DEDICATION
FOR VICTOR HASSINE

1955-2008
Photo by Howard Zehr (1996)


I never thought to be a writer, I never thought that I would find myself in a position to have to write. I never thought that I would have to be a person who was a chronologist. But all that changed when I came to prison and I suddenly found myself immersed in misery… not only my own misery, but misery that people had experienced… Prison is just one tragedy after another, and you have to express it somehow. Some people express it through anger. I chose at some point to express it through writing. (JPP, 1999, p. 107).

Victor contributed the first of seven essays to the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons in 1993 (Volume 5, Number 1), when I became the editor. As our friendship deepened, Victor sent me a wealth of his writing: short stories, plays, and his marvellous ethnographic analysis of prison culture and life. Having studied prison literature and worked with prison writers for decades, I was taken by the quality of his writing and the depth of his understanding. Victor’s keen observation and extraordinary detachment was in the tradition of the best ethnography and I marvelled at his ability to read the prison from within the “belly of the beast”.

…and so when I write about prison I don’t want to write what you already know, what 9,000 textbooks are written about… I want you
to read it. I want you to understand prison better, not as a cliché, but as a real life experience (JPP, 1999, p. 118).

So in order for me to write from the outside, I just placed myself to a point that I was before I came to prison, and I ask myself what would I have seen, what would I not have wanted to see. You have to detach yourself. The hardest thing in the world is for a person who wants to help the poor to have to live amongst the poor. You see so much misery… So what I do is I detach myself and I have to or else I would have so much hate because being crammed in this prison, in these small cells with so many angry and hurt people, injured people, makes you hate, and you can’t write objectively with all that hate in you. And so part of my pleasure in writing is that in order to write objectively I have to remove myself from prison. And although I don’t remove myself from prison physically, my mind is removed and I’m a little more free, I’m a little less hateful, and I can better deal with it. (ibid, pp. 119-120).

Victor established himself as one of the world’s premier prison writers. Life Without Parole: Living in Prison Today (1996) is now in its fourth edition and has been widely used as a text for university courses. He was exceptionally pleased that his fictional work was published in The Crying Wall and Other Prison Stories (2005). His play Circles of Nod (1996) won a PEN Award and was read at the Edward Albee Theatre Conference in 1999. A prolific writer and chronologist, Victor’s work was widely published in academic journals and texts. He was also an activist who used his legal education to file successful suits against the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections over living conditions.

Victor’s writing mapped the vast changes that occurred in the USA prison-industrial complex over the past quarter century. Essays, such as “Monochromes From Over a Prison’s Edge” (Hassine, 1998), place him in the pantheon of great prison writers with Victor Serge, Jean Genet and François Villon. On March 31, 1999, Victor held a teleconference with a seminar class I taught at the University of Ottawa. He opened as follows:

This poem was written from the Bastille, where Villon reflected upon the executions he could observe from his cell window, and his own pending death.
“Ballade des pendus”

Freres humains qui apré nous vivez
N’ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis
Car, se pitie de nous povres avez
Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercis.

Vous nous voiez cy attachez cinq, six :
Quant de la chair, que trop avons nourrie,
Elle est pieca devoree et pourrie,
Et nous, les os, devenons cendre et pouldre.

De nostre mal personne ne s’en rie
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille
Absouldre!

And basically I stand where François Villon stands, and I understand now better than ever the need for mercy, not for mercy’s sake but for all our sake (JPP, 1999, pp. 105-106).

Bob Gaucher

References

Hassine, Victor (unpublished) Circles of Nod.
Barriers to Knowing Inside:  
Education in Prisons and Education on Prisons  
*Justin Piché*

...the more we learn, the more aware we become of injustice, inequality, death, and suffering which affect huge numbers of human beings who inhabit our planet. And the more we learn, the more we develop a sense of responsibility to do something to make the world a better place (Terry, 2004, p. 29).

