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AN INTERNSHIP IN THE ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

OR

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW  
ABOUT RESEARCH IN AN APPLIED SETTING  
BUT WEREN'T SMART ENOUGH TO ASK

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Spring 1979

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As promised in last semester's paper, this one will provide some insight into what it has been like to work for the Illinois Department of Corrections - Planning, Research and Evaluation. This report is intended to be a summary of what I've done and learned. It will be a smorgasboard, and thus, the reader may decide to pick and choose among the offerings. The main dishes to choose from are: My Activities and Responsibilities, Differences Between Research Based in Applied and Academic Settings, Some Qualities of a Good Internship Supervisor and My Relationship to my Supervisor, the Department During Reorganization and Potpourri.

One of the things I've had to learn to do is to be brief in my writing style. (This is explained in the "Differences" section.) Since this is somewhat in opposition to what is taught and required in the University, I've had to maintain a certain schizophrenic quality to my behavior. Since this report is a requirement for the University, but concerns the applied setting, my writing style will probably fall somewhere between these two worlds.

Enjoy the meal!

#### My Activities and Responsibilities

My work at DOC (That is the Department of Corrections; learn those acronyms.) involved: 1) what I was hired to do and 2) everything else. What I was hired to do took up about 25% of my time, everything else was the bulk of my work. I was hired to evaluate the impact of Illinois' new determinate sentencing law - HB (House Bill) 1500 - which makes the most

comprehensive changes in the criminal sentencing procedures in Illinois in the past 15 years. The major product of my work is a DOC report to the Criminal Sentencing Commission on the impact of HB 1500. Of major significance is that lawmakers in Illinois - for the first time that my supervisor can recall - mandated an assessment of a law's impact. That is the responsibility of the Sentencing Commission, which the DOC report (and thus my work) must go to. The Commission is composed of three judges, three senators, three house representatives, and three individuals appointed by the Governor. It is a distinguished, powerful and political group, which makes my job more meaningful but more dangerous; more interesting but more difficult. My official role is one of researcher, but my actual role is one of providing whatever services that are requested. I must attempt to answer all requests as best I can (even though it might not be in my domain), and do so diplomatically with a realization of the political impact of my work.

My work on the DOC report for the Commission will have a good deal of impact - a quantum leap greater than anything I've previously done. This is partly because of the power of the Commission, but more importantly it is because lawmakers and researchers in Illinois and elsewhere are interested in learning the impact of determinate sentencing. The reason for this is that only a handful of states have enacted determinate sentencing but many states are considering introducing similar legislation. This situation makes the Commission report, and my work, a valued commodity.

Another major activity in relation to what I was hired to do has been establishing a communication network among researchers in other states who are studying determinate sentencing. The value of course lies in what we can learn from each other's work. Though this effort may sound simple enough, it has involved a tremendous amount of correspondence and time. The only thing I can suggest to others who might embark upon such a task is:

1. Be organized. There are many names, addresses, replies to letters and missing replies to keep track of.
2. Be brief. You do not have enough time to write your life story, and no one else has time to read it.
3. Be courteous, helpful, but persistent. Make them an offer they can't refuse. Send material describing your own finding, and they will be more likely to send you theirs. I put together a list of researchers in this area, and sent it to everyone I contacted. Don't give up when you send one, two or more unanswered letters. Be understanding of their lack of time to respond, yet insistent of the importance of their professional contact. Make it difficult for them to, in-good-conscience, ignore you by reminding them of the other letters you sent them, and the positive response you have gotten from others.

Most of the individuals I've contacted did not require the efforts I've described. Most were only too thankful to be involved, but it's good to have a plan to deal with those who are less motivated.

The 75% of the time I'm doing other things involves the following activities:

1. Information requests from students (usually around the end of the semester), other agencies and other departments in DOC. These are usually handled quickly over the phone, or through a short memo or previously written material.
2. Review of research involving DOC data and establishing research policy. Review of research occurs constantly, usually involving a good deal of time from my supervisor, more than from myself.

3. Policy development is a new activity, and I have not yet been involved with it.
4. Providing data for describing the impact of new legislation which affects DOC, like student requests, it becomes more frequent as the deadline-in this case, the deadline for introducing new legislation - approaches.
5. Data development for special task forces and committees occurs sporadically. Production of a regular report of population descriptions is a new task.
6. Special projects as they occur, require input from my unit. Recently we have worked on a model for estimating the size and composition of future prison populations, and we have provided input to the planned expansion of Community Correctional Centers.

#### Differences Between Research Based in Applied and Academic Settings

Time. Time requirements in the University are usually fairly flexible, in applied settings -like DOC - they are usually rigid. This probably relates to the problem-oriented approach at DOC, and the theory-oriented approach in academics. Likewise, in one environment the work is usually specific, while in the other, it can be very general.

