

## The Uphill Road to Higher Education and Self-Redemption in Prison

Like the tale behind the journey of a prison resident's life, the higher education road, where a learning institution provides meaningful credit-bearing transfer and degree opportunities is littered with socio-political, economical and ingrained community punitive prejudice. Reliable unbiased data is not available to quantify the impact of higher education in prisons. Consider Castro & Zamani's (2018) findings where they found the demanding task in "engaging empirical" statistics "in part because there are no systematic mandatory federal reporting of currently and formally incarcerated students enrolled at Title IV eligible institutions" (Setting the context). Although this fact may seem trivial, it is just a sample of the Federal and State government, disorganized approach to enfranchise a growing segment of its population. This crucial information is one of many underlying obstacles in Prison education.

However, from a personal perspective, one who has sat on both sides of the fence, as a prison employed instructor and as a member of Texas prison population, the obstacles are clear and tangible. I taught GED classes to federal prison residents in the Bureau of Prison (BOP) installation in Raymondville, Texas. At present, now living inside Wynne Unit, a Texas prison, I serve as tutor to the Lee College program. Through the years, in both capacities, I have seen the same recurring obstacles to college students in prison: Lack of funds in critical basic areas, (like proper classroom settings), prison policies toward secular education, society stigmas toward individuals behind bars and its effect on self-esteem, and prison punitive philosophy towards the people under their care are barriers to brighten the future not only for individuals behind bars and their families but for the national social compact.

Accordingly, without Pell Grant availability individuals behind bars cannot access higher education, which is one of the possible bridges to close the gap found in the social ladder. Those individuals belonging in large part to de-franchise groups, non-white and lower income communities, are also seen as enemies of society. Moreover, a racial legislation and judicial administration keep these individuals under what could be

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consider Jim Crow era discrimination, where denial of employment, housing, voting rights (even after post-release from prison) and until recently education opportunity, just for having lived behind bars. Despite the original intent of the Pell Grant to aid incarcerated individuals to access education, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (Pub L no. 103-322) of 1994 partly states that no federal funds will be available “to any individual who is incarcerated in any Federal or State Penal Institution (Pub L. 89-329)” (Castro & Zamani, “4-Federal Student aid, 2018). Six years later, the Pell Grant program took another deviation from individuals behind bars. Castro & Zamani, (2018) evidence illustrates that any criminal statistic circa 2000-2004 show minorities being incarcerated for drug offences at a higher rate than white individuals. Despite the disparity, the Bush administration added “restrictions to Federal student’s aid regarding concerning drug convictions”. In fact not only people behind bars suffered the consequences as post-secondary institutions were unable to operate in prisons but also those persons with convictions, who sought a second opportunity to obtain skills to self-actualization (a human need), and better job opportunities, were denied educational opportunities.

Although it is true the Pell grant has been restored to those individuals with convictions, inside and outside of prison, history demonstrated that no matter who sits in the White House (Clinton in 1993, Bush in 2001) the Pell Grant will be targeted in the future as it is an expense towards disenfranchise minorities who cannot vote or unable to vote because of restricted laws like in the state of Georgia and Texas, among other states. In short, the plantation minded south. Without a federal mandate to collect, like the data mention at the start of this manuscript, on the impact of higher education on prison population, advocates for education in prison will not have evidence to defend the educational programs.

Similarly, the state and local government does not address all the educational need in their prisons. Castro & Zamani reports a difference of 81% between state and local spending on higher education versus prison institutions with the latter on being the higher expenditure. Most students will tell you that a classroom is an important part of the learning process. It follows then, prisons officials should invest in creating

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classrooms to scaffold the educational process. However this is not the case as classrooms are inadequate. For example, in my unit, despite having a dehumidifier and an industrial floor fan to aid the air condition, the classrooms, for the past five years remain hot enough for someone to sweat during class in the summer months. Moreover, the heat affects the technology hardware and the educators who already under stress teaching in a prison environment. While there are exemptions, most classroom need investments towards creating a proper environment to teach.

