

Educate Me—Please

Only in a prison environment will you see programs that have been proven successful scaled back or discontinued altogether. Such is the sad story with higher education for prisoners. According to statistics prisoner higher education has one of the most measurable and positive effects on rehabilitation and reentry than all other programs combined.

Education Behind Bars, a monthly journal dedicated to issues concerning prisoner education, reports that, "prisoners who obtain AA degrees recidivate (come back to prison) at a rate of 13.7 percent, while those with a bachelor's degree recidivate at a rate of 5.6 percent, and those with a Master's degree recidivate at a rate of 0 percent." Now compare this with the three year average recidivism rate that is well over 50 percent and you would think that every public policy official, educator, and politician in America would be on his or her soap box stressing the benefits of inmate education. Not only as a rehabilitation tool, but a crime fighting one! Unfortunately that's not the case.

I can personally testify to the transformative power of education behind bars. I entered prison a 8th grade dropout who had never attended even one day of high school. However, once I found myself entangled within the soul crushing, humanity stealing jaws of the criminal justice system. I realized that if I was ever to have a any chance at redemption or to salvage what was left of my life I was going to have to travel a completely new road. And that education would be the road map to get me there. With this thought in mind I had to attack my initial state of ignorance deliberately and meticulously like the CDC working to extradite a deadly plague, and make no mistake about it ignorance is deadly. The late Myles Munroe said:

"Ignorance! It is the most destructive force this world knows. It causes wars, poverty, fear and worry. It also destroys the lives of millions of people. Deadlier than any force of evil, ignorance is the number one enemy of life."

And while that has always been true, it is even more so today. To be alive in this day and age without a healthy amount of relevant knowledge to draw from is just like walking down the middle of the interstate blind-folded. An accident waiting to happen.

Nevertheless the higher I progressed in my education the crazier things got bureaucratically. For starters although the State of Texas has 20 to 30 Associate degree programs offered by various community colleges spread out throughout their 111 prisons. When it comes to those seeking bachelor's degrees there are only two programs offered, one Behavior Science program from the University of Houston-Clear Lake, and one Business Degree from Texas A&M University. Inmates anywhere in the state wishing to pursue a bachelor's degree have to wait for classroom space to become available and seek a transfer to one of the two prisons that have these programs. There is also a single master degree program also provided by U of H Clear Lake for the entire 150,000 plus prison population.

Back in 2008 there was four bachelor's degree programs offered and I was fortunate to begin working toward a B.S in Sociology through Sam Houston University. But three classes into my degree the program caught the axe due to budget cuts, another offered by Sul Ross University soon caught the blow as well, leaving the two programs mentioned above.

How ridiculous is that? As the programs that work and spend a mint on those that don't. Another factor that prevents these programs from having all the success they are capable of is due to the fact that inmates aren't allowed to receive grants or student loans. Meaning most inmates looking to pursue a bachelor's or Master's degree have to foot the bill themselves a virtually insurmountable task especially without a source of income. And to add injury to insult the prison system is well aware that majority of the inmates in state prison come from low economic backgrounds, yet these men are expected to try to find a way to pay \$684 per class for bachelor classes, and \$1,140 for Master classes per class, per semester.

I currently know over a dozen men on the unit who would be in the Master's degree program if they are their families could afford the eleven-hundred dollars a semester classes. But, why put obstacles up to prevent inmates from putting themselves in the best possible position to successfully reintegrate back into society and become a contributing member?

My own quest for higher education has been a tortuous journey, I recently had to drop my classes for the 2014 Winter semester as I wasn't able to come up with the money to pay for my courses before the drop date. With 9 classes remaining to complete my degree, I have become somewhat dejected about my chances of having the money necessary to do so.

And I am but one of the multitude of intellectually hungry men and women behind prison walls. Men and women who are constantly finding it harder and harder to do what they were supposedly imprisoned to do; Rehabilitate themselves and become productive, law abiding members of society.