Impact. Even when deadlines are not strict officially, to have impact the deadline must be met. I have learned from my supervisor that contrary to my own belief, research can have an effect upon the decisions of administrators and politicians. To do so, the research must be useful - which means it must address the problem or issue, and do so in a clear concise manner that the non-researcher can understand. It must also be timely. This means that there is a period of time when the politician or administrator can be influenced by research results (as well as voters, special interest groups and political motives). The period of time is

before a commitment is made to a particular position. During this time the decision-maker will honestly be seeking relevant information (and research findings are part of the information) to base a decision on. If research can influence such individuals, the opportunity for impact is tremendous. In fact, in my case, where my findings will be widely read and used in part to determine the introduction of new legislation in other states, the impact might be too great. Therefore, I must be very careful about drawing premature conclusions.

University research rarely has that sort of impact. Since the work is usually more theory-oriented, not at all timely and almost by definitions not understandable to decision makers, it can't be used in such a direct fashion. It's impact is usually felt by the scientific community involved in similar work. It is the nature of science to evolve answers more slowly as bits and pieces of research information accumulate over time.

Form and Style        Here lies a rude awakening for the neophyte in applied research settings like DOC. The long reports, scientific papers and regional conferences give way to the telephone calls, memos, and small meetings. The trick now is do things as simply, quickly, and efficiently as possible. Again, this relates to the problem-solving nature of the work, and the concomitant time restrictions. Certainly, a course like "Memo Writing For Speed" or "Use The Phone: It's Even Better Than Being There" would have been more helpful to me than grant writing and APA style report writing. I do of course realize that those skills are necessary as DOC is not my last career stop, but if I were being prepared for my internship, someone goofed. In fact, whatever I learned about

form and style was on-the-job-training. My supervisor had to resort to specifying what length (number of pages-or lines!) my work should be and how much time (hours - or minutes!) it should take. And it's not that I was unusually slow or wordy, it's just that time is limited and so you must learn to limit your response to the bare essentials - which is usually all that is desired anyway.

### Developing Credibility

Credibility in academia is related to the quality and quantity of one's research. This is usually reflected in the number and location of published articles. Journal articles, books, and convention presentations are frequently the means by which academic researchers influence others.

In DOC, scientific publications mean little. In fact, it may be a negative factor if it associates you with the academic world as opposed to the agency world. Credibility in the agency is developed more informally. It is more personal than scientific, and based more on an attitude about someone than a belief about his work. This mystical-sounding process is nothing more than personal trust. It is a trust I build up by contact with individuals. It is developed when I provide someone with information that is sensible and understandable, and helps them answer a question. It is based on experiences of receiving good information or advice emanating from sound work on my part. However, currently, it is a personal trust in me, not my work that gives me credibility. The details of my work in terms of reliability or sample size will not be questioned. It is now understood that I have done my homework. There's no sense wasting time checking up on me.



My own academic upbringing causes some unease at such a style. Certainly, independent critique of one's work is a cornerstone of science. However, in the applied setting, the result of an oversight or "bad" information can be more critical. Such a mistake may have significant impact, thus there exists a natural feedback system, which usually causes individuals to police themselves. Remember, once you've lost credibility in the agency, it's difficult to regain, and without credibility, you're lost.

This discussion of credibility is relevant to the resources used by researchers in applied settings. Although standard resources such as published material will be consulted, more frequently a telephone call to one or more individuals is more useful. This, in part, is due to the reliance on personal trust; in part, it's the only place the information is available and, in part, time restrictions demand a quick source of data.

Some Qualities of a Good Internship Supervisor and My Relationship to My Supervisor

A very important aspect of my internship has been my supervisor - John Henning. I believe John (don't call me Dr.) Henning made the difference between an ordinary internship and an extremely valuable and enjoyable learning experience. And the influencing process, I hope, was a mutual one. I believe we fulfilled each other's needs to a certain extent.

When I came to DOC, there was one other member of our unit-besides John-working in Springfield. Before him, John had been working alone for a time. I believe John welcomed the opportunity to converse with me-particularly since we both had psychology degrees, and we both had gone to the same University. I can recall many instances, particularly at the beginning of my internship, when we would have very stimulating conversations. Sometimes they were very theoretical, and sometimes they were very practical; sometimes they were about criminal justice, and sometimes they were about psychology; sometimes they were about research issues, and sometimes they were about ethical issues; but always they were educational.