Indeed, state and prison officials undermined their own educational programs with their own inaction. Another example is the failure to use available classrooms when classes are not in session, despite the critical need for educational supplemental support. In 2012, Palmer points to Erisman & Contardo's report published in 2005 in which they acknowledge that prison education is complicated "with large number of" students with "some form of learning disability" (p. 166). Sixteen years later, in 2021, I can attest the fact has not change. When approached, prison officials state lack of available college employee to oversee tutoring. Nevertheless, there is precedence to the contrary, where qualify individuals behind bars facilitated classes in the Texas Department Criminal Justice (TDCJ) safe prison Initiatives. In Texas, a classroom is provided for "peer to peer" instruction on rape prevention and other prison crimes. No immediate overseer is present other than area security.

Regrettably, TDCJ does not transfer this approach to higher education settings. An additional illustration of this error is that college students in prison are not grouped in living quarters as to scaffold learning, aide students with learning disabilities, facilitate tutoring. If peer to peer instruction is understood to be a good tool to disperse prison know-how knowledge and data has demonstrated an extreme need for supplemental education due a high number of learning disabilities in prison then it is logical to group students as to support each other in reaching the goal of graduating and fomenting a future away from prison. Again, there is a precedence to prove it could be done. Faith base dorms exist in almost every prison in Texas. Its goal

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is to bring like-minded individuals into a community to discern religious knowledge. Additionally, a formal four-year seminary in Darrington unit, funded by a Baptist church, exists in TDCJ. Every seminary student is housed under the same roof. Once the students graduated from the seminar and they sent back to their original unit, they are able to move freely in the unit wings, whereas secular tutors cannot even visit a student's cell within the tutor's own block. With the prevalent dogma of the southern states, Christianity is viewed as the only door to redemption and the only way to start a new life. Moreover the oversight of the prison chaplain, an upper echelon prison official, tills the available resources (i.e. security personnel, housing) away from secular education. By engendering this religious culture, a Christian one, as others are pushed to the fringes of practice, an afterthought, prison officials undermined secular education benefits by reinforcing the perception that education is irreverent, a common belief among people of color.

Along the same lines as religion, education, especially higher education, promotes knowledge and wisdom, which when applied correctly, provides the student power and control respectively. On and on, the few studies available demonstrated the overall benefits of higher education in prison. For example, Chappell (2004) argues that "prosocial behavior is encouraged through participation in postsecondary correctional education" which advances community behavior "such as working and paying taxes" (Palmer, 2012, p. 165). At present, I find most college students in prison talking about positive endeavors once in the free world, a contrast to others behind bars dreams of mischief. Moreover, this affirms also the findings of Gorgol & Sponsler (2011), where people behind bars, who attend "post-secondary education report a greater ability to judge and evaluate their actions indicating an increase motivation to avoid conflict (Palmer, 2012, p.165). The identity shift, from criminal to a valuable citizen with potential to excel not only benefits the recipients of the post-secondary education, but the change encompasses the prison staff and officials.

For example in my capacity as an educator in prison, I have never seen a fight between students or an assault to the instructors. Moreover students attempt to keep in mind their goal to graduate. Depending in the

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offence, a student can be barred from school from a semester, six months, a whole year or outright ban from taking courses. As a history college instructor, McCarthy, who taught students in San Joaquin's prison, saw students make "connections" (p. 93) to the world and to their metacognitive self's.

