Excel certifications, nine PowerPoint certifications and 16 Access certifications. Six students are certified Office Specialist Masters.

Around the classroom, Hargrave proudly hangs photocopies of each student's certificates. "It's our own wall of fame," she said. "They showcase our successes and serve as examples to new students."

Because they can rely on Computer Technology students' skills, CCCF staff members often ask





Hargrave's students to complete real-world projects such as creating databases, Web sites, brochures, flyers and invitations. Students are involved with the projects from the ground level and meet with staff members to ask questions, make a project plan and manage the task.

Under Hargrave's guidance, students also coordinate a business, "Prison Bytes," which uses technology to create greeting cards and stationary and sells them to minimum and medium-security inmates at CCCF. Two students have been hired and receive Prison Reform Inmate Work Act Measure 17 award points to coordinate the business, receiving and filling orders.

"We create an environment for practical, on-the-job experience," Hargrave said. "The projects and the business really give students an opportunity for practice. They can't wait until they are employed and on a job to start practicing what they learned in this program."

RESULT

Hargrave said students who have graduated from her course and left prison are out in the community obtaining good jobs, attending college, earning degrees and experiencing a higher level of self-esteem because of their experience in the Computer Technology program at CCCF.

"I have no doubt individuals who truly desire change are those who really take seriously their learning and make an effort to use the skills they acquire in my program," Hargrave said. "Some overcome obstacles like mental illness, physical illness, behavior management issues and low self-esteem to accomplish their goals. They get into the program and work hard, and I counsel and work one-on-one with them to increase their comfort level with technology. Once they get through the first course, you see an increase in their self-esteem. They say, 'I can really do this.'"

As the program has grown, Hargrave has found ways to work with employers in Oregon communities to help program graduates with job searches when they leave the facility. Some graduates have shown their certificates to local community colleges, which have waived course requirements because of the credentials. In addition, individuals who earn IC³ or Office Specialist certification may apply for college credit through American Council on Education (ACE) member institutions. Participating colleges grant credit and may waive the associated tuition requirements, allowing program graduates to apply their certifications toward academic degrees.

"As we help inmates, we help their families," Hargrave said. "This knowledge and these skills impact recidivism, our communities and our nation."

Employment is an important factor in reducing recidivismⁱⁱ, and high recidivism rates can certainly be attributed to a lack of employable and life skillsⁱⁱⁱ. Offenders who participate in education programs are significantly less likely to recidivate, saving taxpayers millions of dollars each year in incarceration and associated prison costs^{iv}. In fact, when individuals participate in vocational and educational programs while incarcerated, society reaps a return of \$7.13 for every dollar spent on the training programs^v.

Christenson knows from personal experience how valuable her training and certifications have been to her life after prison. "I am more employable because I have more than a basic knowledge of Microsoft programs," she said. When she interviewed at Oswald Insurance Agency, Christenson was among four candidates considered for the job. "I was able to walk in with certifications. I could prove I know the programs inside and out."

Although her prison time would undoubtedly factor into a hiring decision, Christenson was hopeful the education she received while detained would help her overcome her past. Fortunately, it did.

After interviewing Christenson, David Oswald, owner of Oswald Insurance Agency, did a thorough background check and verified the information Christenson gave him. Comfortable



with the results and impressed by her skills, he offered her a job. "When everything checked out, I looked at her as I would any other candidate," he said. "I felt she had skills, she was willing to work the hours we needed, she filled a niche for us with her computing skills and she was willing to grow with the agency. I took her at her word and overlooked the past. Everything's proven to be true."

A customer service representative at the agency, Christenson knows Oswald had to weigh the pros and cons of her history carefully. "He's not worried about that now," she said. "He looked past my background and focused on my skills. He considered what I would bring into the business and overrode my conviction and lack of job history to hire me. I've proven myself to him and the other agents. Now we talk about my future career goals."

Christenson's certifications have proven very useful on the job. "I teach my boss and the other agents different uses of the programs," she said. "I create formulas in spreadsheets to prepare insurance quotes and format the data in a presentable way. I can perform these tasks more efficiently and reduce redundancy."

Oswald said computing skills like these mean a lot when hiring new employees. "Melanie actually has excellent skills," he said. "Her expertise is very helpful and timely and reduces stress around the office. Her skills are invaluable and a very important part of our agency."

Christenson acknowledged that individuals with criminal backgrounds have a lot going against them. "But taking the time to get certified improved my chances of employability," she said. "I learned to set and achieve goals and focus on life beyond prison. I've been out and working almost one year. I'm a full-time student at Linn-Benton Community College, and I'm working toward a business administration degree in finance."

"I believe in second chances," Oswald said. "We all need grace once in a while. Provided hiring her wouldn't compromise my business or my customers, I was not going to allow Melanie's past dictate her potential future. Hiring her was a good decision. She's proven herself, is a dedicated employee and is holding her own. She is getting licensed to sell health insurance and has a good future with us."

ABOUT CERTIPOINT

Certipoint prepares individuals with current and relevant digital skills and credentials for the competitive global workforce. These solutions are delivered by more than 12,000 Certipoint Centers worldwide and include Certipoint Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC³®), the official Microsoft® Office certification programs and the Adobe® Certified Associate certification program. For more information, visit www.certipoint.com.

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ⁱ State of the Bureau; *BOP Publication, 2001.*

ⁱⁱ Reducing Recidivism Through Work: Barriers and Opportunities for Employment of Ex-Offenders; *Great Cities Institute, University of Illinois at Chicago; Svenja Heinrich; September 2000.*

ⁱⁱⁱ They're Coming Back: An Action Plan for Successful Reintegration of Offenders that Works for Everyone; *Philadelphia Consensus Group on Reentry & Reintegration of Adjudicated Offenders, 2003.*

^{iv} Prison Education Program Participation and Recidivism: A Test of the Normalization Hypothesis; *Federal Bureau of Prisons Office of Research and Evaluation; Miles D. Harer, May 1995.*

^v The Comparative Costs and Benefits of Programs to Reduce Crime, *Version 4.0; Washington State Institute for Public Policy; Steve Aos, Polly Phipps, Robert Barnoski and Roxanne Lieb; May 2001.*