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The Norval Morris Project: Creating a "Knowledge Pump" for Practitioners.
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Abstract

The National Institute of Corrections initiated the Norval Morris project in 2004 in memory of Norval Morris (1923-2004), law professor and criminal justice reformer. Over the years, the project has developed a unique strategy for identifying knowledge relevant for the field of corrections. Working with thought leaders across multiple disciplines, the project has tapped multiple knowledge bases (e.g., implementation science, transfer of innovation, organizational culture, and dialogue practices) for applications to correctional policy and practice. The project has created a distinctive approach to identify, distill, and disseminate knowledge new to the field and developed a structured strategy to formulate new thinking in corrections. In 2011, the project moved into an implementation phase to put these strategies into practice. Working with the Virginia Department of Corrections, the Morris Project has provided close support to a system-wide effort to create a Healing Environment across the Department to promote a more positive atmosphere in the it facilities and community corrections offices.

The Norval Morris Project

At the time of his death in 2004, Dr. Norval Morris was the Julius Kreeger Professor Emeritus of Law and Criminology at the University of Chicago Law School. Morris was internationally recognized as a leader in criminal justice and prison reform, and was among the most influential writers of his time, having authored, co-authored, or edited 15 books and hundreds of articles over a 55-year career. Norval Morris is still well and fondly remembered by those who knew and worked with him through the relationships he built across many disciplines and his influence on a generation of academics and practitioners. He was also instrumental in founding the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) and served as a charter member of the NIC Advisory Board until the time of his death. One of his students, James Jacobs, once summarized Morris' work by saying that his goal was always to create a criminal justice system, "… that was more just, effective and humane".

The Norval Morris Project was established as an open-ended commitment by NIC to locate innovative, evidence-based approaches, evaluate their potential to inform correctional policy and practice, create opportunities to test these innovations in correctional settings, and develop and evaluate new strategies for the dissemination and application of this knowledge. The Project seeks to honor and promote Morris' legacy by following his model of using collaboration, interdisciplinary insights, and research to bring about innovative change in correctional policy and practice. The Norval Morris Project has been designed to be a practical way to promote wider, deeper and more effective solutions for human service systems in general and in the criminal justice and the corrections fields in particular.

Over the last eight years, the project has created a distinctive approach to identify, distill, and disseminate knowledge new to the field corrections. At its heart, the Norval Morris Project is about developing and using a "knowledge pump" for expediting the transfer into practice of evidence-based innovations. In the process, the project has sought to demonstrate by example how a "Morris Project" would be executed from conception through full implementation of innovative policies and practices in correctional settings. A hallmark of this approach to problem solving is that the structure is designed to allow issues and solutions to emerge as the process proceeds through a multistage approach.

Very shortly after Morris passed away, the NIC Advisory Board created the Norval Morris project to honor his contributions to the field and carry on the spirit of his work. In August, 2004 NIC staff met with a select group of experts to begin planning the project. In analyzing the issues surrounding the application of research knowledge to corrections, the group recognized that simply improving the content and availability of research results would not, in and of itself, be enough to promote its application. The group concluded that explicit and active strategies are required to insure that emerging knowledge

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reaches the field in a form that will lead most directly to its use.

Based on the recommendations of this original group and the ongoing discussions within NIC and between the Institute and its many partners, five broad objectives of Norval Morris project were defined that guided the early development of the project. These were; 1) maximize the involvement of the widest possible range of experts in research, policy and practice from multiple fields, both within and beyond Criminal Justice, Corrections, and Criminology; 2) develop new approaches to accelerate the uptake of innovations based on research and employ innovative strategies to propagate this knowledge to policymakers and practitioners; 3) Enhance collaborative efforts between the policymaking, practitioner, and research communities by encouraging partnerships to facilitate the use of research in applied settings; 4) help train policymakers and practitioners in the use of research and work to sensitize researchers to the needs of the correctional field; and, 5) ensure that research findings and summaries are made as accessible as possible to policy makers and practitioners by employing innovative strategies to disseminate them to the field.

NIC's goals in the Norval Morris Project also quickly became linked to a broader organizational interest in integrating evidence based approaches into its own business practices. One result of this determination was the creation of a new Research and Evaluation Division within NIC and the recruitment of one of the coauthors, Christopher Innes, as its Chief. Innes was a member of the original panel charged with planning the Norval Morris Project. Since his arrival at NIC in early 2006, he has guided the development of the Project. The project has been managed through a series of cooperative agreements, periodically renewed through a competitive process, between NIC and Justice System Assessment & Training (J-SAT). Led by the other coauthor, Bradford Bogue, and based in Boulder, Colorado, J-SAT has developed a long-standing and productive

relationship with NIC through its work on a number of NIC initiatives. The Morris Project has also taken full advantage of NIC's technical resources through its close collaboration with the NIC Information Center.

