

Turn Prisons Into Colleges

By ELIZABETH HINTON MARCH 6, 2018



A Prison University Project student working on an assignment in study hall at San Quentin State Prison. R. J. Lozada

Imagine if prisons looked like the grounds of universities. Instead of languishing in cells, incarcerated people sat in classrooms and learned about climate science or poetry — just like college students. Or even with them.

This would be a boon to prisoners across the country, a vast majority of whom do not have a high school diploma. And it could help shrink our prison population. While racial disparities in arrests and convictions are alarming, education level is a far stronger predictor of future incarceration than race.

The idea is rooted in history. In the 1920s, Howard Belding Gill, a criminologist and a Harvard alumnus, developed a college-like community at

the Norfolk State Prison Colony in Massachusetts, where he was the superintendent. Prisoners wore normal clothing, participated in cooperative self-government with staff, and took academic courses with instructors from Emerson, Boston University and Harvard. They ran a newspaper, radio show and jazz orchestra, and they had access to an extensive library.

Norfolk had such a good reputation, Malcolm X asked to be transferred there from Charlestown State Prison in Boston so, as he wrote in his petition, he could use “the educational facilities that aren’t in these other institutions.” At Norfolk, “there are many things that I would like to learn that would be of use to me when I regain my freedom.” After Malcolm X’s request was granted, he joined the famous Norfolk Debate Society, through which inmates connected to students at Harvard and other universities.

Researchers from the Bureau of Prisons emulated this model when they created a prison college project in the 1960s. It allowed incarcerated people throughout the country to serve their sentences at a single site, designed like a college campus, and take classes full-time. Although the project was never completed, San Quentin State Prison in California created a scaled-down version with support from the Ford Foundation, and it was one of the few prisons then that offered higher education classes.

Today, only a third of all prisons provide ways for incarcerated people to continue their educations beyond high school. But the San Quentin Prison University Project remains one of the country’s most vibrant educational programs for inmates, so much so President Barack Obama awarded it a National Humanities Medal in 2015 for the quality of its courses.

The idea of expanding educational opportunities to prisoners as a way to reduce recidivism and government spending has again gained momentum. That’s partly because of a study published in 2013 by the right-leaning RAND Corporation showing that inmates who took classes had a 43 percent lower likelihood of recidivism and a 13 percent higher likelihood of getting a job after leaving prison.

Lawmakers have rightly recognized the wisdom in turning prisons into colleges. In 2015, Mr. Obama created the Second Chance Pell Pilot Program, which has enrolled more than 12,000 incarcerated students in higher education programs at 67 different schools. The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions [is considering](#) permanently reinstating Pell Grants for incarcerated students, who lost access to federal scholarships under the 1994 crime bill. Even Education Secretary Betsy DeVos calls providing prisoners with the chance to earn a degree “a very good and interesting possibility.”

This is no small matter. If we believe education is a civil right that improves society and increases civic engagement, then the purpose of prison education shouldn't be about training people to develop marketable skills for the global economy. Instead, learning gives us a different understanding of ourselves and the world around us, and it provides us tools to become more empathetic. That's why prisons with educational programs are often safer, and why there is a stronger correlation between educational levels and voting than with socioeconomic background.

Mass incarceration is inextricably linked to mass undereducation in America. Yale, Princeton, Cornell, Georgetown, Wesleyan and New York University are among a handful of institutions that realize this and have begun to create ways for incarcerated people to take college classes. These universities recognize that they have a moral responsibility to pursue educational justice for prisoners, a group that has disproportionately attended under-resourced public schools.

College presidents across the country emphasize the importance of “diversity, inclusion and belonging,” and they are reckoning with their institutions' ties to slavery. Expanding prison education programs would link those two ventures in a forward-thinking way. It's clear that education will continue to be a central part of criminal justice reform. The question we should ask ourselves is not “Will incarcerated students transform the university?” The

better question is, “Will colleges begin to address and reflect the world around them?”