To: Michigan Department of Corrections
From: Mandy Mitchell, University of Michigan, Science, Technology, and Public Policy program
Re: Educational technology for higher education programs
Date: October 17, 2023

Executive Summary

The Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) seeks to provide quality, equitable college educational options for incarcerated students in order to support their academic success and reentry. These rehabilitative goals will be more fully realized if higher education (ed) students are equipped with reliable, up-to-date educational technology (edtech), as well as the technical support and training they need to effectively use the hardware and software.[i] Although security is often cited as a reason to prevent this kind of tech access, cultivating students' digital literacy skills supports public safety by helping to prevent re-incarceration. Notwithstanding edtech's value as a tool, it is a poor substitute for face-to-face instruction; students will have a greater chance of success if every effort is made to offer a higher ed program that is delivered in person or that has a significant in-person component.

How can edtech make MDOC's ed programming more impactful?

MDOC can more effectively prepare students to reenter society by judiciously integrating edtech into its higher ed programs. In particular, providing incarcerated students with technology, tech support, and tech training will place them on more equal footing with students and job-seekers on the outside. Additionally, prioritizing in-person learning opportunities will adhere to the evidence-based best practices for educating this student population.

Provide technology, support, and training

- **Provide incarcerated college students with access to edtech commonly used by college students on the outside**. Knowing how to email with professors, type essays on a word processor, conduct research in online databases, or navigate the resources collected on a Learning Management System (LMS) won't be on any syllabus; they are simply expected at the college level. Edtech access will provide incarcerated students opportunities to acquire

the "soft skills" that will give them the best chances of success, both in their programs and beyond. The most critical need is for laptops or comparable tech, but access to any technology appropriate to the course of study—readers, calculators, printers, and supporting hardware (mouse, headphones) and software (word processing, LMS, videoconferencing)—will allow students to develop much-needed digital literacy skills.

● **Combine access to edtech with technology training and support.** Providing students with the edtech their courses demand is essential, but it can only be fully effective if coupled with training and support. Incarcerated students may have little or no experience with the technologies put into their hands; coaching and training programs will enable them to effectively use the hardware and software provided by MDOC.

● **Budget for maintenance.** Higher ed students operate on their instructor's timeline; delays in repairing or replacing broken equipment can mean that assignments are turned in late or not at all. Even these kinds of small setbacks can undermine student confidence and persistence. They can be avoided when edtech budgets factor in costs for timely maintenance.

● **Budget for updates.** A second, often unanticipated cost in procuring edtech arises from the fast pace of innovation.[ii] While email, word processing and LMS software applications have not changed much over time, any app must be compatible with particular operating systems, which are in turn limited by hardware capabilities. Realistic assessments of a technology's lifespan will ensure that procured goods are functional and that students are gaining up-to-date tech skills that can serve them after reentry.

Weigh longer-term public safety risks in setting edtech usage policy

● **Access to edtech decreases the risk of re-incarceration.** Incarcerated persons' access to edtech is often limited in order to prevent perceived immediate security threats. For example, the Michigan DOC bans books related to computers and programming, and many departments of corrections nationwide limit incarcerated students' access to library resources.[iii] Some restrictions are appropriate in a prison setting, but any short-term security benefit won by limiting edtech may paradoxically increase the risk of re-incarceration. If

security protocols do not allow students to gain digital literacy skills, they will not be prepared to reenter a labor force where they will be expected to apply for jobs online and email with employers.[iv] Ideally, corrections leaders will give weight to this longer-term risk to society when setting policies around tech use.

Provide opportunities for in-person education

- **MDOC must be committed to in-person programming.** A glance at the job market confirms students' need for digital literacy skills, but this does not mean that more edtech is always better. Online-only higher ed programs are becoming more common, but in-person programs, or programs with a significant in-person component, remain the gold standard for the incarcerated student population. Although online-only college programs appear to simplify degree attainment, schools' failure to provide sound program data makes it impossible to determine the true rate of program completion.[v] Therefore, there is no reason to think that online-only programs are a good investment of students' tuition dollars.

