



College Courses in Prison

Research indicates that prison college programs are among the best tools for reducing recidivism. Individuals who take college courses while in prison improve their chances of attaining and keeping employment after release. They are less likely to commit additional crimes that would lead to their return to prison. The effectiveness of these programs led to their widespread adoption for several years. However, nearly all programs were discontinued during the 1990s and few college programs are currently available in prison settings. The history of these programs, and the debate about their merits, demonstrates the counterproductive effect that political influence can have on efforts to combat crime.

HISTORY

The University of Southern Illinois began the nation's first prison-based college program in 1953. Other programs followed, but since the development of these programs was dependent on limited funding, only 12 postsecondary correctional education programs existed by 1965. The funding situation changed significantly that year as the U.S. Congress passed Title IV of the Higher Education Act. This act gave inmates and other low-income students the right to apply for federal financial aid in the form of federal **Pell** grants to be used for college courses.

Title IV provided the funding that was needed to ensure the financial stability of corrections education programs. As a result, by 1973, 182 college programs were operating in U.S. prisons. By 1982 (which was the last year an official count was made), 350 programs were active in 45 states and approximately 27,000 inmates received some form of postsecondary education. Although the numbers had increased significantly, this represented just 9% of the total prison population at the time.

Prisoners applied for **Pell** grants under the same criteria as those outside prison. **Pell** grants are noncompetitive, need-based federal funds that are available to all qualifying low-income individuals who plan to enroll in college degree programs. For qualifying individuals in correctional facilities, the average **Pell** grant award was less than \$1,300 per year. The total percentage of the program's annual budget that was spent on inmate higher education was 1/10 of 1%. Although the cost was relatively low, the idea of providing **Pell** grants to prisoners remained controversial and many argued for the elimination of these grants.

The beginning of the end for college programs in prison was in 1991, as Republican Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina introduced an amendment to eliminate federal funds for education to inmates. Several members of the U.S. House of Representatives introduced similar amendments. Like Helms, they claimed that federal money was being spent at the expense of "law-abiding" students who were enrolled in college outside of prison. Although these amendments failed, this argument would return the next year with the passage of the Higher Education Reauthorization Act, which determined that **Pell** grants for prisoners could be used only for tuition and fees. The 1992 bill also made those on death row, or serving life without parole, ineligible for **Pell** grants seeming to acknowledge the importance of education for those who would eventually be released from prison.

Despite evidence supporting the connection between higher education and lowered recidivism, the U.S. Congress included a provision in the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 that eliminated **Pell** grants for prisoners. This law had a devastating effect on prison education programs. In 1990, there were 350 higher education programs for inmates. By 1997 only 8 programs remained. Ironically, at the same time as the federal government abolished **Pell** grants for prisoners, many states were undergoing a dollar-for-dollar tradeoff

between corrections and education spending. New York State, for example, steadily increased its Department of Corrections budget by 76% to \$761 million. During the same period, the state decreased funding to university systems by 28%, to \$615 million. Much of the increase in corrections spending was the result of longer prison terms and the need for increased prison construction.

In the 1993–1994 school year, more than 25,000 students in correctional facilities were recipients of **Pell** grants. Although these grants were not the only source of revenue for these programs, they provided a predictable flow of money that enabled the continued functioning of classes. Since there were no replacement funds, programs were forced to abandon efforts to provide college courses in prison.

BENEFITS OF CORRECTIONS EDUCATION

In 2002, there were more than 1.4 million prisoners in federal and state facilities. That same year, more than 600,000 inmates were released, either unconditionally or under conditions of parole. Many of those released will be rearrested and will return to prison. Costs of this cycle of incarceration and reincarceration are very high. Many studies suggest that corrections education has the potential to greatly reduce these costs. For example, a 1987 Bureau of Prisons report found that the more education inmates received, the lower their rate of recidivism. Those who earned college degrees were the least likely to reenter prison. For inmates who had some high school, the rate of recidivism was 54.6%. For college graduates, the rate dropped to 5.4%. Similarly, a Texas Department of Criminal Justice study found that while the state's overall rate of recidivism was 60%, for holders of college associate degrees it was 13.7%. The recidivism rate for those with bachelor's degrees was 5.6%. The rate for those with master's degrees was 0%.

