Training for a new life

Goal of MATC machining program is to reduce recidivism and put offenders on career path
Michael Williams was a smart kid with an interest in technology and a bright future. He did well in school and started college-level classes when he was only 15, eventually earning an associate’s degree in electronics from Milwaukee Area Technical College in 2002.

Then his progress stalled.

As a young man with a low-paying manufacturing job and a baby on the way, he took a shortcut to earning more money and ended up behind bars for selling marijuana.

Now 33 and living in Milwaukee, Williams was incarcerated on and off between 2005 and 2015, mostly for a string of probation violations that followed his initial drug conviction. He’d already begun the career he wanted, but a decade out of the workforce plus a criminal record threatened his future.

He was finishing his last stretch of time in a work-release program when he learned about MATC’s CNC (computer numerical control) training program for offenders. He jumped at it.

With the help of the 14-week pilot program, he gained the skills necessary to complete a higher degree in machining and compete for better-paying work. Nearly two years later, he has a good job, is buying a house and is building a future that he’s proud of.

“I wanted it and I needed it, so I was very determined to make it happen,” Williams says. “(The program) opened a lot of doors for me.”

**Inmates as students**

The CNC program at MATC started in 2015 as a pilot program designed to give inmates who were near release the coursework, experience and support they would need to secure good jobs after they got out of prison. Funded by a state grant and supported by the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, the program was set up to offer a 14-credit CNC technical education certificate to eligible offenders who planned to return to the Milwaukee area. The goal was to reduce recidivism and put offenders on a path to a solid career with living wages.

Inmates eligible for the program were incarcerated at the Marshall E. Sherrrr Correctional Center, the Felmers O. Chaney Correctional Center and the Milwaukee Women’s Correctional Center. In addition, offenders who were under the Division of Community Corrections supervision in Milwaukee were eligible.

Inmates at work-release centers are within two years of release and are eligible to leave the facility for jobs and educational opportunities as long as they abide by the rules of their facility, says Cheryl Randall, vice president of economic and workforce development and grants at MATC.

The program participants were committed to bettering themselves, says Dorothy Walker, interim dean of MATC’s School of Technology and Applied Sciences.

“They are very dedicated,” she says. “They concentrate on the work they need to do to learn the skill sets they need to get hired by a company, make sustainable wages and support themselves and their families.”

The CNC program is a good example of what proper assessment and solid education and support can do for offenders who are dedicated to changing their lives.

“This is pretty technical, relatively difficult training, and math skills really need to be at a higher level,” says Silvia Jackson, the state DOC’s re-entry director. “Training builds confidence. Some of these people have never succeeded before in their life. Now they’ve graduated, received a certificate and have a marketable skill,” she says.

**Five rounds concluded**

Originally, the plan was to offer four rounds, or cohorts, of the class, including one exclusively for women. Because there were funds remaining after the fourth cohort, the college added a fifth, which concluded Aug. 19.

“To us, they’re students,” Walker says. “They’re people who are still incarcerated and have an opportunity to change and transform their lives. There is security, but we want them to feel as though they are a college student on a college campus.”
The first cohort attended class on a third-shift, 10 p.m.-to-6 a.m. schedule, and subsequent cohorts moved to a second-shift schedule, Walker says. “They’re with the instructors, taking classes just like everybody else,” she says. “We don’t want to treat them any different. We want them to acclimate to being in a normal setting because when they get into the workforce, they will be in a normal setting.”

The first two and last two cohorts were all male, and the third cohort was all female, but they all followed the same curriculum: classes in machine trades math, blueprint reading, metrology, introduction to CNC, manual vertical milling machining and CNC vertical machining.

Williams, who graduated with the first cohort in April 2015, returned to MATC after his release from corrections to continue his education. He expects to graduate in December with a CNC technician diploma. “By me taking the course, I was able to make more money than I made before,” he says. “I’m on my way to purchasing my first home.”