**Education in Prisons**

In an environment frequently described as dangerous, overcrowded and destructive, many prisoners have cited voluntary participation in education programs such as vocational training, basic literacy, high school equivalency, post-secondary courses and peer-to-peer teaching as the only positive experience one may encounter while incarcerated. The benefits are particularly pronounced when examining the impact of higher education. It is shown that those who obtain post-secondary accreditation in prison are much less likely to recidivate (Huckelburry, 2004). They also find themselves in a better position to secure well paid long-term employment (Taylor, 1989; 2004a) and to continue their studies upon release (Deutsch, 2004). Taken as a whole, “[u]niversity study has been demonstrated by research to be the single best means to post-prison success” (Richards, 2004, p. 70).

Advantages of these programs extend to prison officials who “report that the prisoners who are involved in educational programs are more easily managed, present fewer problems, and are less of a threat to their counterparts and staff” (Nagelsen, 2004, p. 138). Beyond utilitarian imperatives associated with success in the ‘correctional’ realm, prison writers have reported a number of other beneficial aspects of taking part in educational activities. Through the acquisition and development of the tools needed to make sense of the world and one’s place in it (Murphy, 1998, p. 49), students gain the power “to bring about social, political, and economic changes” (Saleh-El, 1992). Historically, this has been the case. For instance, peer-based political education was vital to the success of Irish republican prisoner struggles:

> For all involved in the political education process within the jail it was not simply about the learning of new concepts and theories. It was
also about the acquiring of new values and the construction of a new society. At the same time that society was not utopian or idealistic but firmly rooted in the realities of the real conditions of the jail and the level of development of the Movement on the outside... It was within this new construct of the 'politically aware’, the ‘critical’, the ‘tactical revolutionary’ that we formulated all future assaults upon the prison authorities” (McKeown, 2001, p. 148).

By reasserting a sense of control over their lives in this manner, prisoners build their self-esteem, confidence and feelings of well-being (Taylor, 2004a, p.76).

While noting the positive aspects of prison education programs, \textit{JPP} contributors have critiqued these initiatives for their role in social control. It is argued that in a setting where one “is told what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and where to do it” (Saleh-El, 1992), opportunities to learn are often used as tools to manage those captive (MacLean, 1992). As these initiatives operate at the whim of prison administrators and staff (Bell, 1992; Murphy, 1998, p. 43), the ‘logics’ of security and punishment tend to triumph, often taking precedence over the imperatives of learning (Jones, 1992). The following passages describe the precariousness of education inside carceral institutions:

I witnessed educational events being cancelled on a moment’s notice for “security reasons”. I had seen guards flex their muscle and return men to their cells without provocation, thereby undermining the educational process, and I had watched as men were treated with disrespect and left with little or no human avenue for defense (Nagelsen, 2004, p. 138).

Lockdowns (where prisoners are confined to their living area), institutional recalls (where prisoners must report to those living areas, at least temporarily), and foggy weather all shut classes down. These situations occur regularly. Therefore, learning continuity, which is such an essential factor in the success of any educational endeavor, is interrupted (Deutsch, 2004, p. 102).

Instances such as those described above are not surprising given the potential threat that individuals transformed by learning pose to institutions that think in black and white. Finding ways to displace education in these manners is “the logical strategy for prison administrators ... to keep prisoners ignorant to prevent the acquisition of any high-minded ideas,
lest we begin to question our subjugation and treatment” (Huckelburry, 2004, p. 33).

In prison, as in other ‘social’ institutions, the focus of education is often the promotion of “social utility and conformity” (Hassine, 1997, p. 37). The preservation of the status quo is championed in places of confinement through ‘offerings’ that are seldom mindful of socio-economic disparities and ethnicity (Rivera, 1992). It is also important to note the gendered orientation of prison education programs, particularly in the case of educational opportunities extended to women prisoners which often exclude vocational training (Bonfanti, 1992; Bell, 1992). Such instances reinforce patriarchal notions of labour division in society. Seen in this light, the success of participants is in more cases than not achieved “in spite of, rather than because of, the various ‘curricula’” (Lynes, 1992).