The project began by undertaking a broad and systematic information gathering effort to identify the range of issues and promising areas for possible future development. At the same time as the information gathering process was underway, the project sought to bring people both inside and outside the corrections field to develop interdisciplinary approaches and draw on professional networks that cut across academic, private sector and public sector boundaries. By early 2007, J-SAT was conducting a rigorous analysis of various literatures to serve as a foundation for the Morris Project. The purpose of this first step was to locate and organize the existing knowledge from a variety of disciplines in several topic areas.

The first two topics were transfer of innovation and organizational culture, since these seemed the most relevant to the Project's design. J-SAT began culling through key categories of research on these two broad topics by contacting subject matter experts and thought leaders in several fields, utilizing search engines, and combing databases to establish bibliographies that were designed to be current, comprehensive, and sufficiently detailed to provide a meaningful framework for collaboration. On this basis, they identified initial subcategories and key words, which were used to identify research to enhance the developing framework, to provide topic depth, and to ensure efficient retrieval of information. Under the Organizational Culture area, six subcategories were defined: Organizational Behavior; Performance; Change; Assessment; Leadership; and Evolution/History. Transfer of innovation subtopics included: Time Elements/Methods of Evaluation and Research, Communication Channels, Innovation Technologies, Strategies, and Social Systems.

The intermediate goals for this analysis of the literatures were fourfold. First, we wanted to identify and collect the most recent and seminal articles including evidence-based practices. Second, J-SAT entered all abstracts, articles, and pertinent key words using bibliographical software to create relational bibliographies. Third, they categorized and formulated sub-topic specific annotated bibliographies for efficient, comprehensive information-sharing. Lastly, they created a bibliography of the crème de la crème articles to expedite and enhance information sharing.

One interesting problem in doing an expansive search of any literature is when to stop. Any developing literature has a tendency to begin to fold back upon itself. For example, the originators of a particular line of research or theoretical approach will continue to publish additional analysis, replications, and other refinements of their work. Other authors will test the originators work, analyze and discuss it, or simply recapitulate or recast the original results and insights. In the Norval Morris Project, we tried to identify the point at which any body of work could be considered a "mature literature". Once we had reached this point, it became less necessary to continue to spend project resources scanning all the possible literatures and, instead, focus on new and innovative sources.

While the decision will always be inexact, there are some signs that a literature has matured. These include; that there is a large volume research articles have already been identified, reviewed and catalogued; there are repetitions in the names and sources in the reference sections of many articles; many different studies are identified are on virtually the same subjects/topic, have similar hypotheses/problems, and report similar findings; that different on-line databases and other reference sites yield very few new articles when using the search terms; that are a number of well-done studies and replications using

experimental or strong quasi-experimental designs; and there are a significant number of secondary reviews of the literature or meta-analyses in a topic area.

As part of the information gathering effort semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone of thought leaders in a variety of professional fields. Respondents were identified through the use of a snowball approach in which each person interviewed was also asked to identify others. This process generated a list of over 120 people and formed the pool of leading experts in a wide variety of areas of potential relevance to correctional issues.

From this original pool, a select group of people were recruited to serve on the project's steering committee. Given the expansive vision of the project, a unique group able to "kick start" the search for innovations was needed. Because this group was so essential for creating and maintaining the project's overarching vision, it was called the *Keystone Group*. The first Keystone Group meeting took place in September 2008. It involved 19 thought leaders, half of them corrections practitioners, plus NIC senior and project staff. The retreat itself was designed to be emergent, without preset limits on the group's scope of work, design, or strategy. The Keystone Group's function was to identify emerging topics and knowledge which could be imported into the corrections field, advise the project on how best to translate this knowledge to inform correctional practice, and assist the project in disseminating the results to the field in innovative ways.

The first meeting of the Keystone Group, in September 2008, used the Open Space technique, an approach to conducting meetings that is designed to maximize the creativity of a group by allowing them to be self-organizing and essentially create the agenda for the meeting on the spot. Out of that process, two provocative questions were developed. They were: "*How can we transform correctional leadership and the workforce in ways that empower staff to reduce*

recidivism and promote prevention?" and "How can we safely and systematically reduce the correctional population by half?"

Originally, the project plan called for the Keystone Group to meet each year and to address new topics and nominate new areas for concentrated attention. It was expected that through this process, topical areas would be defined and one or two new Topic Teams chartered to follow up.   The Topic Teams were intended to be structured similarly to the Keystone Group, but as standalone working groups that focus on broad topic areas. Once empanelled, staffed and properly chartered, the topic teams would serve as the knowledge pump's "cylinders," centrally collecting and distributing new and diverse information, knowledge, skills and contacts regarding each topic.   In fact, the topics chosen by the Keystone Group in their first meeting were so ambitions that they have consumed the energies of the Morris Project ever since.

The next step of the process, which began immediately after the Keystone Group meeting, was to assemble Topic Teams. Structured similarly to the Keystone Group, the Topic Teams functioned as stand-alone working groups and focued on the broad topic areas the Keystone Group identified.   During most of 2009, the teams continued to develop, refine and expand on the topics. In September, 2009, the two topic teams met to finalize their work to pass back to the Keystone Group the material they had developed.

