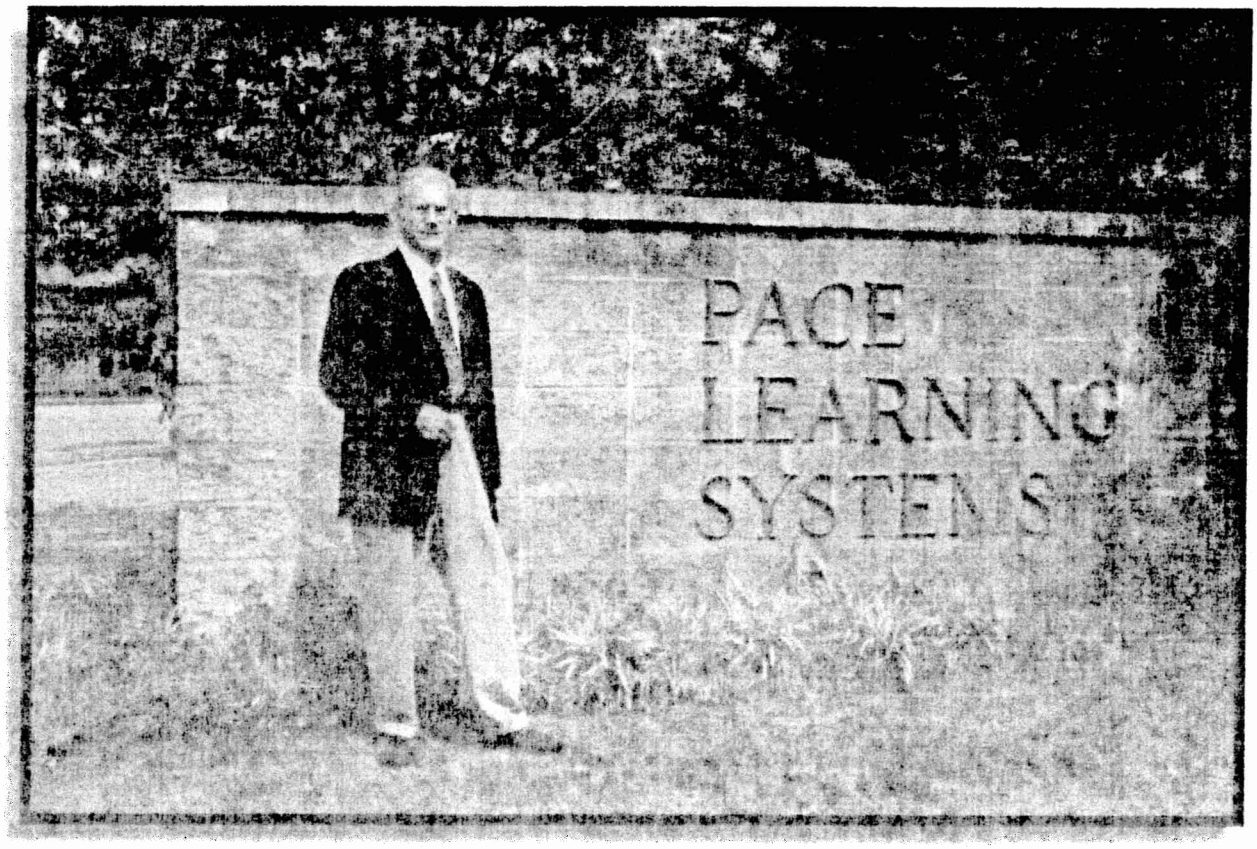
McKee, John: One of the Premier Leaders of Correctional Education Research

by Kim Rigg

John M. McKee, Ph.D. received his doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Tennessee. In 1961, he began what was to be a long and illustrious career at the



Dr. John McKee

Draper Correctional Center in Elmore, Alabama. He worked there for nearly a decade and his efforts provided the basis of much of his research in correctional education, on individualized learning systems, and predictors of school drop-outs and prison recidivism. In 1977 he formed Pace Learning Systems, Inc., which is based in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He now resides in Birmingham, Alabama.

Dr. McKee was Alabama's Director of Community Mental Health in 1960 when he met John C. Watkins, the warden at Draper Correctional Center. Watkins was working on a graduate degree in sociology and anthropology at this time. McKee wanted to know if his agency could help with the prisoners' mental health needs. Watkins stressed that the inmates' problems were mostly related to academic failure (Pacesetter, 2002, p. 1).