In lieu of these systemic hurdles, many including Dana and McMonagle (2004) have argued that the formation of systems of self-education is vital to learning while deprived of one’s freedom. However, even attempts to amass knowledge independently have been under attack. This is especially visible in the United States, where in some jurisdictions prisoners do not have access to bookseller inventories and cannot purchase hardcover books (Ainsworth, 2004, p. 15). Even worse, some “are required to submit a synopsis of the book to obtain purchase approval, and unless we can obtain a catalog or can get an information sheet from the bookseller, we are up the creek or in the proverbial Catch-22” (ibid). For those interested in building their knowledge of the legal system to which they owe their enslavement, they find a judiciary complicit in their de-education as illustrated by “the US Supreme Court’s decision a few years ago stating that prison systems need not maintain a law library (Lewis v. Casey, 518 US 343 [1996])” (ibid, p. 14).

Another major hurdle to knowing inside is the lack of prisoner participation in educational programming (Rucier, 2004). An informal survey which examined the reasons prisoners chose not to participate in adult basic education courses revealed the following:

…the majority of men did want an education, but they felt out of place in ABE classes. A main reason they gave was fear. They feared being laughed at by other prisoners, many of whom are neighborhood friends. We understood their reasons and feelings. In prison, image can be survival (Graves, 2004, pp. 92-93).

In the case of post-secondary education, “[n]ot all inmates will qualify for, or be interested in, such opportunities” (Taylor, 1989, p. 62). That being
said, it is important that avenues for learning “be expanded so that no prisoners are denied a chance to better themselves” (Harris, 2004, p. 58). In addition to the barriers outlined above, perhaps the greatest on-going threat to already scarce education initiatives inside prisons are “budget cuts and changes in the tide of bureaucratic or public opinion” (Graves, 2004, p. 94). These tensions are heightened in times of economic uncertainty where misinformed individuals believe funds earmarked for post-secondary prison education are taking away from those allocated for the schooling of ‘law-abiding’ citizens. They are of the perspective “why-should-they-get-an-education-for-free-when-I-will-have-to-work-two-jobs-and-go-into-debt-to-put-my-son/daughter-through-college” (Nagelsen, 2004, p. 134). Politicians and prison officials have fostered and mobilized these sentiments to dismantle higher education in carceral institutions in Canada, the United States and elsewhere in the world. For instance, in 1993 the Correctional Service of Canada shut down university accreditation programs citing budgetary shortfalls and the need to shift these resources to target the ‘criminogenic’ propensities of prisoners (Murphy, 1998, p. 40). This move “hardly bears scrutiny since the monies allocated for university programming were minuscule to say the least in terms of CSC budgeting” (ibid). South of the border, legislation was passed by American lawmakers in 1994 that prohibited prisoners from applying for Pell Grants made available to individuals in financial need who wished to pursue a post-secondary education (Taylor, 1998). The passage of this unjust law had a significant impact:

Almost immediately, half the prison college classes across the country were closed, and opportunities in most surviving programs were reduced as well. Today, the only access the majority of convicts have to post-secondary education is through traditional correspondence classes, less well-known university end-of-course exams, and even less publicized equivalency tests (Taylor, 2004, p. 74).

Without access to educational financial aid, such as the old Pell Grants (less than one percent of all Pell Grants actually went to prisoners), the prohibitive costs of accredited college level correspondence courses and the difficulties in obtaining them (requiring the co-operation of the prison’s Education and Mailroom departments) make it nearly impossible to pursue this avenue of credit earning and possible degree attainment in higher education from the depths of Death Row (Ainsworth, 2004, p. 13).
But why remove the opportunity to learn from prisoners who without an education are likely to return to prisons, contributing to the continued growth of carceral populations? Nearly two decades ago, Taylor (1989) noted that the prison boom in the United States and expanding ‘correctional’ budgets were contributing to the erosion of funds for education not only for prisoners, but also the general public. We need to be reminded that for every new prison built funding for a new post-secondary institution is lost, that a new prison guard hired empties coffers that could provide ten deserving students much needed tuition scholarships in a given year, and that one security camera mounted inside deprives a pupil the assistance to buy compulsory textbooks needed for class. As the “money for this massive and already delinquent building program has to come from somewhere at the expense of someone else” (Taylor, 1989, p. 58), the rhetoric which divides and conquers those inside and outside needs to be exposed for what it is.

