



Adults in Custody: How Partnering with a State Correctional Facility Apparel Factory Fosters a Unique Learning Environment for Design Students

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In Fall 2017, faculty from the author's academic department were contacted by the Oregon Corrections Enterprises (OCE) to determine if a partnership could be established between the university and state agency. OCE operates training programs for Adults in Custody (AIC), housed within Oregon prisons. Their programs teach inmates marketable skills, including 3D CAD drafting, welding, furniture making, sewing and embroidery.

In order to participate, AICs must fill out an application and be of good behavior, showing a strong desire to learn new skills (OCE, 2019). Additionally, applicants are required to possess or be pursuing a GED. Upon submission of a successful application, the prisoner will be interviewed by a civilian on-site manager, to determine if the inmate is a good fit for the job and current team.

Prisoner work programs have several benefits. They reduce individual idleness, foster a sense of productivity and lower the risk of prisoners being involved in institutional misconduct (Solomon et. al., 2004). In organized prison work programs, inmates are provided with job-specific skills and workplace habits, which they often lack pre-prison sentence (Solomon et. al., 2004). Work experience also benefits inmates emotionally and financially as wages earned from working allow prisoners to contribute to their families back at home. (Solomon et. al., 2004). The Oregon Department of Corrections has one of lowest rates of recidivism in the country and rivals that of Norway's Corrections system, which is considered to be one of the most effective in the world (OCE, 2019).

OCE expressed to the university that they needed help to update the design of their current products; many which have not been changed in decades. Some of the products produced through OCE include dormitory furniture, workwear, roadway/park signs, camping structures and governmental office furniture. As it pertains to workwear, OCE produces a denim apparel line called Prison Blues. It has been in production since the late 1980's out of its' Pendleton Oregon in a 47,000 square foot factory (OCE, 2019). For purposes of this paper, a design course that focused on the creation of new denim products for the Prison Blues factory, in collaboration with OCE will be explained.

Prior to the start of the course, students were invited to take a tour of OCE's Prison Blue's factory. Upon arriving at the prison and going through security clearances, chaperoned students witnessed the production line used for existing apparel products, task-specific machinery (e.g., automatic patch pocket seamer), learned about operator tasks, inventory and distribution. Post tour, a project brief was created and distributed to students by the instructors to align with Prison Blue's current workwear product line,

by aligning to a theme of “chores.” The brief also required students to work in denim and to assume that all new product ideas must be made with existing factory machinery.

For the first design review, students pitched their selected chore and described the market opportunity for new denim products, related to their chore. Ideation sketches were presented along with off-white canvas drop cloth prototypes. From the review, the instructors provided feedback and helped the students select ideas for further development. By the end of the course, students created final prototypes in denim with Prison Blues branding. Each idea was supported with a tech pack that included flat sketches, materials and measurement specifications, order of operations and bill of materials (BOM). The best student concepts were selected to be presented at the 2019 Wanted Design Brooklyn exhibition. Products are now under consideration by OCE for future manufacturing and e-commerce.

Teaching a design course in partnership with OCE provided a transformational learning experience. As none of the students had ever been inside a US prison, the initial tour experience was humbling, yet also connected students to something they are familiar with – apparel design. For students who had never been inside an apparel factory, it was a great opportunity to see a full production run locally and walk through all of the steps involved with making commercial workwear. Students saw materials procurement, cutting, specialized stitching, labeling, packing and shipping. The product brief created by the instructors provided a clear format for students to work together, to create a collection of items around a theme. Instead of working as individuals, students had to think holistically about how products are designed to be merchandised together as a collection. They also learned about factory communication methods, including the development of standardized tech drawings, materials and measurement specifications, order of operations and BOM. Although this class was taught in partnership with OCE, many states in the US have inmate work programs that may provide opportunities for other faculty and students to collaborate on design projects, practice design communication skills, and work with local manufacturers.

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