This hypothesis that the inmates' problems were related to their lack of education led to the Draper Experiment. Watkins and McKee proposed the Draper Experiment to the Alabama Board of Corrections as a practical approach to the rehabilitation of inmates in 1960. The project was approved and began on March 15, 1961.

> The purposes of this project in education and rehabilitation were (1) to demonstrate the administrative feasibility of an entirely self-instructional education program within Draper—evidenced by an ongoing project, the ease with which we could interest and teach the inmate students, and the degree to which the institutional resources could be used; and (2) to make a tentative analysis of the subject matters and skills most practical to teach inmates from the standpoint of obtaining the most productivity at the least cost. (Ofiesh, 2004, p. 91)

The project began with 25 inmate volunteers approved by the warden. The warden's main criteria were that the inmates could achieve, in his judgment, at the high school level. Also, a number of "troublemakers" were purposely chosen for the group in order to measure any type of potential effect on this type of prisoner within the institution (p.91).

> The pilot project ran for a year and many interesting discoveries were made: (1) Self-instructional programs can be successfully used with confined young offenders. (2) The experimenter-subject role relationship, wherein the subject is a cooperative research partner in a new venture rather than a more or less passive student, appears to be the best role-vehicle for maintaining task-relevant behavior. (3) The intellectual interests of the subjects expanded very rapidly and they were maintained at a high level of intensity. (4) It is very likely that prisoners can produce self-instructional programs themselves. (5) Inmate interest in serving in the Armed Forces could be an important factor in the rehabilitation chain. (6) There are a great number of significant reinforcing factors operating in such a project, it would seem. (pp. 91-92)

The Draper Project received a three-year grant in May 1962 from the National Institute of Mental Health to conduct a more powerful education and rehabilitation program. At this time the project received funding for a full-time professional staff. That made possible both the full-time appointment of the Project Director, John McKee, and the Vocational Specialist, Norman Ussery. This influx of funding meant that the total population served

would continue to rise until there were 125 students participating; it also enabled the conversion of other spaces into classrooms (p. 93).

McKee is remembered for his efforts to turn back Jim Crow segregation at Draper. In 1964, when George Wallace was governor, John McKee prepared a $400,000 grant application for the Federal Manpower Development Training Agency (MDTA), to initiate vocational education at Draper. He eventually heard from the MDTA management team in Washington, DC that the project would be funded, but that it could only be implemented if Black inmates participated in the program along with White inmates. Unsure how the concept of integration would be received in his State, McKee dialogued with Draper Warden John Watkins. When he first heard the term "integration," the warden asked what it meant, and McKee explained. The warden's response was, "You'll need to take this matter to the Commissioner." McKee then discussed the matter with the Commissioner of Corrections, Frank Lee. After hearing the situation Lee said, "I'd lose my job tomorrow if I have anything to do with integrating the prison. I can't do it." So McKee took the matter to Alabama's Department of Labor. The director of this department said, "I'd be glad to take this bid to Governor George Wallace, but I can't give you any encouragement." When the governor heard about the prospect of the program improvement and the issue of integration, he approved the project and commented that "the Black prisoners need training, too, but you tell Dr. McKee not to get me into trouble." So, hearing of the approval, the warden took the issue to the Draper Inmate Council—"We're going to get big resources for training, but we've got to integrate the institution to qualify for the funds. What do you think about this matter?" Their response: "We support you in this warden" (McKee & McKee, in Gehring & Eggleston, 2006).

In 1962 Dr. McKee founded the Rehabilitation Research Foundation to conduct a string of studies in offender education and rehabilitation (p. 281). He created this non-profit organization to administer the grants that funded his experimental programs.

This foundation, with the backing of the U.S. Departments of Labor and Health, Education, and Welfare, was involved in the design, operation, and evaluation of innovative basic education and vocational training programs tailored to the particular rehabilitative needs of adult, institutionalized offenders.