- **Online-only programs are not a good fit for students who face more learning barriers.** Recent research comparing online-only to in-person modes of delivery in non-incarcerated classrooms suggests that face-to-face instruction works better for average and lower-performing students.[vi] There is no question that incarcerated students will tend to fall into these buckets; they have higher rates of learning disabilities, lower literacy levels, and lower levels of academic preparedness.[vii] While there are a few examples of online-only ed programs designed with the needs of incarcerated students in mind, they are generally not an effective substitute for in-person programs.[viii]

- **The classroom's rehabilitative value is greater than its strictly academic qualities.[ix]** Incarcerated students have few opportunities to forge meaningful social connections, much less receive positive feedback from peers and authority figures. Face-to-face interaction in the classroom can provide a much-needed space for healthy socialization. Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students have affirmed the healing and humanizing impact of connecting with classmates and instructors.[x]

[i] "Technology" here describes devices and applications that have emerged in the Information Age, which can store and process high volumes of information rapidly, often with the assistance of remotely stored information (on a drive or cloud) accessed through hardware or over the internet.

[ii] S. Gaskill, E.L. Castro, and E. Aguilar Padilla, "'It's Useless, to Put It Politely': Experiences with Technology Among Incarcerated Students Receiving Second Chance Pell at Four Institutions," Brief, Pell Is Not Enough: Exploring the Experiences of Participants in Second Chance Pell (Salt Lake City, UT: Research Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison, October 2022), https://cherp.utah.edu/_resources/documents/publications/upep_breif9.pdf.

[iii] "Michigan – Restricted Publications 2019," Prison Legal News, accessed on October 12, 2023, https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/publications/michigan-restricted-publications-2019/; Ess Pokornowski, "Technology in Higher Education in Prison Programs," ITHAKA S+R, September 7, 2023, https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/technology-in-higher-education-in-prison-programs/?utm_source=college-inside.beehiiv.com&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_campaign=i-visited-sweden-this-summer-here-s-what-i-learned-about-its-prison-education-system

[iv] Pelletier, Emily, and Douglas Evans, "Beyond Recidivism: Positive Outcomes from Higher Education Programs in Prisons." Journal of Correctional Education (1974-) 70, no. 2 (2019): 49–68. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26864182.

[v] Ashland University stands out here. Although its participation in the Second Chance Pell pilot has enabled it to expand its prison ed program to 12 states, it does not disclose information that would allow an evaluation of the program. See "Unbarring Access (Ithaka)," Ithaka S+R (blog), sec. "Second Chance Pell and Program Evaluation," accessed May 26, 2023, https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/landscape-review-postsecondary-education-in-prison/.

[vi] Julie Ajinkya et al., "Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide to Designing Prison Ed Programs" (The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, 2019); Tamara Tate and Mark Warschauer, "Equity in Online Learning," Educational Psychologist 57, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 192–206, https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2022.2062597; Duha Tore Altindag, Elif Filiz, and Erdal Tekin, "Is Online Education Working?" (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, July 2021), https://doi.org/10.3386/w29113. For an example of a deeply engaged online program, see Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson, "The Right to Education, Prison-University Partnerships, and Online Writing Pedagogy in the US," Critical Survey 23, no. 3 (January 1, 2011): 32, https://doi.org/10.3167/cs.2011.230303.

[vii] "Lessons from San Quentin"; "NCES Blog | Education and Training Opportunities in America's Prisons"; Bronson and Berzofsky, "Disabilities Among Prison and Jail Inmates, 2011–12"; Maruschak, Statistician, and Bronson, "Disabilities Reported by Prisoners."

[viii] For a brief, internationally-situated summary of the interests, incentives, and concerns involved in the question of online education in prisons, see Lockard and Rankins-Robertson, "The Right to Education, Prison-University Partnerships, and Online Writing Pedagogy in the US," 30-32.

[ix] There are a number of resources for DOCs and colleges that wish to provide incarcerated students with access to high-quality in-person programs, both in the form of model programs such as Bard and in the form of literature identifying the essential elements of such programs. Since the focus of this guide is on technology policy, we will not reproduce these here, but one excellent guide is Julie Ajinkya et al., "Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide to Designing Prison Ed Programs" (The Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, 2019).

[x] Programming focus group, December 1, 2022, Zoom, Facilitator Ken Nixon