

# *A Long-Time Professional Reflects on WDOC Training Academy*

(This article appeared in the Wyoming Department of Corrections employee newsletter, The Rap Sheet, September 2009 issue)

*Dr. Rick Patterson, a Criminal Justice professor at Eastern Wyoming College, is on sabbatical for one year. During this time he'll be working with our staff and observing the process of opening the Wyoming Medium Correctional Institution in Torrington. Dr. Patterson has had a long relationship with the Wyoming Department of Corrections. In the mid 1980s, he worked as a counselor in the medium security unit at the Wyoming State Penitentiary. His 1992 doctoral dissertation involved a two-year study of inmates at the Wyoming Women's Center. Over the past 19 years, he has overseen sex offender assessment and treatment programs, first in Cheyenne, then in Worland, and currently in Torrington. During this time, he worked closely with field services agents in the management of these clients. Holding a PhD and licensed as a Professional Counselor and Addictions Therapist, he has taught classes in Sex Offender Assessment, Treatment, and Management and Understanding Mentally Ill Clients for the WDOC Field Services staff at the Wyoming Law Enforcement Academy for the past 11 years.*



Dr. Rick Patterson

My initiation into the Wyoming Department of Corrections (WDOC) began on July 7, 2009, in Rawlins. As a way to begin my study of the WDOC, it seemed to me that I should start where all new employees start, with the pre-service training academy. Currently the training academy holds classes at the National Guard Armory and training exercises in the Wyoming State Penitentiary (WSP). Beginning on September 14, all training functions will shift temporarily to Camp Guernsey, in Guernsey, Wyoming, which will be supplemented by training exercises held at the other Wyoming facilities. Once the bulk of new WMCI employees are trained in the spring of 2010, the Training Academy will return to Rawlins to a new facility, now being built on WSP grounds.

My experience with the Training Academy was very positive. I was impressed with the professionalism of the staff and administration. The classes were well run and organized. The material was challenging, but well presented. I was most impressed with the quality students. Overall, they were bright, motivated, disciplined, and mature. Most seemed very committed to their chosen profession and made efforts to learn the material and develop the necessary skills. I look forward to



Students participate in the Academy

following them as they continue their training.

My training class consisted of approximately 50 new WDOC employees. The vast majority were correctional officers, but also included food service workers, a warehouse manager, a teacher, an electrician, a human resources specialist, and two people from the medical department. Most were male and many had come from out-of-state. Some were veterans and several had college degrees.



Dr. Patterson teaches one of the sessions at the Academy

The first week's training is intense with a great deal of material covered, rather quickly. The emphasis is upon the role and function of correctional employees, the mission of WDOC, and the need for teamwork, and maintaining professional attitudes and bearing in all they do. Proper staff/inmate relationships and boundaries were emphasized throughout. In addition, all uniformed staff also had to complete a physical fitness test.

All employees complete the first week of training together, after which the contract employees return to their respective facilities.

The next four weeks' training covered a variety of topics such as use of force, cross-gender supervision, suicide prevention, motivational interviewing, inmate discipline, inmate programming, key/tool control, classification, movement, special needs inmates, use of restraints, searches, etc. During two days of the training, the students were assigned to work shifts within WSP to allow them to experience the supervision of maximum security inmates.



Dr. Patterson confers with Investigative Lieutenant Wendy Halter

While not fully using a military model, the training had a definite military tone, as is necessary to initiate new employees into a correctional organization. Periodically the uniformed staff members were called into formation and their uniforms were inspected. Classes started promptly and ended on time. Break times were tightly controlled. There was no cutting of corners permitted when it came to attendance and participation. The trainers were all sergeants/lieutenants and wore uniforms. Weekly exams were given over the class material presented. Students reported having to do a great deal of studying after hours to prepare for these challenging exams.

The training process resulted in the class members forming into a "team." They became noticeably more cohesive and unified as the weeks progressed. Bonds were formed and they began working well together. Throughout the training, the instructors were supportive, but

demanding. They were focused and modeled professional appearance, demeanor and bearing. The combination of the training and the trainers seemed to have the desired effect of creating “corrections professionals,” who exhibited pride in their work and possession of the skills necessary to do it.

At the end of five weeks, the non-uniformed staff members returned to their respective facilities and the uniformed staff members entered a one week period of on-the-job training, during which they worked in their facilities with training officers/supervisors. They then returned to the academy for four more weeks of instruction in topics specific to their position.

— *Rick Patterson*



Dr. Patterson meets with staff following a session