

Post-Secondary Education for People in Prison

By Abigail Strait & Susan Eaton

The United States locks up a larger share of its population than any other nation, with one out of every 100 American adults behind bars. The think tank and advocacy organization, Prison Policy Initiative reported in 2016 that the American criminal justice system — state and federal prisons, juvenile correctional facilities, local jails, Indian Country jails, immigration detention facilities and other institutions — incarcerates about 2.3 million people. This is a 500 percent increase since 1980. The United States has about 5 percent of the world's population but 25 percent of the world's incarcerated population.

The lack of educational and economic opportunities in communities of concentrated disadvantage, the mechanics and focus of the “drug war” of the 1990s and 2000s and well documented racial bias in surveillance, arrests and sentencing have contributed to vast racial disparities in incarceration. More than 60 percent of people in prison in 2014 were either African American or Latino, even though those two groups make up

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about a quarter of the total US population. Incarceration widens the racial wealth gap in the United States and previous incarceration tends to have a harsher economic impact upon African Americans than it does upon previously incarcerated whites.

The costs of mass incarceration are proving untenable to the federal and many state governments. In 2011, lawmakers in fifteen states passed sentencing reform legislation aimed to reduce reliance on incarceration and its associated costs. A public opinion poll released in 2016 showed that 60 percent of voters in key Congressional battleground states think federal prisons detain too many people who are convicted of nonviolent offenses, and more than 70 percent think the criminal justice system's principal purpose should be "rehabilitating criminals to become productive, law-abiding citizens."

One way to reduce the prison population and lower costs is to reduce the number of people who return to prison after being released. Some 700,000 people are projected to be released from state and federal prisons this year, most without the education and work experience to get a job to support themselves and their families.

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It is estimated that nearly one-third of the people released will be rearrested in the first year out and within five years, nearly three-quarters of people released from prisons will be arrested again. When people who are released from prison can find and keep legal jobs, "they are more likely to be able to pay restitution to their victims, support their children, and avoid crime," according to a study by the Pew Charitable Trusts. It is challenging for formerly incarcerated people to find employment in part because of hiring policies and practices that discriminate against people with felony convictions. But even if an employer were willing to hire a formerly incarcerated person, jobs that pay a living wage increasingly require at least some postsecondary education.

Unfortunately, beginning in 1994, it became exceedingly difficult for incarcerated people to get access to potentially life-changing postsecondary education that could increase their chances of life success after release and help transform prisons into the rehabilitative institutions most voters say they want. That was the year that President Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act into law. This law expressly denied people in prison from receiving Pell Grants, which is a form of federal financial aid for low-income students. (A 1965 law had expressly stated that incarcerated people were eligible for the grants, which led the growth of postsecondary prison education programs.) After this 1994 policy change, the number of college programs for people in prison dropped dramatically. For example, in New York State alone, the number of college programs in prisons fell from about 70 in the 1990s to just four by 2004. The number of college degrees awarded to incarcerated people dropped from 1,078 in 1991 to 141 two decades later in 2011, according to a 2016 report by the New York State Bar Association.

Imprisoned people who wish to improve their lives through postsecondary education, thus, are left with few options other than paying out of pocket for courses or being lucky to land in one of the handful of prisons with privately funded postsecondary education programs. A 2011 study by the Institute for Higher Education Policy estimates that between 35 to 42 percent of correctional facilities have some form of postsecondary education but that most enrolled students were not on a path toward a degree.

The Philanthropic Opportunity

It is a promising time to invest in postsecondary correctional education programs. In the past several years, elected leaders and social commentators from across the ideological spectrum have become more vocal about the need to reduce incarceration rates and find ways to prevent previously incarcerated people from returning to prison. Some federal and state lawmakers have proposed or enacted legislation that would make it easier for people in prison to have access to postsecondary education.