John took a great deal of time bringing me from someone who was completely ignorant of the world of the Department of Corrections to someone who can now manage to find his way through the system. Not only would he respond to my questions, but he elaborated upon his answers. He provided me with information, insights, historical data that could otherwise be learned only after a good deal of time with DOC. I wish I could have processed information better, because I'm certain much of what John mentioned I've forgotten.

I believe John is as good a supervisor as he is, because he takes his role seriously. He believes he has entered a contract with me, and he lives up to his part of the deal. Considering his position and other responsibilities, I'm very appreciative for his efforts.

Above all, his greatest asset is probably his ability to get along with people. In DOC where you must deal on a personal level with so many individuals, this is a very valuable skill, and may explain his ability to survive in a department that experiences frequent and sometimes turbulent changes in personnel. He deals effectively and amiably with everyone from the Director down to the cleaning lady.

My own experience with John's modis operandi has been one of total satisfaction. I was somewhat anxious in preparing for my interview with John, but after meeting him, I was immediately comfortable and at ease. It was really quite amazing. It seemed more like two old friends getting together for a chat, than a job interview. John's relaxed, friendly attitude has persisted throughout my internship, and smoothed out many rough spots along the way. I am thankful to him for this and for all he has taught me - he certainly is one of the finest teachers I've had.

#### The Department During Reorganization

If you ever get a chance to attend a reorganization of DOC (I suppose any department will do, but you'll probably have a greater chance of catching a reorganization at DOC), don't miss it - it's worth giving up your bowling night for. I almost feel that the whole thing was staged just for me to really make my internship complete. I do not intend to make value judgments of the current administration, or its actions; it is not my place to do so

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and I don't pretend to be enlightened enough to do so. I would merely like to report - as a participant-observer - what I've seen, heard and felt.

On the first of the year, the Director of DOC was replaced. I found this out on the morning of January 2nd on the radio as I was getting dressed for work. The new director brings with him new ideas and new people to implement his idea (all very reasonable). What is also reasonable is the confused reaction of the staff, for it is not clear (and still is not, months later) who will stay and who will go, who will move up or down or sideways. Important work grinds to a halt because no one can tell if this work is required, or even acceptable any longer. Staff must be careful about their associations and alliances, because you can't determine who will be in and who will be out. However, it doesn't take long before the situation begins to shape up. Executive and managerial staff are called upon to confer with the new director and decisions are made.

The immediate overall effect of the reorg (this abbreviation has<sup>a</sup> somewhat mysterious and evil connotation which fits with my personal feelings only) is department-wide disruption. Besides the reasons previously mentioned, staff may not know who to get information from, and who to provide information to. There, of course, remains a lingering disruption as old contacts and communication lines have been broken and new ones must be established. Since it has only been a few months since the reorg was begun, it's impossible to determine the long term impact. Clearly, it will have benefits in the long run in terms of removing some inefficient or unqualified people. Also, it may move the Department in a new and more positive direction. However, the immediate

effect upon the staff is one of confusion and interruption of work.

Potpouri

1. Since I already seemed to have slipped into my academic mode of being wordy, I will make this section brief. I quickly discovered a major obstacle in my unit, the Corrections' Information Service (CIS) is not set up for research purposes. I suppose it's set up for management purposes instead. It is a constant source of frustration that hopefully will be remedied.
2. We are frequently bogged down with so much routine work of the department that we can't initiate research and evaluation projects, which could be of value. To increase the manpower needed for such a task, before the reorg we made a small effort at recruiting interns from universities and colleges. Whether or not we increase the effort will probably be determined when reorg is completed.
3. DOC is problematic for academically-trained researchers, because it offers neither good pay nor prestige. Maintaining a talented research unit is thus difficult, and when combined with the unfamiliar restraints of an applied setting it is nigh impossible.
4. One of the most important lessons I've learned from John involves the relationship between researchers and administration, or politicians. I was concerned that our work was not utilized nearly as much as it should be in decision making. Naturally, with my academic background, I felt that research was the answer to most anything. I was told, however, that research was only part of the answer and not the most important part. A politician deals with political decisions, and an administrator deals with administrative decisions. Both have many factors to consider - political, economical, historical and, oh yes, scientific. They must weigh all the factors in arriving at their decisions; and though we may question their weighting scheme to a certain extent,

we quickly reach unfamiliar territory. After all, political and administrative decisions are their specialty - not ours. They are the experts, and should make such decisions. Researchers are the experts on the production and analysis of scientific data. We can provide such data to administrators and politicians, but only the decision-making experts should make the decision of how to use it.

Now that the meal is over, I hope you enjoyed it. I don't know if my internship was unusual in being so rewarding and instructive. I do know that I had a most unusual supervisor, and was in the department during a most unusual period of time. However, I think any qualifying internship position should be a learning experience, since it is so different than the academic environment.

**END**