Williams works for Snap-On Tools and hopes to advance to supervisor before long. He’s also considering a career in real estate. In the meantime, he is able to be the kind of influence for his 11-year-old son, Loron, that he always wanted to be. “I’m an excellent example now,” Williams says. “I’ve got a good job. I’m buying a house for him. It’s really for him, something I can leave to him. Instead of having to struggle, he’ll have something. It worked out for me because I took this program.”

Who pays?

The first five cohorts were funded by a $703,500 Wisconsin Fast Forward-Blueprint for Prosperity grant from the state Department of Workforce Development and $23,000 from the state DOC. That funding ends in December. Early this year, MATC officials began looking for funding to continue the program. In June, MATC was one of 67 schools chosen for the U.S. Department of Education’s new Second Chance Pell pilot program, an experiment to determine whether making financial aid available to inmates increases their participation in educational opportunities.

Though the federal Pell Grant program for low-income students has not been available to federal or state inmates since 1994, the Second Chance Pell program is specifically for people who are incarcerated.

A 2013 study by the RAND Corporation funded by the U.S. Department of Justice found that educational opportunities for offenders decreased by 43 percent the likelihood they would return to prison within three years. In addition, the study found that every dollar invested in correctional education programs saves $4 to $5 on three-year reincarceration costs. “That’s a very big deal,” Randall says. “We are very excited about that. While they’re still in correctional centers, even though they have more freedom, they’re still considered to be incarcerated. While they’re incarcerated, in the past there hasn’t been an opportunity for them to apply for Pell Grants,” she says.

The Second Chance Pell program will provide roughly $30 million in grants nationwide, which is less than 0.1 percent of the overall $30 billion Pell program, to incarcerated students in 27 states. The funds are available to prisoners who are eligible for release within five years of enrolling in a college program; 12,000 students are expected to participate nationally.

The Second Chance Pell program at MATC will be available to 250 inmates, though those funds can be used only for tuition. The support component of the program, which is essential to the success of the students, has to be funded some other way. Support includes an educational assistant, a lab assistant and a student specialist who mentors the students and guides them as they start to plan for a different sort of life. The support has proven to be so important, Walker says, that MATC is looking at ways to implement that into its regular educational programs. “That’s what really, really makes this all work,” Walker says. “What we’re looking at now is how we will be able to put this together. Is there other grant money we can use? We know this is the tipping point on this. Attendance is not a problem because (students) are still within the system, but support is critical. “(Support) helps with the recidivism rate for incarcerated students, and we feel over time it will also help with retention rates here at the college,” she says. “This is something I feel very passionate about. We’re going to find the monies to keep it going.”

Randall says one way to judge the success of the support
component is to look at the completion rate for the CNC program for offenders. In its first five cohorts, it had an 82 percent completion rate, higher than the rate for the regular program, which she declined to spell out. However, the two programs are not identical, so exact comparisons cannot be made, she notes.

To qualify for the next round of the CNC program, offenders will have to complete the FAFSA requirements (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) in addition to being within five years of release. Walker expects the next cohort to begin before the end of the year.

As with the first round, the DOC will provide transportation for students to and from MATC.

The five completed cohorts had 68 participants, and 56 of them completed the training and received certification in CNC machining operations — milling. That far exceeds the initial goal of the program, which was to graduate 48 students, according to a progress report prepared by MATC for the Wisconsin Fast Forward-Blueprint for Prosperity program.

Of the graduates, 29 are working in manufacturing in a variety of areas: assembly, packaging, welding, machine operators as well as CNC. The students who have been hired as CNC operators or CNC machinists had experience in the field prior to receiving the training at MATC. When he was sentenced to 20 years in prison for four felony burglary charges. His then-wife was expecting their child when he was sentenced, and he met his 5-month-old son in the visitors room of Waupun Correctional Institution.

Curtis took all the classes he could during his 15 years in a series of prisons. As his son was growing up without him, Curtis was determined to do whatever he could to be the role model Jaydon deserved.

“I told myself I had to do something totally different in life,” he says. “I always liked the law, but unfortunately I was on the wrong side of the law.”

Since his April 2015 release, Curtis has started his own business as a paralegal and process server and is considering law school. Although manufacturing was not his destiny, the CNC re-entry program helped him get a job in machining after his release.