Philanthropic investments in effective postsecondary educational programming for people in prison, thus, will likely receive public attention and support, inspire continued public conversations about criminal justice reform, and potentially be a catalyst for renewed government support.

In her book, *Voices From American Prisons*, long-time prison educator and director of the Harvard-based Prison Studies Project, Kaia Stern, notes that reinstatement of Pell Grant eligibility for people in prison is, while “essential,” not a “cure-all to the question of funding for higher education in the prison context.” She stresses that in addition to bipartisan support, there must be “collaboration between public and private resources,” which can “forge a sense of partnership between disparate constituencies and absorb the potential political fall-out which might otherwise cause any single source to falter.”

With further investment, long-standing prison education programs with a record of success could expand or be replicated. If provided financial support, architects of such programs could share strategies and best practices with the some 200 colleges and universities in 47 states where leaders have expressed interest in creating postsecondary education programs for incarcerated people through the new pilot program initiated by the Obama Administration (see below).

At a conference in Arizona, in March, 2016, prison education practitioners and advocates articulated a vision for a national organization that would support and advance high-quality postsecondary education opportunities for people in prison. This detailed draft plan could serve as a useful roadmap for interested grantmakers. The document has not yet been publicly released but such leaders as Jody Lewen from the Prison University Project in California (see below), Tanya Ezren from the Freedom Education Project in Washington State (see below) and Kaia Stern of the Prison Studies Project at Harvard collaborated on the report with several other colleagues.

Political and Policy Context

In May, 2015, US Rep Donna Edwards (D-MD) introduced the Restoring Education and Learning (REAL) Act, which would have reinstated access to Pell grants for people in prison. It won 26 sponsors but never came up for a vote. A similar bill was introduced in the Senate in 2016.

In July 2015, President Obama announced a \$30 million pilot program, administered through the Department of Education, called the Second Chance Pell Pilot, which will provide 12,000 incarcerated people access to Pell grants to finance their postsecondary educations in collaboration with 67 colleges and universities across

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the United States. (As a pilot program, the Department of Education has authority to administer financial aid and waive federal regulations for the benefit of experimentation.) At this writing, in April 2017, it is unclear what might be the fate of the Pell pilot under President Donald Trump.

At the state level, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has proposed a program that would offer incarcerated people in 10 prisons the chance to earn an associate or bachelor's degree, costing the state about \$5,000 a year per student. In California, a 2014 law allows community colleges to receive the same amount of state funding for educating people in prison as for a student on campus. The California legislation provided incentives for community college officials and prison officials to provide instruction. A well-regarded privately run program, The Prison University Project, based at San Quentin Prison in California, provides training to community college instructors and administrators.

Support for prison education programs, though, often also triggers opposition and controversy as people complain that money would be better spent upon children or others who have not been convicted of crimes. In reality, though, the Pell Grant program acts as an entitlement program, borrowing from future appropriations to meet current needs. Thus, any student who has a demonstrated need, receives a grant. As the General Accounting Office wrote in 1994, if grants weren't provided to incarcerated people, "no student currently denied a Pell Grant would have received one and no award amount would have been increased."

Given the public misunderstandings and the likelihood of contention, sizable and sustained government support may be delayed or stopped short at the pilot phase. This makes private support from funders all the more necessary at least until advocates build more understanding about the collective value and actual funding

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mechanisms associated with Pell Grants. Programs that grow and succeed with private investments can serve as important existence proofs for advocates and elected leaders who are trying to win public support for postsecondary education programs in prisons.

Research – What We Know

In its 2013 meta analysis of all rigorous studies on postsecondary education, The RAND Corporation found that, on average, people who had enrolled in postsecondary education in prison had 43 percent lower odds of returning to prison than incarcerated people who did not enroll. This led RAND researchers to conclude that for every dollar invested in prison education programs, taxpayers save between \$4 and \$5.

