

## March Feature

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### CE Cultivates 'Learning Organizations'

Organizations that want to stay competitive must find ways to increase their effectiveness. Having the capacity to adapt to rapid change and produce results is key to realizing success. However, having skilled employees may not be enough. To truly succeed, according to Peter Senge, the influential business strategist, organizations must discover how to engender a commitment to continually learn among all people in the organization—to become “learning organizations.” Senge believes cultivating that link between individual performance and organization performance, through dialogue and systemic thinking, can yield extraordinary results. While some may view the concept of a learning organization as an ideal, several entities have been making efforts toward realizing this ideal—and are turning to continuing education for help.

In July of 2005, the state of California passed legislation to merge two public agencies—the California Youth Authority and the California Department of Corrections. The new incarnation—the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR)—had a new strategic plan and a new mission. Nancy Baldwin, Chief Learning Officer at CDCR, explains that this scale of restructuring served as an opportunity to re-evaluate the organization’s entire system, including aspects of workforce excellence, technical training, and staff development.

CDCR decided to search for outside expertise, which led them to **California State University-Sacramento**, College of Continuing Education. “At the time, everyone felt unsettled,” says Baldwin. “We had to learn a lot of new things. It was quite a period of turmoil ... we needed a strong, credible program. That’s why we went through the college system.” CDCR subsequently began a leadership development program with Sacramento State. “The four-day leadership program for 84 executives has been successful,” Baldwin says. “Participants have generated a buzz in the department. They are talking about concepts they are learning—and using them. Now we want to be more ambitious. Let’s not involve just one college, but let’s try the whole system. We want new ways of doing business—to get staff geared up into being a learning organization. Each person has to be a ‘learning person.’ That’s the idea.”

This spring CDCR plans to launch a pilot program for supervisor and management education, which will be distributed around the state.

**Corporate Sector Turns to CE** The corporate sector is also turning to continuing education to fulfill its educational needs. Cendant Mobility, headquartered in Fairfield County, Conn., is an international organization of 5,000 employees worldwide. In March 2001, the company forged a unique relationship with **Fairfield University** to build a shared commitment to employee education.

Fairfield has 3,500 full-time undergraduate students and 1,500 part-time (undergraduate and graduate) students. University College, one of the six colleges at the University, was the first to partner with Cendant Mobility. Cendant’s president was a Fairfield alumnus, and had approached the University about conducting business writing sessions.

That instruction developed into a certificate program, which eventually blossomed into the development of a two-year Master of Communication (MAC) degree. According to Art McAdams, Director of Professional Development at University College, the program was designed with a strong commitment from Cendant Mobility executives, the students, and the university. “We used a cohort model. The group starts [the program] at the same time, taking the same classes in the same order,” McAdams says. “We bring the education to them onsite. This is a delivery mechanism professional people really like.”

The success of the MAC program has spurred the completion of a second MAC program, other noncredit programs (one of which was taught at Fairfield by a Cendant human resource executive) and a project management for Six Sigma program—and it is still growing. McAdams explains that a Master of Business Administration degree program is planned to begin in fall of 2006, and that “University College will serve as a broker and

liaison to work with the business school for the program." A large part of the success, McAdams points out, is the continued encouragement for the learning programs throughout the company: "The President of Cendant Mobility and the Executive Vice President are really big advocates of an educated workforce."

#### A 'Mini-University'

Central Vermont Medical Center (CVMC), one of the largest employers in central Vermont, is another organization creating a learning organization with the help of continuing education.

The Technology Extension Division (TED) of **Vermont Technical College** in Randolph Center began working with manufacturing businesses, such as IBM and General Dynamics, in 2000 to provide technical training to their employees. In 2001, according to Maureen Hebert, Manager of Education and Training at TED, the institution branched out into the medical field and took the lead with CVMC.

"We approached them because we did work with other businesses and they had an identified need," Hebert says. "Because the state is small, it's hard to get training resources in this area. Most colleges [in the state] are traditional and have more traditional-age students. They don't offer a lot of online classes or classes in the evenings, so we met the need."

This model is unique in that TED has created a "miniuniversity" at CVMC, with Hebert onsite at the hospital full time, performing yearly assessments and coordinating all training and education efforts. "I serve on committees and chair committees, so I really am part of the organization. People forget I belong to the college," says Hebert.

TED provides a wide variety of learning options to the 1,100 employees, ranging from CPR training to leadership certificates to computer courses. Most programs provide CEUs and college credit for certification. In some cases, such as with the leadership program, students can apply those hours as college credit and can transfer credits to other institutions if they so choose. The health care industry, being highly regulated, does require compliance and mandatory training; however, Hebert noted that the learning goes beyond that. "We do measure success through the regulatory bodies, but also by the hospital's own mission and goals for the year," she says.

The plan for TED is to continue making partnerships of this kind. "We've been able to get grant funding because of this unique partnership," Hebert says. "Since October 2001, we've gotten over \$500,000 in grants to help support programs." With funding in place, TED plans to increase its role in creating learning organizations throughout the state.

—Kandace Studzinski

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