

From Bars to Textbooks: Bringing Higher Education Behind Bars

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Abstract: Corrections literature maintains the profound utility of postsecondary education programs in reducing recidivism rates among ex-offenders (Anders & Noblit, 2011). Notwithstanding, financial restrictions often impede the abilities of correctional administrators to offer college-level courses. Alternative avenues for postsecondary correctional education are addressed and policy issues and recommendations provided.

The appearance of steadily increasing crime rates over the past three decades has sparked public interest in the criminal justice and correctional systems (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). In turn, elected public officials, inspired by the misguided belief that delinquents and criminal deviants regularly engage in a series of increasingly violent crime sprees, have intensified their efforts to increase police presence, lengthen prison sentences, and allocate additional funds to crime prevention measures and punishment techniques (Seiter, 2011). As the legislative endeavors of said officials have prevailed, American taxpayers remain encumbered by the \$30 billion annual debt required to support the nation's vast corrections system (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Seiter, 2011).

The rapid construction of 300 state, federal, and private penal institutions over a 5-year period, June 2000 to December 2005 (Seiter, 2011), necessitates the continued development of cost-saving programs to deter criminal activity. One such alternative mandates the restoration and expansion of postsecondary academic curricula within correctional settings. Numerous studies have discerned inverse relationships between the completion of college courses and the resumption of criminal activity upon release from a correctional facility (Anders & Noblit, 2011; Batiuk, McKeever, & Wilcox, 2005; Dawkins & McAuliff, 2008; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Esperian, 2010; Meyer, 2011; Seiter, 2011) and, accordingly, affirm the efficacy of postsecondary education opportunities in "reducing reoffending and improving public safety" (Esperian, 2010, p. 332). To demonstrate how access to higher education could reduce recidivism rates post-release, the author provides an overview of America's correctional higher education programs, discusses policy implications of such programs, and presents recommendations for continued expansion of postsecondary educational programs within correctional settings.

The History of Correctional Higher Education Programs

Traditionally, the mission of correctional institutions entailed the implementation and enforcement of court-prescribed sanctions for offenders (Seiter, 2011). However, as correctional missions evolved and expanded, correctional objectives required administrators to safeguard members of society via the regular surveillance, control, and incapacitation of offenders during periods of incarceration as well as the constant supervision of the treatment and rehabilitation of those offenders preparing for release. In fulfillment of these responsibilities, correctional agencies provided an assortment of services designed to help "offenders become less likely or less motivated to return to a life of crime and more likely to become productive and law-abiding citizens" (Seiter, 2011, p. 6).

Historically, prisoner access to higher education varied according to current public perception. During the early 20th century, few prisoners participated in free print-based

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correspondence courses offered by seminaries and bible colleges (Seiter, 2011). Yet, as correctional philosophies shifted from punishment to rehabilitation, postsecondary correctional programs took root and blossomed in the majority of the nation's prison systems (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). By 1972, the Basic Educational Opportunity Act, an amendment to the Higher Education Act of 1965, facilitated prisoner access to larger colleges and universities via tuition assistance (Rose, Reschenberg, & Richards, 2010). Over the next two decades, opportunities for postsecondary education within the correctional setting flourished with the establishment of more than 350 fully operational correctional education programs across the nation (Buruma, 2005).

The trend eventually waned, however, after public perception that prisoners could secure the luxury of higher education without costs while impoverished, yet law-abiding citizens struggled to pay for college influenced Congress to pass the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (Rose et al., 2010). Notwithstanding,

These arguments were based on false assumptions about the extent of Pell Grant funding that went to prisoners. In fact, during the 1993-94 academic year, approximately 27,000 prisoners received around \$35 million in Pell Grant funding, less than 1 percent of the total \$6 billion spent on the program that year. Moreover, no students were ever denied a Pell Grant because of prisoner participation in the program (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1994, as cited in Erisman & Contardo, 2005, p. x).

The Act effectively disqualified incarcerated individuals from receiving the Pell Grant, virtually eliminating access to higher education programs during periods of incarceration. Consequently, shortly after the Act's passage, the vast majority of penal institutions abandoned postsecondary education programs for prisoners, leaving a mere handful of programs in operation at the turn of the century (Erisman & Contardo, 2005).