**Education on Prisons**

While the need to make visible what takes place inside prison walls is greater today than any previous point in history, opportunities to provide such an education are few and far between. For the most part, we do not know about how incarceration is experienced by captives and their captors (Simon, 2000; Wacquant, 2002). There are many factors which have contributed to this crisis in knowing inside.

In a context where scholarship was seen as an integral component in helping to transform austere carceral institutions into bastions of rehabilitation, scholars such as Clemmer (1940) and Sykes (1958) were allowed to enter prisons. Influenced by the ethnographic work emanating from the Chicago School, these academics examined the social dynamics and processes of imprisonment. During this period described as the “golden age of prison sociology” (Simon, 2000, p. 285), the brutalities of the prison world were exposed.

The situation changed as ‘crime’ and punishment became a hot political issue in the late 1960s. In this climate, the institutional predisposition to avoid scrutiny through secrecy coupled with the displacement of rehabilitation as the chief concern of ‘corrections’ (Wacquant, 2002, p. 384), led prison officials to effectively bar social scientists from carceral settings. Activists were also “barred from prison”, as shown in the three books written by Claire Culhane (1979; 1985; 1991) which attest to the difficulties faced by those who wished to gain access to Canadian prisons in the wake of disturbances and riots in the 1970s. Taking their
place were technocrats schooled in “risk prediction, accounting, systems engineering, and the like” (Simon, 2002, p. 303).

It should be noted that ethnographic work has not completely disappeared from the penological landscape. Feminist scholars interested in reconstructing history and contemporary developments through the perspectives of women (Carlen, 1983; Adelburg and Currie, 1987; Comack, 1996; Bosworth, 1999; Martel, 2001), and academics influenced by functionalist and symbolic interactionist traditions (Liebling et al., 1999; Crewe, 2005; Inderbitzin, 2007), have managed to navigate barriers to conduct meaningful studies on imprisonment. By merging “their past with their present” (Richards and Ross, 2004, p. 115), former prisoners turned professors who work under the Convict Criminology banner have also been able to develop grounded accounts of contemporary prison life. Notably absent in this literature are neo-Marxist and neo-Foucauldian analyses of carceral experiences. Instead, those belonging to these dominant traditions in critical criminology tend to direct their attention towards theorizing the quantity of imprisonment while ignoring its qualitative aspects. As a result, the pool of credible material from which one can draw in an effort to convince others of the destructive character and horrifying impacts of incarceration is quite small.

**Prison Writing as Education**

As discussed above, there are limited opportunities and significant barriers to knowing inside prison walls, both to prisoners who work towards enhancing their education and to scholars who wish to examine the inner workings of carceral institutions. Given the current levels of punitiveness being expressed in our penal systems and the continued politicization of ‘corrections’, it is unlikely that authorities will provide interested parties with openings to reverse these connected trajectories. With these developments in mind, it is imperative that proponents of education in prisons encourage prison writing as a knowledge advancement practice.

According to many *JPP* contributors, motivations for writing inside prison walls are quite similar to prison education program participation, particularly for reasons that are intimately linked to their personal survival and resistance to the shackles placed on them by society (Abu-Jamal, 1989, p. 29). As discussed by Clemmer (1940), Sykes (1958), Goffman (1961), Cohen and Taylor (1972) and most prison writers, the day-to-day processes and brutalities one encounters in prisons strip one’s sense of self, control and connectedness to the world. By writing, prisoners reacquaint themselves with the one of the most basic freedoms – expression (Horii,
1988-1989). Similarly, writing also provides opportunities for prisoners to get in touch with their senses which have been numbed in prison, allowing their “creative juices to flow” (McMaster, 2002, p. 64), contributing to psychological and intellectual well-being (Rafferty, 2004, p. 52). In this sense, expression becomes both therapeutic and rehabilitative as prisoners are able to engage in constructive work that allows them to sort out their often troubled pasts, to regain self-esteem, to build portfolios, and to make a contribution to the world in an environment that is otherwise negative and unproductive (McMaster, 2002, pp. 64-66).