Although this "connection" may seem important to only a small group of educators, it should in fact concern anyone who cares about our nation. According to Castro & Zamani "approximately 2.3 million individuals" are living behind bars (2018, Introduction). In other words, there are 2.3 million broken homes without a father, mother, brother or sister. However do not assume some sectors of society are not affected. Do not fall under the proverbial "not me" pitfall. Let us remember that individuals with no prior criminal record, have been swept up in the fever that swept congress in January 6, 2021 or those famous rich Hollywood elites who were caught cheating in the name of the welfare of their children in the university admission scandal. I am sure those individuals, among many more not mention, could have said they could never step a prison or jail. Moreover, as you read this manuscript more laws are passing with prison or jail penalties. Alas, here in Texas, you cannot even offer water in a voting line. Depending on the family, it is likely another family member will follow the wrong steps and end up in prison as well, this is call generational incarceration. It is not uncommon to find two or more family members behind bars. The sentencing project in 2015 reported that "1 in every 3 U.S. adults had been arrested by age 23 and has a criminal record" (Castro & Zamani. 2018, setting the context). Most of this adult may have an impoverished sense of self as there is correlation between crimes and low-esteem (such as individual with learning disabilities) like substance abuse, spouse and people of color battering, sexual crimes among other. If society wants to save the nation from falling apart, society must act to have a comprehensive approach to higher education access in prison. Otherwise, the building block of society, families, will continue to crumble away to prison. Higher education can help in making that "connection" to a better future. Furthermore, in prison punitive culture must be change to a humanistic rehabilitation, where the population in prison are not consider second class citizens and over all they are still humans. Failure to do so

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will only ensure the continuation of the enslavement of the metacognitive of the people who is not only underserve but it is politically voiceless.

For instance, in my experience as an educator of adults and children, in a diverse student population, I have seen firsthand the deterioration effects of stigmas on human metacognitive health. Racism, cognitive disabilities, socioeconomic status among many other stigmas decay the persons view of themselves which is a major factor in succeeding in life; add a felony and the road to achievement and self-fulfillment, a human natural need, is more daunting experience to overcome.

Not only are the individuals with a felony burden with the aforementioned stigmas but also with deprecating community stigma for those who have broken the law. As Batchelder et al. (2017) argues, "The key to achievement is self-confidence" (p. 4). Consequently, the stigma attached to a felony limits access to housing and employment, erodes self-confidence and enslave the new release individuals to a mediocre future at best. Furthermore the enslavement manifest on the individual as a passive mind rather than active where self-responsibility, purposefulness and integrity is compromise. Not only prison and community culture creates obstacles but higher education is sometimes an unaware culprit as well.

Usually this culpability begins with individuals carrying a prison college diploma, seeking job opportunities and find themselves unable to obtain good employment. As a consequence, they may question their own self-worth and possibly, like a cancer, spread the narrative that education does not have any visible benefits to the sacrifices made to obtain a college diploma. Those affected could be family, friends and/or community in which the discouraged citizen lives. Worse, if the former prison resident returns to behind bars, he will become a living obstacle for higher education projects. It is necessary for higher education institutions not only to police their own industry but to address the apathy towards folks who have been or are behind bars. For one, the very existence of the industry is at play, as the effect would be cumulative with returning ex-residents to prison.

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As a consequence, higher education in prison should market their product, the students who successfully complete their courses, in the powerful, all reaching social media like twitter. At minimum, try to dissipated the stigma and ignorance of the public towards individuals who been behind bars. Castro & Zamani (2018) believes in the idea. They acknowledge several grassroots groups whose main goal is to dismiss the fable of a monster behind every person who has lived behind bars. Of this groups, Castro highlights “Formerly Incarcerated College Graduate Network” who through a website, networks “people who been to prison and either received a college degree in prison” (2018, Options) or after. Moreover, higher education institutions marketing should also help keep the current goodwill towards prison education. The continuity of prison education is contingent upon addressing the issue. This crossroad is not new to the American society.

In fact, let us not be a nation where history is no more than passages of times and no one wants to revisit it. Towards the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Esperian (2010) points out “the reformatory movement” underlined “education and training” (p. 319), for the reduction of recidivism. Most instruction was into blue collar industries. However, society, at this time point in time, failed to see the advantages of social unity and equality. Perhaps we still see traces of those convictions today.