A 2006 study found that participation in such programs "yields a positive influence on the psychological well being" of people in prison. An earlier study in 2001 found a strong relationship between participation in an educational program in prison and lower rates of recidivism, higher rates of employment and higher post-release wages compared with outcomes for people who were not enrolled in the program.

There are limits to these studies, as they carry a "selection bias," in that the findings could reflect the fact that people who participate in prison education programs already possess motivation for improving their lives and



thus were relatively less likely to return to prison whether they received educational opportunity or not. That said, the correlation between getting a postsecondary education and avoiding recidivism is a strong one. Moreover, some researchers and advocates resent the focus on recidivism, arguing that prison-based postsecondary education programs should be evaluated as well on correlations with reductions in violence in the prison setting, the health or well-being of incarcerated people.

Current Practice

Several well-regarded programs provide postsecondary education to people in prisons. Among the programs, there are variations in structure, setting, design and course offerings and funding. There is limited data on prison postsecondary education programs, but the Prison Studies Project, now housed at Harvard Law School's Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice offers an online directory of prison education programs in the United States. This directory is a work in progress.

This section (organized alphabetically) is not exhaustive and should not be viewed as a program endorsements. Intentionally geographically diverse, this list is best seen as a starting point for funders who wish to learn more about the form, content and needs of various prison programs across the country.

Bard Prison Initiative (New York) - Created by students in 1999 to bring tutors to local prisons, BPI is now an academic program that offers a liberal arts education to prisoners in five of New York's correctional facilities. In 2016, Bard granted 275 degrees to incarcerated people and enrolled more than 500 incarcerated people.

Overall, fewer than 4 percent of formerly incarcerated BPI students have returned to prison. BPI's success led to creation of the Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison. This organization unites and supports higher education programs for people who are incarcerated. It includes several prison education programs including those operated by Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Notre Dame & Holy Cross Colleges in Indiana, Grinnell College in Iowa and Goucher College in Maryland.

Boston University Prison Education Program - Funded mostly by Boston University, with some support from private foundations, the program has offered credit-bearing college courses since 1972, beginning at the Massachusetts Correctional Institute in Norfolk. In 1989, the program expanded to a second prison for men and by 1991, it brought courses to the state's only penal institution for women in Framingham. The program offers more than 600 courses in a variety of disciplines and confers a Bachelor of Liberal Studies to graduates. Entry into the program is through a four-part examination. This program also offers scholarships to corrections staff. Nearly 12,000 incarcerated people have participated in the program since the 1970s. Nearly 300 have earned bachelor's degrees, 39 received master's degrees.

Freedom Education Project (Washington State) - In 2014, a partnership with Tacoma Community College earned this program the accreditation it needed to offer associate degrees. Since 2011, it had been offering college courses, but not degrees, to women in collaboration with the Women's Village, an organization of imprisoned women in the Washington Corrections Center for Women. In 2016 the first four women to earn the 90 credits necessary for an associate's degrees graduated at Washington Correctional Center for Women. The program is staffed by professors from the University of Puget Sound and other colleges and universities in the area.

Prison University Project (California) - Founded in 1996, and located in San Quentin Prison, the program offers courses in the humanities, social sciences, math and science leading to associate's degrees through Patten University, a private college in Oakland. Courses are also offered that are required for transfer to California's public universities and colleges. More than 100 instructors from colleges and universities in northern California work as volunteers. The program is funded through individual donations and grants from foundations. PUP does not restrict eligibility based on age, length of sentence or type of offense. A 2012 evaluation using data from the California Department of Corrections found that that the recidivism rate for both new offenses and parole violations among PUP graduates who leave prison is 17 percent, compared to 65 percent of all people released from California prisons overall. Researchers at Stanford University are currently conducting an independent evaluation of the program that will evaluate the program on a variety of outcomes.

