

Case Study: Networking Academies at Prisons

Massachusetts State Department of Corrections

Networking Academy Pilot Helps Win Federal Grant for State Prison

Go beyond the vision: prove your commitment

Grants can play an important role in funding innovative programs. The Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) decided to present a proposal to the Department of Justice (DoJ), which administers Second Chance Act (SCA) funding. The SCA is a federally funded program aimed at improving reentry programs to reduce recidivism.

In the digital era, information and communication technology (ICT) professionals are in high demand. The DOC Education Division decided to ask for funding to set up a technology education program based on Cisco Networking Academy courses. Cisco training and certifications can provide inmates with the credentials, confidence, and problem solving skills that lead to meaningful (well paying, sustainable) employment.

Before they submitted the grant proposal, Brian Flynn, who ran the DOC's Computers for Schools program for over a decade, was chosen to be the technical coordinator for the new learning program. Brian recommended setting up a pilot at the DOC facility in Shirley, Massachusetts.

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

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

Per Brian, "Students in prison can sometimes be especially intimidated by these courses. They do not think they're smart enough to learn the material. But then when they master a concept, it is like a light bulb goes off. It shows them they can learn anything."

Instead of just explaining their vision in abstract terms, the success of the academy pilot was used to demonstrate the DOC's knowledge and commitment. And it turned out to be one of the reasons that the DOC

received the grant to expand the program. In fact, the DOC received several extensions to the grant in the years that followed.

Setting up the pilot program

If you are interested in setting up a pilot for a technology education program in an incarceration facility, here are some of the details around how the Massachusetts DOC went about it.

Requirements	Approach
Curriculum	 Brian chose the Cisco Networking Academy's IT Essentials (ITE) curriculum (which covers computer installation, maintenance, networking, and security), because he felt that it provides a strong foundation for entry-level IT jobs.
Physical space and tools	 The design of the classrooms was based on Brian's experience in the manufacturing sector (he suggests that others interested in starting a program look at classrooms and labs in vocational schools).
	 In one room, students move from classroom-style learning to workbenches, applying principles to projects immediately and reinforcing what they have just learned.
	 Special security cabinets hold the physical tools that students work with to rebuild computers and set up physical networks.
Instructor training and textbooks	 Brian had previously earned his CompTIA A+ certification. To prepare for the new prison training program, he received his instructor training and credentials from Bunker Hill Community College (which was providing support to new local academies) to teach the ITE curriculum. The college also donated textbooks for the pilot program, and set up articulation with the Massachusetts DOC to provide credit for the ITE course if prison students matriculated.
	 Part of the grant proposal was hiring and training 5 instructors to extend the program to other DOC facilities.
A secure network	 Because of security requirements inside prisons, students cannot have Internet access, so they have to access course material and tests on a closed server.
	 Brian worked with nearby Networking Academy instructors to import all of the necessary course content for the pilot to a closed server.
	 Tom Romaniecki, one of the instructors hired under the grant, replicated the Cisco exam for an internal server using Exam View.
Certification	 Students who prepare sufficiently can take an exam to earn an industry-recognized certification, such as CompTIA A+ or Cisco CCENT. Certifications validate the skills and knowledge for potential employers.

How the secure network continues to support reentry after release

Once inmates complete their coursework and are released from prison, they can use their same academy student accounts to review what they learned, and to enroll in more advanced courses. They have the same access to the resources available to all academy students, including other certification prep and job listings.

Partnerships for job experience and references

Brian knew that prospective employees would be looking for job experience and references—but the DOC is not allowed to provide either of these due to CORI restrictions. He set out to find "bridge" partners who can help with that essential next step in moving from training to employment. Partners can find ways to offer handson experience on a volunteer basis, or encourage employers to take a chance on newly released individuals. Following are tips for finding bridge partners:

- Ask community and business leaders to come to the prison as guest speakers. Students appreciate learning about technology jobs, and speakers often become advocates for helping find employment after release.
- Engage and involve prison counselors, who usually have extensive connections in the community.
- Reach out to community-based organizations that may already offer support programs for inner city families, or for families of inmates. Their goals of restoring lives and reuniting families are a perfect fit for reentry program goals.

More Information

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