

### Is it Even Possible? Seeking Advanced Degrees in Prison

Through hard work, discipline, and receiving a welcoming attitude from the college or seminary, one may earn advanced degrees; while in prison, I earned my Master of Divinity through Covenant Bible Seminary. Get ready to mail out many letters; get ready to receive many 'no replies.' Perseverance is the key in locating and finding the right college or seminary. Once you set the goal of obtaining an advanced degree (e.g. Bachelor's, Master's, or PhD), prioritize your goals and activities; discipline yourself to create and stick to a budget. In addition, students should not expect hand-outs, lesser work, or favors just because you are in prison. My idea was this: the degree is the same for everyone who earns it, so my work and the professor's expectations should also be the same. Although there are many road-blocks to obtaining an advanced degree, don't create your own obstacles. Instead, be diligent, dedicated, and direct. This essay outlines my journey. My hope is that it will inspire you as well.

Perseverance is a necessary trait in attempting to obtain any goal worth striving; perseverance can be seen as having tough skin to criticism, rejection, and hard work. Strive for the best school for the money; the cheapest school isn't always the best. As inmates, we don't make much money. Look at a few schools and compare the price per credit hour. The seminary I chose was \$65/credit hour, and each class was three credits. The important part wasn't accreditation, but a quality program that would lead to success later on. Next, send out lots of inquiry letters, and maybe one or two will answer. In Washington State, our inmate envelopes are all stamped '...this is from an inmate...' which causes them not to reply. However, the better quality programs will answer, treating an inmate just like anyone else who applies. To me,

Corey Minatani

that means something. Lastly, complete all the forms in a timely manner; if the school responds quickly, so should you. When the schools send out application forms, I always get the sneaky suspicion they use it as an informal test. Test? Yes, a test: testing your attention to detail, testing your ability to collect information, testing if you're even teachable. This first step in seeking out a degree program is undoubtedly the most difficult; successful completion of this critical step will be a great skill towards re-entry.

Once the goal of obtaining an advanced degree is complete, prioritize your life and create a budget. Creating a budget and sticking to it is one of many ways to prioritize your life. In addition, if you've never attended college outside of prison, guess what? Many other students also budget, prioritize, and do without in order to pay for college. Therefore, it was my intent to earn and use my own money. If it took me three months to save up for tuition and books, so be it. Any other way, it felt like I was cheating myself. If this degree is what I wanted, having a great story about how hard it was to earn it would make it all the more special. Create and sticking to a budget for me meant staying away from junk food and buying stuff that didn't add towards getting my degree. In short, I had to sacrifice. I had to sacrifice time, money, and food. I figured the state paid for my food and housing, so I could do without the other stuff. Students on the outside don't get deals that good. Next, take a class or two. Do quality over quantity. Some students like to take 12 credits worth of classes. Later on, they find out that was too much. I took only one course to analyze the coursework, reading, and most important, how the professors grade my assignments. Once you figure out how they grade, you can tailor your coursework to the professor's ideal. Keeping oneself focused on college is difficult: work, studies, college fees, book costs, postage. Accurately managing your money and focusing on your degree is paramount.

Corey Minatani

Prisoners tend to ask people for too many things; dependence on others can undermine your work. Earn your own money, do your own work, earn your degree. This was my idea going into an advanced degree program. In so doing, it was all worth it. Earning your own money to pay for classes isn't the same as asking for discounts or scholarships. In my case, I was a disabled combat veteran of Iraq. Some seminaries and colleges will either give you a military discount or a special scholarship worth a set amount of money. My seminary granted me a 50% discount on tuition due to my military background. In addition, the seminary granted me 15 credits when I supplied the Registrar my military records. The 15 credits saved me over \$975 alone! The point here is to ask about scholarships and discounts; prudent money management is part of the college experience. Next, family and friends are almost always willing to help. However, this is your goal. Figuring out how to coordinate everything needed to earn the degree in prison will develop a person in so many ways. Lastly, the college or seminary will expect students, whether in prison or not, to produce the same quality of work as regular students. I tried to always go above and beyond in school work; try to articulate your points succinctly with high amounts of logic. In essence, everyone earns the same degree which requires the same amount of work. No short-cuts at this point. Anywhere in the world, earning a college degree is difficult; life in prison is especially difficult in trying to focus on one's work and studies. All of this will be worth it when your prospective employer asks, "You completed your degree in prison?"

My success in earning my Master of Divinity degree while in prison is very dear to me; I worked hard, saved money, and stopped buying unnecessary items like junk food and television. It all began by writing a letter; it gets challenging when you finally get an answer. Save money like crazy and get ready to cut-out stuff you don't need. Discipline yourself to depend on

Corey Minatani

yourself; decline help from friends and family. In reality, their name will not be on the degree.

Once you break through all the barriers of prison life to earn your degree, expect people to see you differently: fellow inmates, officers, counselors, wardens, friends, family. The most important person who will see you differently is yourself! God bless.