University Beyond Bars (Washington State) - This program began in the mid-2000s when two volunteers began teaching small business management, creative writing and African American history inside Washington State Reformatory in Monroe, Washington. This effort expanded into a non-profit organization that offers college and enrichment courses to more than 1,100 incarcerated men in two facilities each semester. Program leaders collaborate closely with the Black Prisoners Caucus, created in 1972 by African American men incarcerated at Washington State Reformatory at Monroe.

Limitations and Challenges

Researchers have identified various challenges associated with prison education programs. This includes bureaucratic delays in modernizing and expanding necessary educational technology. Time-consuming secu-

rity protocols, an array of logistical challenges and transfers of incarcerated people to different facilities and other disruptions also create challenges. But advocates stress that programs have overcome or learned to work around these limitations and that it is mostly for lack of money that postsecondary education programs for people in prison aren't more prevalent.

Further, some advocates express concern about the proliferation of online learning, which has not demonstrated the same effectiveness as in-person classroom settings that typically include collaboration, real-time dialogue with fellow students and professors and oftentimes, mentorship and advising.

The Philanthropic Landscape

Philanthropic investment in postsecondary prison education programs is not widespread, but several foundations have experience funding in this area.

For several years, the Ford Foundation has helped to fund established postsecondary programs operated by Bard College, the Prison University Project inside California's San Quentin prison and Wesleyan University's Center for Prison Education.

In 2015, the Andrew Mellon Foundation granted a \$1 million, 3-year grant to the Justice-in-Education program, which will provide postsecondary education to incarcerated people in New York.

The Open Society Foundation has also supported prison education programs. The Sunshine Lady Foundation, operated by Doris Buffett, has been a steadfast and generous supporter of several prison education programs, including Hudson Link inside New York's Sing-Sing Prison, one in Maine and in Washington State.

The postsecondary prison education program operated by and also funded mostly by Boston University has benefitted from support from smaller Massachusetts-based foundations including the Lenny Zakim Foundation, the Carpenter Foundation, the Clipper Ship Foundation and the Shaw Foundation.

In Washington State, an array of smaller family and community foundations provide support to the University Behind Bars program, which also has received corporate support. Similarly, the Freedom Education Project of Puget Sound receives support from individual donations and several foundations.

Summary Findings

- * Investments in postsecondary prison education would fill a clear gap and respond to contemporary social concerns and growing awareness about the harm and costs of incarceration in society, the contribution of mass incarceration to racial inequality and the need to reduce recidivism.
- * There exists strong evidence of successful, sustained higher education programs for incarcerated people
- * There is a demonstrated demand among people in prison for educational opportunities
- * There exists demonstrated will for expansion and a dedicated core of experienced and sophisticated prison education practitioners and advocates in many regions of the United States

- * A supportive research base is limited by study design concerns, but findings on the relationship between postsecondary education programs, reduced recidivism and improved psychological health of incarcerated students are consistently positive
- * Research and evaluation of existing programs, such as the ongoing study of the Prison University Project in California could also be a useful investment, strengthen the case for further philanthropic support and provide guidance for program improvement
- * A handful of mostly progressive larger foundations have made grants in support of postsecondary prison education programs and local and regional foundations have supported particular programs in their geographic areas.

Additional Resources

College Behind Bars: How Educating Prisoners Pays Off. *Forbes Magazine*. March 25, 2013.

Current information on the costs of prison at the federal and state levels can be found at the Prison Policy Initiative, which offers free reports and commentary.

The American Civil Liberties Union (2015). 121 Organizations Support the REAL Act of 2015 (HR 2521).

LeTourneau, N. (2015). Momentum for Criminal Justice Reform Continues to Build. *The Washington Monthly*.

U.S. Department of Education. U.S. Department of Education Launches Second Chance Pell Pilot Program for Incarcerated Individuals.

Westervelt, E. (2015, July 31). Measuring the Power of a Prison Education. NPR.

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draw upon research, policy analysis and practitioner experience to identify promising grantmaking opportunities that aspire to create a fairer, more inclusive and more equitable society.

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