The Need for Postsecondary Correctional Education

The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that 1.6 million individuals are currently incarcerated across the nation's local, state, and federal penal institutions (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011). Approximately 95% of those offenders, however, will be released into their respective communities at some point in time (Guerino et al., 2011). The vast majority of them will face reincarceration within three years of their initial release (Hughes & Wilson, 2002; Rose et al., 2010). Consistent strides, therefore, must be made to facilitate the successful reintegration of prisoners into society (Seiter, 2001; Guerino et al., 2011).

Corrections literature proclaims the availability of postsecondary academic programs within the correctional setting as the most salient and cost effective method for reducing recidivism subsequent to release from a correctional institution (Rose et al., 2010). As listed below, the benefits of correctional higher education programs are numerous. First and foremost, access to higher education facilitates legally permissible income-generating opportunities for ex-offenders. The ability to refrain from criminal activity, therefore, leads to an overall reduction in crime rates and an increase in public safety (Esperian, 2010). Second, the excessive investigative and ancillary costs (i.e., law enforcement personnel, pre-trial detention, judicial salaries, attorney fees, court fees, and juror reimbursement) associated with navigating the criminal justice system decrease. Elevated recidivism rates augment the prison population and, thus, compound total incarceration costs. Nevertheless, higher education programs minimize total costs by reducing the likelihood of recidivism, thereby, saving each state \$18,000 to \$50,000 in annual incarceration costs per offender (Gream, n.d.) whom successfully avoids

reincarceration. Hence, decreased criminal activity lessens the taxpayer's burden as it relates to an offender's repeated movement through the criminal justice system (Hrabowski & Robbi, 2002).

Moreover, ex-offenders re-entering society regularly face stigmatization and employment discrimination associated with their arrests, imprisonment, and lack of academic fortitude. The resulting limited employment prospects adversely affect employment stability and may, consequently, draw these individuals into criminal activity. However, educational opportunities in correctional settings equip future parolees or probationers with the skills required to obtain employment (Chappell, 2004). Improved employability curtails ex-offenders' reliance upon government assistance while gainful employment and higher wages associated with postsecondary education increase tax revenue for local and state governments (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Consequently, correctional postsecondary education contributes to national economic growth and prosperity (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Hrabowski & Robbi, 2002).

Next, college education programs facilitate the restoration of incarcerated individual's families. Academic success improves the offender's self-esteem, self-confidence, and feelings of self-worth (Anders & Noblit, 2011; Batiuk et al., 2005; Burke & Vivian, 2001; Chappell, 2004; Dawkins & McAuliff, 2008; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Esperian, 2010). That sense of accomplishment, combined with increased employability, may minimize the negative effects of incarceration (i.e., increased delinquency of minors raised in female-headed households and decreased educational and occupational attainment for those remaining behind). Therefore, correctional education reinforces the social bonds previously broken by incarceration, reinforces feelings of self-worth, and undermines the ability of incarceration to decimate minority populations.

Discussion

Corrections literature maintains the profound utility of postsecondary education programs in reducing recidivism rates among ex-offenders (Anders & Noblit, 2011; Batiuk et al., 2005; Burke & Vivian, 2001; Chappell, 2004; Dawkins & McAuliff, 2008; Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Esperian, 2010). Notwithstanding, financial restrictions often impede the abilities of correctional administrators to offer college-level courses as well as the ability of prisoners to self-pay for higher education access. Consequently, alternative avenues for postsecondary correctional education must be researched.

Innovative programs such as the North Carolina Workplace and Community Transition Youth Program, the Inviting Convicts to College Program, and the National Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program remove the financial obstacles to higher education by guaranteeing educational access without any costs to the correctional institution or the offender and minimal costs to the university or college facilitating instruction. For example, the North Carolina Workplace and Community Transition Youth Offender Program relies upon colleges and universities to offer courses typically found within the general education curriculum including, but not limited to, Elementary Spanish, English Composition, and Environmental Science (Anders & Noblit, 2011). In their assessment of the program, Anders and Noblit (2011) found that participation in college courses permitted students to discover their previously undetermined capabilities. Moreover, prisoners comprehended the potential of higher education to increase future employability as well as decrease the likelihood of returning to prison at a later date. Hence, exposure to college courses mediated the effects of incarceration.

