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A Case for Liberal Arts College Education in Prison

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History of College in Prison

Beginning in the 1970's, the amount of education programs in prisons increased nationally with the help of federal Pell Grants. Pell Grants provided financial aid to individuals coming from low-income households, which initially included inmates. However, in 1994 Pell Grants were banned for inmates which lead to a 40% national decrease in programming (Wright, 2001)*. While prison education was quickly declining nationally, the prison population was expanding at a 7% rate (Wright, 2001). From the 1990's to 2020, education was scarce for prisoners because of the blocked federal funding for incarcerated persons. In December 2020, congress re-expanded access to Pell Grants to incarcerated individuals and prison education programs (U.S.D.E., 2021). Since its reinstatement, prison education programs have begun to rise again with a further emphasis on college education programs.

What's the Political Benefit?

Prisons that have college education available for inmates reliably experience lower recidivism and inmate misconduct rates, as well as an increase in job placement post-release.

Reduced Recidivism Rates

In the United States $\frac{2}{3}$ of offenders are expected to recidivate (Gottschalk, 2015). A study of prison education found that inmates that participate are 3.7 times less likely to become reincarcerated upon release (Courtney, 2019). Inmates that participate in a liberal arts college program have an average of a 2% recidivism rate with many programs successfully fostering a 0% recidivism rate (Langemann, 2019).

Increased Job Placement

Inability to secure a job post-release is one of the main hurdles that ex-inmates face, driving higher recidivism rates. Two studies in 2002 found that inmates after release only have an employment rate of about 0.30-.35, making between \$1,000-\$2,000 quarterly (Holzer, et.al., 2003). Liberal arts education programs in prison report that about 85% of student inmates secure a job within two months of release (Langemann, 2019).

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Reduced Inmate Misconduct

Prisons with education programs experience less inmate misconduct and violence within the prison. Many correctional officers report reductions in violence simply because it gives inmates something to occupy their time. A prison study in Ohio found a 9% overall decrease in misconduct rates among participating inmates (Pompoco, et. al., 2017). This information is supported with qualitative interviews in the "Public Opinion" section.

Why Liberal Arts Specifically?

Philosopher Harry Brighouse's Five Aims Goals of Education: personal autonomy, ability to contribute to social & economic life, personal flourishing, democratic competence, and capacity for cooperation (Brighouse, 2009). A successful education (i.e. liberal arts) fosters these skills. Prisons would especially benefit from liberal arts because these skills would increase inmate flourishing and potentially changing their mindsets.

Why Should We Care?

Ethical Argument

Punishing in harsh ways that remove wrongdoers' dignity has been justified by retributive and deterrent-based models. Both models intentionally remove elements of well-being in order to make amends or change future behavior. This has historically been proven ineffective as incarceration rates have been rising for the past twenty years.

Instead, we must acknowledge that what makes a life go well is access to 10 central capabilities. We must also acknowledge that human dignity ought to be upheld for all humans, not just ones who meet merit requirements. By accepting the basis for well-being and that every human deserves access to these, then it is required that we must uphold such standards to wrongdoers as well. One necessary amendment to the incarceration to uphold these standards is to install liberal arts education programs into prisons state-wide.

Qualities of Human Well-Being

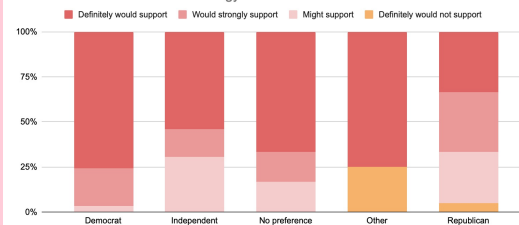
Martha Nussbaum's 10 Capabilities for Well-Being: Life, Bodily Health, Bodily Integrity, Senses/Imagination/Thought, Emotions, Practical Reason, Affiliation Towards Others and Self, Other Species, Play, and Control Over One's Material and Political Environment (Nussbaum, 2011). Individuals must have access to these elements in order to be living a dignified life.

Public Opinion Status

SNC Students: From a survey collected in 2020 of a portion of the SNC student body, there is overwhelming support for implementing college education in prisons. Previous research suggested that we are still in a highly punitive era, but this survey suggests that there may be a shift in young-adult opinion. Students identifying with republican and "other" parties were the only respondents to report "definitely not support"; still at surprisingly low numbers.

Department of Corrections Staff: Through qualitative interviews with current and retired correctional officers at the Green Bay Correctional Institute (GBCI), there seems to be a shift in DOC opinions on the role of education in prison. Both correctional officers interviewed reported personal experience seeing inmates' behavior change to more positive and cooperative actions when participating in educational programming (GED and Vocational programs). There were related reports of inmates becoming less violent, with significant reductions in fights in the educational halls of the prison. The retired correctional officer reported that multiple of the inmates he knew well participated in the GED program and did not return to prison, to his knowledge. Statistical data about GBCI inmate behavior/recidivism is not available.

PrisEduNoTax and Political Ideology



What's Next?

Presenting policy proposal to local and state representatives to advocate for a state-wide initiative to implement liberal arts college courses in prisons. Ideally partnering SNC course credits with a local prison.

*Resources available upon request.