Above all, writing provides a forum through which a prisoner cut off from the world can “rejoin society as a productive human being” (Hassine, 2002, p. 63) to achieve broader aims. Through analytical essays, commentaries, scholarly articles, autobiographies and the like, these writers give “insight into the perspectives and understanding of prisoners and the everyday experience of prison life” (Gaucher, 1989, p. 4). Such contributions raise political consciousness around the struggles faced by prisoners (Ghuanna, 2002, p. 74). This is also accomplished through advocacy that mobilizes support in the form of letter writing campaigns and organized protests on the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ (Wright, 2002, p. 81). Attempts to raise political consciousness also involve cultural struggles articulated through song, poems, plays, comics, drawings, paintings, and carvings (Ghuanna, 2002, p. 71). Through such activities, prisoners attempt to re-enter public debates on crime and punishment to “help halt the disastrous trend toward building more fortresses of fear which will become in the 21st century this generation’s monuments to failure” (Mayhew, 1988, p. 11). By “making a record of the wrongs”, prisoners have a “better chance of success than quiet solitude in the meek hope of not being hurt for not being heard” (Taylor, 2004b, p. 130).

In the realm of academia, it has been argued that if one is interested in understanding the experience of prisoners, the researcher must seek their accounts and take record of their narratives through ethnographic research (Wacquant, 2002). By engaging in such activities, it is believed that one is able to best capture the complexity of the relationships that exist in carceral institutions (ibid). To restate the obvious yet clearly ignored, if one wants to make sense of imprisonment one must conduct research by interacting with prisoners. Such a viewpoint situates the academic as the only actor capable of developing authoritative knowledge on the social processes and dynamics of prison life.

This sentiment is not shared by imprisoned intellectuals, also known as prisoner ethnographers, who argue that it is not enough to extract information from them in order to capture the reality of imprisonment. As
they have first-hand knowledge of the hard realities of incarceration, it is a shared belief amongst this community of writers that “anyone who has not done time cannot possibly know what it is like and therefore cannot write competently about it” (Hucklebury, 2002, p. 52). This position is also supported by McMaster (2002), who argues that one is best situated to write about particular sets of experiences when such issues have played a part in the formation of their personal biographies. Such an epistemological position challenges the claim made by criminologists who argue that knowledge on prisons and prisoners can be adequately constructed at a distance without prisoners as informants (Piché, 2006, p. 78-79). It also allows for the deconstruction of accounts and theorization on the ‘criminal justice’ process produced by ‘outsiders’, including the categories used to make sense of the experiences of prisoners (Gaucher, 2002, p. 21).

As with other knowledge building activities within the walls of carceral institutions, those who write in prisons face many hurdles. For instance, being in prison means that one is stripped of many of the resources needed to express one’s ideas intelligibly (Richards and Ross, 2004, p. 120). McMaster (2002) notes that his research is hampered by his lack of access to the Internet and to core texts, many of which are deemed to be inadmissible due to the alleged risk they pose to institutional security. Prisoners also experience censorship through the monitoring of correspondence which is subjected to rigorous screening processes and regulations (Wright, 2002, p. 88). If one manages to collect books and articles over time, the “minute our writings aggravate a high ranking corrections official or some other government bureaucrat, the files and books are deemed to be a fire hazard and confiscated” (McMaster, 2002, p. 68). Equipment used to write such as pens, typewriters and computers can also be confiscated (ibid, p. 66). Prison writers can also “suffer the retribution of prison authorities, including denial of parole, loss of good-time credit, physical threats from staff or inmates, frequent cell searches, confiscation of manuscripts, trips to ‘the hole’, and disciplinary transfers to other prisons” (Richards and Ross, 2004, p. 120). If not chastised by their captors, prison ethnographers are often threatened by fellow prisoners who do not want the outside world to become aware of what takes place on the ‘inside’ (McMaster, 2002, pp. 68-69). Furthermore, many writers inside are on occasion discouraged to write by their families, who claim to experience humiliation when their work is published.