The Topic Teams began meeting before the end of 2008. The specific areas of concentration for these teams will be chosen as the project develops. Rather than simply refining and repackaging the chosen topic areas, the Topic Teams were encouraged to conceptualize their charge in terms of far-reaching change implications, representing, in the broadest sense, the knowledge strategies that could drive future innovations in the field. The strategy behind the Morris Project Topic Teams, therefore, was to add further value of their own to the goal of pumping knowledge, information, and fresh ideas to the corrections field.

When the project was first conceived, the topic teams were intended to be "virtual teams" that would work together by taking advantage of the technical capacity for tele-conferencing, WebEx sessions, web-based communities, and the like to do their work. The expectation was that these groups would be able to work more quickly, involve a wider range of participants, and become self-organizing teams. This approach, in practice, encountered some unanticipated difficulties. Not all members of the topic teams were entirely comfortable with virtual approaches or found the very "remoteness" of these technologies a hindrance to generative discussions. It also proved to be very difficult to schedule the sessions at times where most of the team could participate. Finding an hour or two in busy schedules for an on-line meeting proved so impractical, that the project eventually organized face-to-face meetings for the Topic Teams.

Much work had been accomplished, however, through the efforts of the Topic Teams during 2009 and a number of innovative ideas had been developed through the process. When the topic teams met in September, 2009, they used a Scenario Thinking approach to select the most promising strategies and develop action plans for them. Following that meeting, the project staff refined the action plans and compiled the supporting information the topic teams had developed.

In November, 2009, a second meeting of the Keystone Group took place with 16 members attending. The group met to follow up on the Topic Team meetings held in the previous month with the goal of reviewing and prioritizing the action plans developed by the two topic teams on Reducing the Corrections Population and Transforming the Correctional Workforce. The meeting was designed as a strategic planning session to elicit dialogue and discussion between participants. The Keystone group continued conversation on the two areas, discussing possible ways to use these tools to achieve the project goals. The

group concluded by determining the top six strategies for Population Reduction and the top five strategies for Workforce Transformation.

By early 2010, with the project entering its sixth year, some concerns were being raised by the NIC Advisory Board and senior NIC leadership about the project. At its inception, the Morris Project had received a relatively modest funding level, but the cost of the project was mounting. NIC had also hoped to gain funding support for the effort from other partners, especially foundations, who might be interested in the approach. The recession which began in 2008 made that aspect of the project plan less realistic. Finally, some wondered when all the talk was going to end and something more concrete was going to be done.

NIC leadership and project therefor staff began a new round of engaging the field to plan next steps. Based on these consultations, NIC outlined a strategy for the future of the project that would involve an "implementation phase" to build on the work done over the previous four years. This strategy was executed through two separate awards from NIC; the first was a cooperative agreement with Justice Assessment and Training (J-SAT) in Boulder, Colorado and the second is a cooperative agreement with Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. The two awards have been designed to work in tandem to draw on the strengths of each organization.

Shortly after these awards were made, the opportunity arose for NIC to do a project with the state of Virginia. The arrival of a new director of corrections, Harold Clark, who had been previously involved with the Norval Morris Project, allowed NIC to work with the AV DOC to develop a project on workforce development. Clarke had participated in the Topic Team work on Transforming the Correctional Workforce and had introduced the project to the idea of creating a "Healing Environment" in corrections settings. One of the actions

plans developed during the topic team's work was on that subject.

The project began formally working with the Virginia Department of Corrections early in 2011. The project in Virginia was designed to reinforce the work, already under way, as part of Governor McDonnell's Adult Reentry Initiative to improve offender transition back in their communities in Virginia. As part of this initiative, the Department is implementing improved practices including the development of individualized case plans based upon a risk and needs assessment and providing programs identified by research to be effective in preparing offenders for their transition to and stabilization in the community. In addition a major objective of the Department's reentry plan is to improve collaboration with all stakeholders and to develop a strategic and unified approach to prevent crime, minimize victimization and improve public safety in the Commonwealth.

This project has been established to serve as a demonstration of a crafted work force transformation process that will identify Corrections worker operating practices and behaviors to support a "healing environment." The joint VA DOC/NIC project focused initially on senior management and expand over time to involve and effect the entire organization culture, with both top-down and bottom-up strategies. Senior managers are serving as coaches in the development of a culture embracing trust, collaboration and teamwork. They also mentor middle managers who, in turn, mentor line staff. Through this process, staff at all levels learns and practices behaviors and communication skills that support offender change. In this way, offenders living in this healing environment are exposed to a more normative environment where pro-social learning and communications skills will improve their chances for success.

The project is proceeding and expected to continue for up to 24 more months. It is following a plan with three incremental phases; *Building Readiness, Re-*

Envisioning the Organization; and *Implementation.* Throughout the project, there will be a focus on sustainability and performance measures to guide the Department in implementing a staff development system based upon the skills required by the Virginia Reentry Initiative.