> The results of some of these programs were highly encouraging: One 18-month study of released offenders who participated in the Foundation's projects and were placed in training-related employment revealed a recidivism rate of only 30%, while the recidivism rate for comparable released offenders not participating in such training was commonly reported to be in excess of 60%. (RRF, 1970, p. 1)

One study funded by the Rehabilitation Research Foundation was *An Ecological Experiment in Corrections: A Programmed Environment for Behavior Modification*. This was a proposal for the development and evaluation of a token economy within Draper Correctional Center (p. 11). It advocated (a) remedial basic education and vocational training, and (b) a behavioral management system.

> It appears that the institutions themselves must adopt a behavioral management system capable of meeting at least six critical requirements: First, the system must insure the maintenance of order and discipline with only minimal reliance upon the threat of punishment as a control procedure. Second, it must provide for the performance of maintenance tasks and work assignments without primary recourse to the coercive use of aversive control procedures. These two requirements are obviously closely related and, if met, attack what may be the most significant conditions underlying the inmate counter-culture. Third, the system must be one which the correctional staff, with appropriate training and supervision, is capable of administering. Fourth, it should enable the line correctional officer—the man who has daily contact with the inmate—to participate in the rehabilitation program rather than function as an agent of punishment. Fifth, the behavioral management system should be compatible with and foster the inmates' participation in formalized rehabilitation programs. Finally, the system should approximate, as closely as possible those controlling conditions which exist in society itself for, by so doing, the system best prepares the inmate for integration into that society. (pp. 8-9)

The Environmental Deprivation Scale (EDS), the Maladaptive Behavior Record (MBR), and the Weekly Activity Record (WAR) all resulted from studies done through the Rehabilitation Research Foundation.

> The EDS consists of a 16-item checklist in the areas of occupation, organizations and institutions, and interpersonal and social relationships. The focus of the EDS is on environmental input to the individual: what his sources of support or deprivation are and in what areas. The points an individual receives on the EDS indicate deprivation in the form of absence of support for adaptive behaviors or support for inappropriate or maladaptive behaviors. (Jenkins & Barton et al., 1973, pp.26-27)

The EDS is extremely selective and predictive of law violation status. The pattern of scoring indicates areas in which intervention or retraining is necessary (p. 29). It has been found to be a reliable predictor of recidivism (Jenkins, in Gehring & Eggleston, 2006, p. 264).

The Maladaptive Behavior Record (MBR) was developed as a companion piece to the EDS to provide a directory of everyday behavior.

> The MBR items deal with responses in the areas of occupation (income, attendance, employer, co-workers, conditions), addiction (alcohol, drugs, and gambling), and other forms of deviant behavior, fighting, maladaptive associations, and money mismanagement. (Jenkins & Barton et al., 1973, p. 31)

The MBR is quite predictive of criminal behavior, and serves as a valuable complement to the EDS in covering the behavioral side of human activity. Merging the EDS and MBR scores produces an increase in validity over what has been established by the EDS alone (p. 34).

The Weekly Activity Record (WAR) was created to complement the EDS and MBR. It was developed to study how individuals use their time each week.

The WAR was divided into five major sections with a total of 20 items. The format is as follows:

I) Occupational Activities: hours working (one item).
II) Physical Activities: sleeping, eating and drinking, sex, elimination, cleaning and grooming, exercise, and health care (seven items).
III) Leisure Time Activities: shopping, hobbies, social, antisocial, intellectual, watching and listening, family, and time spent with ex-offenders (eight items).
IV) Organizational Activities: time devoted to civic organizations and religious activities (one item).
V) Other Activities: travel and waiting time, daydreaming, and other activities (three items) (p. 44).

According to a study funded by the Rehabilitation Research Foundation in 1974, the EDS, MBR, and WAR were highly effective diagnostic and detection strategies for identifying environmental and behavioral events associated with law encounters and criminal behavior. Additionally, they were a powerful tool to assess programs, providing positive feedback to improve treatment as well as immediately evaluating its effects. The information supplied by these instruments leads the way toward intervention and retraining. By highlighting the specifics identified, "effective treatment can be developed that will ultimately lead to the establishment of preventative programs to obviate the problem of law violation at its source, reducing the occurrence of crime" (Jenkins & Witherspoon et al., 1972, p. 37).

The Law Encounter Severity Scale (LESS) was outlined in a manual published in 1973. J. M. McKee and A. D. Witherspoon wrote the manual. This scale came out of the idea that a continuum of success and failure is more meaningful than a rigid classification as "recidivist" or "non-recidivist." There are degrees of recidivism, according to the authors, that should be judged on a law encounter continuum (McKee & Witherspoon, 1973, p. 2).