“I pretty much used (the income from the CNC job) to finance where I am now,” he says. “I used (the program) as a stepping stone to learn a new skill as well as to do what I actually wanted to do. It helped me catapult to where I needed to go.”

Support from business

Employer buy-in is a critical part of the re-entry process, Walker says, and field trips to area manufacturing plants are part of the MATC program.

“Some employers are willing to train; some have an appren-
ticeship process," she says. "We're working with employers to see how successful (program graduates) are on the job site. We'd like to recruit more employers. Not every employer is offender-friendly."

Michael A. Mallwitz, president of Busch Precision Inc. in Milwaukee, is on the CNC advisory committee at MATC and strongly supports the re-entry program.

Because Busch Precision does custom and advanced machining, it's not a destination for entry-level operators such as new graduates of MATC's program, Mallwitz says. But students have toured the facility and have impressed him with their commitment.

"They're getting that good foundation through MATC," he says. "We want to encourage them, not be a roadblock for them. We're excited to help. You could not tell, from the two cohorts of men and one of women we had through here, they had been incarcerated."

Mallwitz says MATC's re-entry program is helping to solve two problems: It is creating a new pool from which to draw skilled employees, and it is providing a showcase for what modern manufacturing is all about.

"There's a shortage of people, and this is a great pool," he says. According to the state DWD, Wisconsin is experiencing its lowest unemployment rate in 15 years and there are more than 90,000 job openings statewide.

"The re-entry program is much more than a workforce program; it is an emerging talent development strategy," says Ethan Schuh of the DWD in an email. "With experienced or latent skill sets waiting to be developed and released to the local labor market, DOC, DWD, technical colleges and workforce partners view the offender population as an untapped talent pool that has proven to be capable of quickly developing technical skill sets through standard training programs."

And as that untapped pool becomes job-ready, the changes affect more than just the offenders.

"We realize if in fact we can get them this training, they realize they can change their lives and what they do impacts not just them but the people around them," Walker says. "It also changes what happens within the community — it makes the community safer. And people don't go back in (prison) because they have something that sustains them."

For that reason, MATC's goal for the program — to educate a certain number of inmates in CNC machining — has a larger purpose.

"We want people to be employed," Walker says. "We want them to be able to turn their lives around in a positive way regardless of what happened in the past. It's simply the right thing to do, to provide opportunities for them. It's part of our mission."

Janet Weyandt of Sheboygan is a freelance writer.

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Pilot project to link corrections, workforce efforts

While Milwaukee Area Technical College was designing its CNC program for offenders, a larger effort was underway to combine the efforts of corrections, re-entry personnel and workforce professionals to create a more promising outlook for a larger pool of released offenders.

Wisconsin was chosen to participate in the Integrated Reentry and Employment Strategies (IRES) pilot project by the Council of State Governments Justice Center, thanks largely to efforts that already were being made to set up offenders for success outside prison.

Four prisons were selected for the IRES pilot project: Fox Lake Correctional Institution in Dodge County, Oakhill Correctional Institution in Dane County, Milwaukee Secure Detention Center and Racine Correctional Institution.

"We'll triage about 600 people returning to Milwaukee in the pilot, sorted into different groups," says Silvia Jackson, the state Department of Corrections re-entry director. "MATC is on my steering committee, advising us on technical training in high-demand fields, delivering CNC training, helping us think through other fields where we might be able to train offenders."

The IRES program is similar to the CNC program at MATC, only bigger, Jackson says. Its purpose is to show that research-based assessment of inmates and strong collaboration between the corrections system and workforce programs are the best ways to reduce recidivism.

"The (IRES) grant is assistance from the CSG Justice Center," she says. "There are national consultants working with us, doing assessments locally, analyzing our data, making recommendations on how we can change our system so we can better serve people."

We want to target our resources to where there's the greatest need and make sure providers in Milwaukee are giving the right type of services to the right offenders."

The IRES program is being designed now, and Jackson expects it to be implemented early next year. — Janet Weyandt