Even small reductions in recidivism can save millions of dollars in costs associated with keeping the recidivist offender in prison for longer periods of time. Additional costs are apparent when we consider that the individual, had he or she not committed another crime, would be working, paying taxes, and making a positive contribution to the economy. When we add the reduction of costs, both financial and emotional, to victims of crime, the benefits are even greater. Finally, the justice system as a whole, including police and courts, can save a great deal of money when the crime rate is reduced.

The Changing Minds study (Fine et al., 2001), which was conducted at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York's only maximum-security prison for women, was the first major study to examine the impact of college in prison since **Pell** grants were eliminated. As other research had shown before, Changing Minds demonstrated that college prison programs transform lives, reduce recidivism, create safer prisons and communities, and significantly reduce the need for tax dollars spent on prisons. Only 7.7% of the inmates who took college courses at Bedford Hills returned to prison after release, while 29.9% of the inmates who did not participate in the college program were reincarcerated. The authors calculated that this reduction in reincarceration would save approximately \$900,000 per 100 student prisoners over a two-year period. If we project these savings to the 600,000 prison releases in a single year, the savings are enormous.

The success demonstrated in the Bedford Hills study has led to the creation of the Center for Redirection Through Education. This organization continues to work to develop college programs in prisons throughout New York State. Other states are also working to develop postsecondary education programs but they continue to face funding problems. In most cases, options are limited to single courses with no expectation of earning a full degree.

CHALLENGES

Students in prison education programs evidence a wide range of potential and have had varying educational experiences. Inmates who choose to enroll in college courses are not necessarily any different from the typical university student. As in any college-level course, the range of abilities can include very gifted students, students who face challenges, and students who have various motives for enrolling in college courses.

The educator's challenge is compounded by the uniqueness of prison culture and the need for security. Prisons adhere to strict routines and provide a controlled environment for education classes. These routines may not be ideal for teaching or learning. College programs may also adhere to schedules that conflict with the requirements of correctional institutions. Another issue is that inmates are often moved from one facility to another with little or no notice. This movement interrupts, or ends, the individual's educational programming. Along with structural issues related to security, social factors may further limit learning opportunities. For example, prison culture can vary from one facility to another, or even in different parts of a single facility. The support and expectations of fellow prisoners can be an important determinant of prison culture. Prison administrators may also have varying degrees of support for education—especially if they see education as a threat to the primary functions of security and control. If the culture of the facility is not supportive of the individual's educational goals, and willing to work toward integrating education into the dominant goal of creating a safe and secure facility, it may be difficult for individuals to reach their goals.

CONCLUSION

Most studies indicate that an individual who takes college classes while in prison is less likely to return to prison than someone who has not received the same educational opportunities. There is some question as to why these courses lower recidivism. Many of the benefits of a college education are hard to measure. As such, it may be difficult to show a clear relationship between educational opportunity and recidivism. However, an intervening factor, the ability to find and hold a job, appears to relate to college courses in prison since college education increases the likelihood of postrelease employment, which, in turn, reduces the chance of recidivism.

The vast majority of incarcerated individuals will eventually be released. The growth in the incarcerated population over the past 20 years has created unprecedented release rates since there are just so many people in prison. Due to strict sentencing guidelines, these women and men have often served long terms and are released only when their terms have been completely served. Many are released unconditionally, without parole or other postrelease supervision. Each of these individuals will be expected to begin leading a productive, law-abiding life outside prison walls. Access to a quality education can increase their chance of success.

—Kenneth Mentor

Further Reading

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