> A criterion, which provides a basis for discriminating criminal behavior and recidivism, must meet certain requirements to avoid the limitations of the scales and classification schemes previously discussed. First, it should present criminal behavior and recidivism as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Second, it should generalize to all situations involving offenders, whether they are adults, juveniles, parolees, or some other group. Third, it should cover all offenses, which can be verified by official records. Fourth, it should group only those offenses which are comparable in terms of cost to the criminal justice system, as determined by length of sentence. Finally, the terminology used to distinguish offenses and groupings should be as objective as possible (p. 3).

The LESS was designed to rank law encounters which were verified by official court and arrest records. Using this instrument, the researchers prepared the following findings: Parolees with minimal law encounters were found to devote significantly more time to work, eating and drinking, cleanliness, religion, shopping, physical activity, hobbies,

intellectual activities, and family activities. Those with more severe law encounters spent significantly more time on social behavior, antisocial behavior, maladaptive associates, and waiting. The less severe the law encounter, the greater the amount of time devoted to positive activities (those that contribute to successful post-release adjustment) and the more severe the law encounter, the greater the amount of time spent at negative activities (p. 7).

The cellblock token economy was applied to the Draper Correctional Center beginning in 1971 and the final project paper was presented in October, 1974. There were three main objectives of the study. (1) To explore the degree to which token reinforcement procedures could be effectively employed to motivate the performance of activities that administrators consider important for the orderly operation of their institutions. These things consist of arising at a certain hour, making the bed, cleaning the bed area, and being well-groomed. (2) To determine the nature of the connection between the token reinforcement for a particular task and the probability that the task will be performed. (3) To establish a leisure-time adult basic education program. The study also compared three different formats for the presentation of programmed instructional material and the degree to which the token economy changed the day-to-day routine of inmates (Milan, 1974, pp. 15-16).

The researchers, including McKee, believed that programs to remediate the deficiencies that inmates have in reading comprehension and mathematical skills should be of the highest priority. He believed that academic achievement was a primary determinant of success or failure following release from prison. This belief led to the Individually Prescribed Instructional (IPI) System (p. 71).

The IPI System, which was developed to aid in the teaching of the adult basic education program, allowed a teacher to diagnose educational deficiencies, to recommend programmed instructional materials to remediate those deficiencies, and to assess student progress throughout the course of the program. Briefly, the IPI System first administered the Tests of Basic Education (TABE), which is a standardized achievement test, identified the inmate's academic deficiencies, and then assigned instructional modules to remediate those deficiencies. Each module took between 30 to 90 minutes to complete (p. 72).

The IPI System was tested further when the researchers used three different formats to determine which would generate the highest levels of student performance. The first format applied programmed material textbooks, which use question frames, followed by the next page with an answer frame. The second was a teaching machine, which used question and answer frames that were cut from the textbook and put on a roll of paper. The roll was put into a machine that could not be reversed, so the student could not go back and change the answer. The third format was to use a tutor who made flash cards with the question frame on one side and the answer on the other (p. 83).

The results of this study failed to confirm the superiority of the teaching machine or the individual tutoring formats over the traditional programmed textbook routine. It is

also more cost-effective to use the programmed textbook over the other two presentations (p. 86).

In 1977 Dr. McKee created a company that would apply his research findings to meet the needs of a growing number of education programs, Pace Learning. This offered tribute to the PACE (Program for an Achievement of a College Education) program that was begun at Draper in 1966 (Pacesetter, 2002, pp. 4-5). Primary customers were prison education programs, but adult educators who wanted tools to help students pass the GED were soon interested also.

The content areas covered by Pace Learning include reading, language, basic math, advanced math, science, social studies, writing, employability, and life skills. The content is available in software as well as print versions. The materials are used in over 300 correctional facilities across the United States. Adult and state juvenile programs, state county facilities, Federal programs, as well as juvenile boot camps and day treatment centers successfully use the Pace material (Pace Learning Systems, 2004).

Dr. McKee believes in individualized instruction for incarcerated youth and adults. In 2000, he wrote an article for the *Journal of Correctional Education* with Carl Clements on individualized instruction in corrections. In this commentary, they posed 14 challenges that correctional educators face in delivering high quality, individualized instructional programs (McKee & Clements, 2000, p. 270).