Indeed, the failure to identify social inequality as the root of “rising crimes rates” continue in the next century (p.319) and reformation was seemed as ineffective. Society in 1960 returned to punitive rather correctional prison initiatives, as vocational training and post-secondary school programs started to lose funds. As mention before in this manuscript, the Pell Grant, perhaps the cornerstone of prison education was targeted in a counterproductive attempt to control crime. Disenfranchised individuals found themselves without means to get educated in a nation where master degrees are common. A comprehensive approach is warranted to address encumbrances to post-secondary education in both sides of the prison walls.

By extension, the approach must include the prison staff philosophy towards those under their care. As Batchelder et al. (2017) explains the current prison staff philosophy’s culture “as an ideological desire to

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punish” residents in prison with “an oppressive mindset” that result in “inundating residents with bitterness and defeat” (p. 2). Similar to the police transgressions before smart phones, it is difficult to find a prison officer guilty of humanitarian abuses such as denying clean clothes, bedding or meals without fear of repercussions.

To put it another way, from the stand point of higher education, the present prison culture stunts the metacognitive growth of people and impairs their skills to properly function in society. Many new residents of prison, arrive with low self-esteem. Thus, it should not be surprising that suicide attempts are not uncommon, at least in my own experiences. In his book, Brandon (1994) argues that “raising self-esteem is more than a matter of eliminating negatives” (p. 258). It requires a positive environment for post-secondary education. Of course many will probably disagree with the need to change prison punitive culture. However, 2020 unrest in the world, especially in United States demonstrated that authorities violent behavior foment violence in the community by the community.

Similarly, other areas of prison policy must change. There is no central data location to quantify the number of individuals behind bars with a degree or are in pursuit of one. In my experience, in Texas prisons, there is no tracking of education above high school. It is more difficult to add formal education to prison files as you step into the prison system. Even when an individual, at the time of entry in TDCJ, passes a college level exam, TDCJ’s educational department will not add any special designators to your education file or your complete personal file. Thus, TDCJ wastes available resources. When a person arrives to his or her’s assigned unit to serve the court appointed sentence, the person is presented to the UCC (Unit Classification Committee) where no questions from the board is asked about skills or education. The human being in front of the board is essentially reduce to a warm working lump of flesh, a clean slate. From their perspective, it is more advantageous to the state to put individuals in profit making industries and other work functions than to send the individual to get an education other than the mandatory secondary diploma (GED). Moreover, the disregard of education and skills is the first official affront to the person dignity as you cease to be first class citizens much less a human being as you are considered a work mule.

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Consequently, in my unit, the position of tutor in higher education did not exist until little less than a decade. It was believed, under a negative stereotype toward persons behind bars, peer to peer instruction was an explosive initiative to be implemented. This went against the evidence show in the Safe prison program mention above. Eventually, the Lee College staff overcome the objections of prison officials and the program was started with a handful of tutors. Today, we have twenty plus members. However, until late 2018, TDCJ school system, Windham, has only employed tutors from the ranks of TDCJ's field ministers who have no secular experience in tutoring.

Even though the tutors from Lee College have facilitated many educational tasks, the position is not a full-time job and it does not exempt individuals from a job in the infrastructure of the prison. Priority, as addressed beforehand, is to provide a net zero overhead to prison industries. A person behind bars can work all day (sometimes all night), go to school, return to the cell about ten p.m. and then wake up five hours later, at three a.m. for breakfast. Indeed the cycle repeats again at the next day. In some cases, when returning from school or work, the individual will find his block locked up in their cells for mass punishment. With no fault of his own, the individual may likely miss his next day class. Under the view, deprecating at best, of first line supervisors, education is not a priority, not even when the inmate is paying for his own education.

