

Report Recommends Lawmakers Reinstate College Programs in Prison

by David M. Reutter

Citing the benefits of college prison programs, a report by the Correctional Association of New York recommended several policy changes to increase and recognize participation in degree-awarding programs. The report says the principal benefits of college programs in prison are: reduced recidivism because of the enhanced problem-solving skills, greater opportunities for steady employment provided to prisoners, safer and more manageable prison conditions and a cost-effective option for improving public safety.

When President Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, also known as the Clinton Crime Bill, into law in September 1994, the use of Pell Grants by prisoners to fund secondary education was eliminated. Upon taking office as New York's governor in 1995, George Pataki banned prisoners from receiving grants through the Tuition Assistance Program. Nationwide, nearly all 350 post-secondary correctional education (PSCE) programs closed. Only 4 of the 70 in New York remained.

The report under review here found this was a grave mistake. It examined several studies that found PSCEs reduce recidivism. In New York, those who earned a degree while in prison recidivated only 26.4% of the time, compared to 44.6% for those who did not earn a degree. A three-state study of Ohio, Maryland and Minnesota found a 22% recidivist rate for PSCE degree-earners and a 41% rate for those not participating in PSCEs.

"Those people who got an education on the inside had the same problems when

released as those who didn't," says Christina Voight, who earned an Associate's Degree and began a Bachelor's at a New York PSCE, "but those without college kept falling while those who had an education got back up and kept going."

When released, former prisoners "are at a dual disadvantage: they are chronically undereducated, which limits employment options, and are stigmatized as ex-offenders when filling out applications." However, earning a college degree in an "adverse environment is evidence of strength, intelligence, and dedication, qualities critical to succeeding on the outside."

In addition to gaining cognitive skills, PSCEs have "multiple benign effects: providing an incentive for good behavior; producing mature, well spoken leadership who have a calming influence on other inmates and on correction officers; and, communicating the message that society has sufficient respect for the human potential of incarcerated people." Prisoners in PSCEs avoid disciplinary problems, encourage each other to improve and their children take education more seriously.

Along with providing a safer and more manageable prison environment, PSCEs are a cost-effective method of improving public safety. "A better educated population means a more productive population." Policymakers can help reduce former prisoners' reliance on public assistance by assuring they have sufficient education to earn a wage above the poverty line, which is usually their fate.

The three-state study concluded: "A \$1 million investment in incarceration will

prevent about 350 crimes, while that same investment in education will prevent more than 600 crimes. Correctional education is almost twice as cost-effective as incarceration."

The report then examines successful, cost-effective programs in North Carolina, Texas and New York. It recommends that lawmakers in New York restore and expand public funding for college programs in prison, require the parole

board to consider PSCE participation as a qualifying indicator for parole release and to expand programs that provide higher education to former prisoners as a means of supporting successful reentry and community well-being.

The report, *Education from the Inside, Out: The Multiple Benefits of College Programs in Prison*, is available on PLN's website. ■