Based at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh campus, the Inviting Convicts to College Program also provides college courses to prisoners; however, undergraduate students, supervised

by university faculty, serve as instructors (Rose et al., 2010). The program purports to expose prisoners to the college environment by assisting them in completing applications for admission and financial aid documents as well as in making decisions regarding enrollment in university, community, or technical colleges upon release. Researchers asserted that “[t]he prisoner-students enrolled in the ICCP clearly understood the importance of a college education and, often, would explain that their involvement in crime resulted from their lack of education” (Rose et al., 2010, p. 299). In fact, one prisoner stated

Drugs, alcohol, depression, low self-esteem led me to give up on college. When I started taking this class I really didn’t think it would change this. I was just doing it to occupy some time. But these two interns convinced me not to give up, and they’ve helped me get into [a local technical college]. I’ll be there in Fall 2008. (Rose et al., 2010, p. 302)

Another reported,

The course has really opened my eyes to my full education potential, and what college education is really about. It is the best course in my eight years so far in prison. I think they should use this course in every prison and maybe other places where troubled kids and adults might be and don’t know that this [college] might be possible for them. (Rose et al., 2010, p. 302)

Finally, based out of Temple University, the National Inside-Out Prisoner Exchange Program encourages mutually beneficial collaboration between colleges, universities, and correctional systems (The Inside-Out Center, 2010); the college or university, however, assumes all costs associated with the program, hence, eliminating the need for self-pay programs or state funding. Throughout the semester, college students and prisoners study an assortment of academic disciplines within the correctional setting and engage in discourse addressing crime, justice, and social policy; as such, students’ and prisoners’ perspectives are broadened. Furthermore, continued contact with college students and faculty provides offenders with the resources necessary to venture into the academic setting upon release. This is particularly beneficial to prisoners whom receive course credit for their efforts and retain eligibility for reduced tuition rates towards their future matriculation at the university facilitating the Inside-Out program (The Inside-Out Center, 2010).

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Despite the availability of studies documenting the negative correlation between increased educational opportunities and recidivism rates, the public remains blissfully unaware of such findings or the national implications of their ignorance (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Such blatant misperceptions that education rewards offenders for their criminal behavior are reflected in the lack of state and federal funding for postsecondary correctional education programs. It is imperative, therefore, that the public avail itself of the advantages of correctional education, mainly, the reduction in crime rates and the employability of ex-offenders upon release, in order to reap the benefit of significant reductions in taxpayer expense. Hence, the adjustment of public opinion may remove the impediments currently preventing offenders from becoming productive and law-abiding citizens.

The United States professes to be a nation of “second chances and opportunity . . . , [hence,] democratic access to high-quality higher education must include access for people in prison” (Nixon, as cited in Esperian, 2010, p. 311). Accordingly, several recommendations must be implemented to restore and expand postsecondary correctional education programs. First, federal financial aid eligibility must be reinstated for prisoners. Providing tuition assistance to prisoners increases their opportunities to seek higher education within an academic setting. This,

in turn, allows for the development of skills needed to negotiate the outside world. Second, legislative efforts should be directed at increasing state funding for postsecondary correctional education programs as the fiscal and social benefits outweigh any difficulties associated with bringing higher education behind prison bars. Next, legislators should aim to increase funding for universities serving prison populations in an effort to ensure that financial restrictions do not impede prisoner access to higher education. Finally, the development of postsecondary correctional education programs requires the collaborative efforts of the Departments of Education and Corrections, respectively. Consequently, efforts must be made to foster relationships between the two competing entities.

In conclusion, prisoner access to higher education within the correctional setting brings about a multitude of fiscal and social benefits for the prisoners, the correctional system, and society, at large. Accordingly, “we cannot bar the most vulnerable people from the very thing that has the greatest potential to change their lives” (Nixon, as cited in Esperian, 2011, p. 311). To do otherwise would not only constitute a travesty for all Americans but also undermine the ideals upon which this great nation was founded.

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