Should prison writers evade these forms of censorship they also face a final major hurdle, as they have to find a publisher in a less than supportive literary community (Hassine, 2002, p. 63), which often voices disbelief...
of their accounts and also wishes to evade unwanted public scrutiny (McMaster, 2002, p. 69). If published, prisoners also face hostility from the public who believe the “club-fed” rhetoric that claims prisoners are not being punished enough by pointing to the televisions and radios in their cells. Thus, not only is the writing process made problematic for prisoners, finding an audience for their work is extremely difficult (Hassine, 2002, p. 58).

When considering the contributions of prison writing to education inside and outside prisons made in spite of all constraints, forums such as the JPP are vital to helping prisoners transcend the shackles that aim to stifle their minds. As the armies of social control who hold millions upon millions captive continue to grow at more than alarming rates, projects of knowing inside have never been more important.

**THIS ISSUE**

As this is the first volume published by the new JPP collective, we thought it would be an appropriate time to explore some of the barriers to developing knowledge while imprisoned and on imprisonment. In the process, an understanding of the need for prison writing in this era of mass incarceration was once again renewed.

The barriers to prison education are many. As noted by Jon Marc Taylor in “Pell Grants for Prisoners: Why Should We Care?”, a major hurdle faced by prisoners who wish to obtain a post-secondary education behind bars is erected in the realm of politics. In revisiting the elimination of Pell Grants in the United States and its impacts, Taylor makes the case that “it is time” to reverse the trajectory in order to improve the lives of prisoners and reduce recidivism rates, providing “the possibility of a better future for all Americans”. Scott Steffler’s discussion in “Oregon’s Anti-education “Corrections” Policy: A Surprise?” takes us beyond electoral politics, to consider the institutional barriers faced by those who pursue higher education in prison. Drawing on his experience, Steffler’s piece illustrates how the discretionary powers afforded to ‘correctional’ officers can be used to obstruct and all-together thwart one’s educational progress.

In crisis there is opportunity. As noted by Eugene Dey in “Higher Education in Prison: The Palo Verde Model”, there is a crisis in post-secondary education in the State of California, largely caused by the diversion of funds once earmarked for such programming to build prisons in recent decades. As places of higher learning struggle to survive, a few institutions have turned to the provision of post-secondary education to prisoners through correspondence to maintain the necessary numbers
to stay afloat. In “Convict Criminology Courses at the University and in Prison”, Stephen Richards, Donald Faggiani, Jed Roffers, Richard Hendrickson and Jerrick Krueger provide an overview of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh’s Inviting Convicts to College initiative. This project provides prisoners with an introduction to criminology through the Convict Criminology perspective along with key information needed to bridge from one total institution (the prison) to another (the university). While the interviews with prisoners conducted by Dey and the excerpts from the surveys administered by Richards et al. highlight the positive aspects of these arrangements, the existence of such schemes highlights the absurd fact that the small government rhetoric of neo-liberalism has laid the groundwork for the dismantling of welfare apparatuses to fund the expansion of domestic and foreign warfare (see Gilmore, 2007), leaving us to make the best of a bad situation.

The issue then turns to Canada, which in the global ‘correctional’ community is often heralded as a model system whose policies, practices and programs are to be emulated. Pieces by Rod Carter and Peter Collins challenge this view. In “My Experience With Education in Canada and Federal Prisons”, Carter, a former prisoner and Prison Chaplain for the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), takes us through his educational journey in an effort to highlight its capacity to open doors and transform lives. However, he makes the point that CSC’s “forced education” approach, which makes participation in basic education a compulsory component of their case management plan, undermines this potential. Carter is also critical of CSC’s policy to “not pay for university courses as they once did”. Collins extends this critique by highlighting the ways in which CSC’s brand of ‘correctional’ education teaches its pupils more about how the system obstructs personal growth than it provides tools to succeed in society.

