

Unintelligent Design

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An unseen war on education is taking place within America's criminal punishment systems and, sadly, the forces of ignorance are winning. In 2013, 11 states spent more on corrections than on higher education, and in 2016 the United States spent over \$80 billion on incarceration.(1) Despite having these massive correctional budgets to work with, states are failing to make any real investments into prison education programs for the socially disadvantaged men and women who need help the most if they are ever to realistically transcend the negative cycle of incarceration. No UN observers or CNN correspondents are being dispatched to the front-lines of these particular battles, however, because prison walls are the original stealth technology in that they conceal even more than they contain.

Within the prison context, to be out-of-sight is to be dangerously out-of-mind and the human minds of those incarcerated represent the objective of this war. The repressive forces of ignorance, quite literally, have the battlefield surrounded and their daily siege against educational empowerment is taking a savage toll upon the ever-waning forces of learning. A 2016 CEA report illuminates the dark facts that "In the United States, over 600,000 prisoners are released each year and over 70 percent of released prisoners are re-arrested within 5 years of release"(2), and it goes on to highlight how "Approximately 65 percent of prisoners have not completed high school and 14 percent have less than an 8th grade education"(3). The correlation between the

overall lack of educational attainment and the absurdly high rates of recidivism is as undeniable as it is reversible, but states must be pressured by concerned tax-payers to reprioritize their sizable corrections budgets if returning-citizen casualty rates are to be reduced in a meaningful way.

Massachusetts is a perfect example of this shadow war because, on its surface, it is a state widely regarded as a great bastion of both liberalism and higher learning. Indeed, it is home to some of the best schools in the world and both of its U.S. Senators are blue enough to make Sinatra's optometrist proud. However, a closer look at its executive branch will reveal a conservative Republican governor in Charlie Baker whose Department of Corrections(DOC) dungeons more accurately mirror the true sentiments of state government regarding human rehabilitation. For example, the DOC's mission statement reads; "Promote public safety by managing offenders while providing care and appropriate programming in preparation for successful reentry into the community" (4), but, again, the DOC's budgetary allotments tell a much different tale. In fact, from an annual operating budget approaching \$600 million, "the percentage for expenses for inmate programs in 2014 was 1.98% of the total DOC budgeted expenses, a decrease from 2.09% in 2011"(5). Is this the state's definition of "appropriate programming"?

Unlike Governor Baker and his prison officials, the numbers do not lie. Of the 5,177 full-time DOC employees in 2015 only 83 were educational staff, or a mere 1.6% of staffing totals.(6) Even the most ardent supporters of law enforcement and tough criminal

justice policies must acknowledge that their tax dollars are being used counterproductively when the vast majority of prisoners will be returning to their communities with no employable new skills because DOC officials decide to employ a larger maintenance staff than an educational one by more than a two-to-one margin of 180 to 83, respectively.(7) When it comes to getting what you pay for, the DOC appears to be running a rehabilitative-service Ponzi scheme on the tax-payers who keep blindly funding it in the name of public safety. Tellingly, the most effective educational program within the DOC, the Boston University Prison Education Program(BU PEP), is a privately funded entity whose success lies in its distinction from the DOC, or at least it did until recently.

Operating within both MCI-Norfolk and Framingham, the BU PEP has offered free college scholarships to qualifying prisoners since 1972. The moral courage displayed by BU leadership in stepping-up to support prison education, even after Pell Grants for prisoners were eliminated, has been nothing short of inspirational. Over the years, countless men and women have been empowered to transform their lives through this wonderful program as is evidenced by the less than one percent recidivism rate of its graduates. Unfortunately, the most successful prison education program of its kind is currently being sabotaged by the DOC-connected managers hired to run it a few years ago. Since their infiltration, excuse me, installation, Danielle Rousseau and James Matesanz have made enough cuts to the program to make an NFL GM blush. Tutors, audits, valedictorian status, Dean's List recognition, clerk jobs, and seniority registration have all been eliminated, while the number of course offerings, class sizes, books, and scholarships have all been greatly reduced.

While the BU PEP has quietly existed for more than forty years, it has not operated as freely as many may believe. To prevent the correctional officers union from inciting public backlash against the program, BU had to offer free scholarships for DOC staff as well. Matesanz, a former DOC superintendent, has been pushing for an increase in DOC scholarships since his hiring, and in an article he co-authored with Rousseau this agenda is clearly touted. Matesanz writes that "In addition to supplementing BU PEP programming, Boston University provides a significant number of scholarships to MDOC staff who wish to pursue further education. Several past and current leaders in MDOC have benefited, and continue to benefit from the staff scholarship program. This mitigates some of the potential resentment about the program in the institutions"(8). Talk about letting the fox in the henhouse. Disturbingly, not only are DOC staff receiving full BU scholarships in what amounts to a form of basic extortion, but they have now outpaced the very students that the program was designed for.

All BU PEP scholarships for prisoners have been canceled for the 2017-2018 school year,(9) but it has been indicated that the DOC staff scholarships will continue unabated. Due to the deep DOC backgrounds of Rousseau and Matesanz, such a diversion of PEP resources appears to represent an unethical conflict of interest. Of course, when incarcerated students dare to raise such questions we are accused of being ungrateful and are warned that voicing our concerns will get the program shut down. Fear is the DOC's go-to move when its control is questioned, but what it fears most is losing control of public perception. It is time for the public to understand that not all the bad guys are wearing stripes in the DOC.

The Norfolk Inmate Council's(NIC) Education Committee, together with a small platoon of dedicated graduates, exiled tutors, and passionate students, are putting up the best resistance possible as we defend our existing educational opportunities and fight for more. The state's power is overwhelming though, and without reinforcements from outside the walls we will be mentally massacred. Invisibility and public apathy are killing us every day. We need tax-payers to demand a much greater investment into prison education programs from all of their respective legislators, and we need more vocal support of such programs from the community and the media. Most of all, we need all of the loud-mouthed critics of prison education to get an education on prison before they speak any further on the subject. Understanding triumphs ignorance everytime.

End Notes

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