Incidentally, Batchelder & Pippert (2001) underlines the situation in their report by pointing out a skew "competition for" people's behind bars time "as demand increases" for their labor (i.e. large industries orders, harvesting time in produce fields) "competes with instruction time" (Batchelder et al., 2017, p.3) or even the health of the population in prison. For example, during 2019 Covid-19 epidemic, many of the safety guidelines applied outside prison walls were not applied to prison industries. Among many oversights, workers were not advisee of civilian supervisor sickness until the virus took hold of the population inside. If not for prison advocates and letters, like mayday calls to newspapers from individuals behind bars, the industries could not have made accommodations for the virus. When everyone was being order to stay home across the nation, the

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industries in prison, where at work and sometimes working overtime to complete orders before the fiscal deadline while everything else in prison, like education and church programs, were close. Ultimately the integral part of identifying tutors' work position as not a purposeful fulltime employment whereas a janitorial position is considered one in the school hall, alludes to the prison culture bias and entrenches the stigma of individuals serving time in prison towards achievement low payment jobs and becoming a drone to society.

Conversely, the Federal Bureau of Prison (BOP) use educated individuals behind bars to enlarge "the pool of instructors available to the local BOP institution" (BOP, 2016, Tier III). The bureau understands that they are not only instituting a mechanism to show to the citizen behind bars he is still a productive, value member of society despite the error of his past behavior, but more importantly the practice invests into an effective transition tool into society. The "connection" to the community are not subtracted. To put it terms of self-esteem, as Branden explains in his book, "the healthier" the "self-esteem", "the more inclined" they "are to treat others with respect, benevolence, goodwill, and fairness" (p.7) The Federal agency is so committed to this idea, they offer incentives like "good time points and sentence reduction "(BOP, 2016, TIER III) to degree holders in its prison population to come aboard to the installation education department. By aligning their education policies to employment policies, BOP does not undermined their own recidivism programs.

For this nation to progress in all humans are equal axiom, to meet the social equality compact, federal and state governments, and society as a whole must work together to maintain the two keystones of the social status mobility ladder: the Pell Grant and the metacognitive health of individuals who are at the bottom of society (i.e. people of color, people behind bars).

Although, the Pell Grant has returned to people to behind bars, state governments continue to feed the ghost of plantation spirit by ignoring the existing needs of its prison's population, like supplemental or supportive educational programs, proper classrooms, and a de-escalation approach to managed every day routines aspect of prison. The reminder to the past era of separate but not so equal (my phrase) in higher

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education in prison versus outside prison walls education should not exist at all. Furthermore, rather than allow itself, higher education institutions, to carry all the responsibility of the future of the people behind bars as it was done in the past century, the learning institutions ought to remind government entities the problem is not only localized in the population in prison but it also includes marginalized communities outside the prison walls, who under disparities in racial social justice, mental health, living wages have been targeted by current and past legislations. The present policies governing society do not reflect the sentiment to the majority of the nation.

Moreover, under the religion aspect of prison policy, exist policies which, if applied to secular education, could benefit the scaffolding of learning. After all, both schools of thought have the same goal of rehabilitating individuals to society. Perhaps a partnership of religious volunteers with higher education institutions, where the volunteers give supplemental secular support classes. At the end, it is up to society institutions, to assist grassroots organizations in the endeavor of losing the stigma, stereotypes of people who have resided in prison, to allow the individual to rise or fall in society under his/her own merit instead of a preconceive opinions. As not everyone in society has failed to comprehend what their beliefs, stigmas or bias created in this great nation, not every person behind bars fails to acknowledge their error and pain they have cause and wants to redeem themselves. A self-selected group, higher education students in prison, is ready to an opportunity to work again in the community.

Higher education is not a silver bullet for recidivism nor will a healthy self-esteem prevent individuals from making the wrong choices as social life is a complex set of variables. However, failure to give individuals behind bars the tools to succeed in the community will destroy the family unit, the supportive column of a stable society. More importantly, by allowing to define an individual to a set of time, society will always see post-prison competent individuals as lackadaisical shadow individuals. No matter if they are reformed and productive for society, they will always be a shadow, a dispirit slave, instead of human being.

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