As previously noted, there are few opportunities for academics to enter prisons to find out what is going on inside. In “Prison Visits: On the Outside Looking In”, Victoria Simpson Beck, Stephen Richards and Preston Elrod explore the benefits of prison visitation for academics who wish to learn about the realities of the prison system from the incarcerated. More importantly, they highlight how prison visitation benefits prisoners who are largely deprived of contact with the outside world and how this in turn can contribute to their safe reintegration into society upon release.

In a context where educational opportunities for prisoners are few and far between, Susan Nagelsen forcefully argues that prison writing plays a vital role in helping prisoners develop their intellect and to “counter the stultifying existence they encounter daily”. We are also reminded
that while prison writing offers one of the few windows into carceral institutions the barriers are many, as illustrated by the confiscation of the articles contained in this volume sent to Taylor that were to form the basis of his Response to the issue. In our march to make visible that which the authorities wish to keep invisible, Taylor in “What We Have Continued to Exemplify” encourages us to continue to “fight the good fight”.

In this spirit, the Prisoners’ Struggles and Book Reviews sections include resources for prisoners along with contributions from individuals and groups working towards expanding knowledge inside including Seth Ferranti, Eugene Dey and books2prisoners Ottawa. A call for contributions from the UN Special Rapporteur on Education who is currently examining whether the right to education outlined in article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is being respected in places of detention is also included.

Through writing, contributors to the JPP continue to document and critique “the nature, functions, and significance of educational programs” inside prisons (Davidson and Taylor, 2004, p. 1). As “education must never be treated as or considered a privilege” (Harris, 2004, p. 59), it is my hope that these pieces evoke a sense of responsibility amongst our readers to support, promote and participate in opening the doors to learning to all who thirst for knowledge.

**JPP Moving Forward**

In November 2007, the JPP began a renewal process involving the reconstitution of our Editorial Board in order to inject new life into the initiative. Since that time, we have added a number of current and former prisoners, and academics. We continue to base our operations at the University of Ottawa Press, remaining committed to disseminating prison writing that explores the contours of imprisonment in a context where incarceration is becoming normalized and is expanding beyond the confines of the penal system.

As we release the first issue as a collective, we would like to take this opportunity to thank Bob Gaucher for exposing us to prison writing, giving us this opportunity to work on this unique project, and for his encouragement and advice during the renewal process. We would also like to thank those who have contributed pieces to the JPP over the years and look forward to working with all prisoners who wish to engage in writing as resistance. To our readers, we would like to thank you for your continued support of this forum for education inside and outside prison walls.
REFERENCES


Pell Grants for Prisoners: Why Should We Care?

Jon Marc Taylor

Commonly used in the opening salvos of the Reagan Revolution, the irresponsible “unwed mother”, lazy “welfare queen”, parasitic “drug dealer” and dangerous “gang banger” were not-so-subtle euphemisms for the poor and people of colour. Use of these code words signalled the conservative movement’s concerted onslaught on the more inclusive entitlement and social safety net programs inspired by the New Deal era of government. This was also a crusade against the politically powerless and publicly vilified prisoner.

The assault on the socially-politically marginalized was ongoing and multifaceted, providing easy to sensationalize diversionary scapegoating for soundbite seeking politicians. While the more overt War on Drugs with its attendant abolition of parole, mandatory minimum sentences and expanded death penalty would take years to enact, the initial foray against prisoners was fired by Virginia Congressman William Whitehurst in 1982, when he submitted legislation to rollback Pell Grant disbursements (Whitehurst, 1982). By 1991, senators and representatives from both parties – primarily of the old Confederacy – repeatedly introduced legislation to exclude “any individual who is incarcerated in any federal or state penal institution” from qualifying for Pell Grant assistance (Congressional Record – House, 1992). In the previous decade, the various annual exclusion-fest amendments either did not make it out of their committees or if passed on floor votes, were stuck in the joint resolution committees (DeLoughry, 1992). The consequences of which had been clearly and continuously outlined, but were obviously politically immaterial to the covertly desired and thought to be advantageous prison-industrial complex.