Their main impetus in choosing individualized education for offenders was because many offenders have huge gaps in some academic areas, but can be fairly strong in others. This diversity is the fundamental drive for individualized instruction in corrections. Individualized instruction usually provides the most promise of remediation of learning deficits, especially in the context of crowded classrooms attended by diverse students (p. 272).

The article proposed a *systems approach* for individualized instruction. It includes:

> (1) Orientation of the student to the instructional approach and plan, (2) specification of the instructional goal, (3) a detailed assessment of current skills and deficits, (4) a highly focused prescription of proven instructional lessons or technologies, (5) continuous evaluation of student progress, and (6) strategies to respond when such progress is below target objectives. (p. 273; emphasis in original)

Another key component of individualized instruction is the role of the instructor, which entails intensive involvement in motivating and supervising students and evaluating progress. According to McKee and Clements, a major source of motivation is a history of positive reinforcement for the desired behavior. They stated that during the beginning phase of skill acquisition and habits, the more frequently a person receives reinforcement, the greater his or her willingness to continue (p. 276).

Long-term incentives, such as GED completion or a high school diploma, are typically not adequate for the daily motivation required by many remedial learners. Such remote consequences have little effect on behavior unless more immediate reinforcers have been created to bridge the time gap (p. 277).

McKee has focused on dropout prevention and at-risk identifiers during the past 10 years. In 1998 he published an article in *The Journal of At-Risk Issues* entitled "SARIS: Student At-Risk Identification Scale." It uses a self-report and student records to predict dropouts.

McKee developed the Dropout Assessment and Prevention System (DAPS) in 2005. This program can identify at-risk students with better than 85% accuracy, assess the individual student's needs, evaluate and utilize school and community resources, and establish an effective prevention program with measurable results. DAPS is an outgrowth of his work in corrections. School dropouts are 10 times more likely to commit juvenile crimes and be incarcerated than other youth (Pacesetter, 2005, p. 1). If the dropout problem can be addressed properly, a reduction in the number of offenders in jails and prisons across the United States might follow.

According to McKee's wife, Susan, he has recently been working with the Oklahoma Department of Corrections evaluating their life skills grant which uses an entrepreneurial model for pre-release inmates. The program is teaching the soon-to-be released inmate skills to write a business plan and get started in business. The Oklahoma Department of Corrections is also using the EDS and the MBR, which were developed by the Rehabilitation and Research Foundation under McKee's direction (Gehring, Personal Communication, April 16, 2007). In 2007 John McKee was awarded the Correctional Education Association's Lifetime Achievement Award.

In summary, Dr. John M. McKee is a prolific researcher in the area of correctional education and behavior modification. His work with Draper Correctional Center was vast and under his leadership Draper "became a laboratory for improved school models, using the diagnostic-prescriptive approach, computer-assisted learning, and programmed instruction" (Gehring & Wright, 2003, p. 11).

McKee's work speaks volumes on his views of incarcerated youth and adults. He has spent a lifetime studying and creating programs to improve the probability of an imprisoned person returning to society in better shape than when he came into prison. His predictors of recidivism were used to prove that academic and vocational education were important components of an offender's stay in prison. Strong evidence has accumulated that "educational intervention has a positive impact on offenders" (McKee & Clements, 2000, p. 270).

There is a story from Dr. McKee's days at Draper that is a good representation of his views of education within prison walls.

> 'Some of the inmates would say, I don't care about an education,' Dr. McKee recalled. 'But it wasn't a problem, getting them to participate—especially since school was nice and had an air-conditioned work area, and they wouldn't have to work on the prison farm, except at cotton-picking time.'
>
> 'One of the guards said, *now doc, don't let them fool you. They're just going to school for a soft lick.*
>
> I said, 'That's just fine. I appreciate whatever the motivation is. I just want to get them there. It's up to me then for them to be productive.' (Pacesetter, 2002, p. 1, emphasis in original)

McKee was grounded in individualized instruction, recognizing that correctional educators need to meet students at their unique levels of maturation and ability. In reality this idea impacted not only individual levels but also social and cultural ones. Individuals who learn more about themselves enjoy higher levels of functioning and an increased ability to attain social and cultural aspirations.