In 1991, the primary force behind the eventually successful exclusionary legislation, Senator Jesse Helms, pontificated that “the American taxpayers are being forced to pay taxes to provide free college tuitions for prisoners at a time when so many law abiding, tax-paying citizens are struggling to find enough money to send their children to college” (Congressional Record – Senate, 1992). The following year, Representative Thomas Coleman claimed 100,000 prisoners unrightfully received Pell Grants (Congressional Record – House, 1992). Then in 1993, Senator Kay Bauley Hutchison stated that prisoners “received as much as $200 million in Pell funds” (Congressional Record – Senate, 1993).¹
Three weeks earlier, dramatically waving a copy of the Pottstown, Pennsylvania Mercury above his head, Congressman Timothy Holden fulminated before the C-SPAN cameras that he was appalled to learn from the newspaper’s (tabloid lurid) reports that prisoners were receiving hundreds of millions in grants, allowing them free college educations. “There is an obligation to do the best you can to give the incarcerated people a change”, the representative intoned, “but certainly not from a program that has been earmarked for low-income people to educate their children” (Berkey, 1993a).

By 1994, the Texas senator’s and Tennessean Bart Gordon’s House amendments had been attached to the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. In September of that year, America’s first “Black President”, Bill Clinton, signed the law that among a plethora of draconian measures resulted in prisoners becoming ineligible for Pell Grant disbursements (Taylor, 1997). It was diversionary politics at its hypocritical best, while the victims were only convicts at their worst. Truly “just deserts” at the epitome of the era’s zeitgeist.

LIES, DISTORTIONS AND FACTS

During all the indignant and self-righteous performances by politicians, the rhetoric used to demonize prisoner-students and morally justify their expulsion from the Pell Grant program flowed like pabulum. Yet not one rationalizing fact cited was correct. Why should have it been? Again, it was diversionary politics at its best and we were only convicts.

The fundamental argument advanced by opponents against prisoners receiving Pell Grants was that it was unfair for zero-income prisoners to take limited grants away from poor, law-abiding traditional students. Concomitantly, with tuition soaring it was becoming harder for the working- and middle-class to send their children to university. If “unworthy” prisoner-students were barred, the reasoning went, then criminals would be further punished and a “just” balance would be restored to student funding. The problem was that the political diatribe did not reflect reality. Forty years ago, when Basic Education Opportunity Grants – later renamed in honour of the sponsoring senator, Claiborne Pell – were created, as a “needs-based” student financial aid program, prisoners were specifically encompassed by the legislation’s sponsors (Ubah and Robinson, 2003). Commenting on the then pending exclusionary legislation in 1994, Senator Pell observed:

…the Pell Grant program functions as a quasi-entitlement: a student qualifies for a grant, and the size of the grant depends on
the availability of appropriations. Thus, the child of a police officer would not be denied a grant in favor of a prisoner. If both are eligible, both receive grants” (Pell, 1994).

In the last year they were eligible, approximately 25,000 – and not the trumpeted 100,000 – prisoner-students received funding among the 4.7 million Pell Grants disbursed. Only one-half of one percent of all awards went to prisoner-students. The average amount of $1400 then issued to prisoner-students would have totalled well less than one-quarter of the $200 million so loudly decried – i.e., six-tenths of one-percent of the $6 billion in funds distributed (Taylor, 2004).

Over two-thirds of all grant recipients came from families with incomes at or below the poverty line, which matched the prisoner-demographic the year prior to their incarceration, and wholly thereafter (Perkins, 1993). Furthermore, nearly seven out of ten (68 percent) state prisoners had not received their high school diploma prior to arrest (Harlow, 2002), two-thirds of the nation’s penal population is composed of minorities (Beck and Harrison, 2002), and there are now more black males in prison earning General Equivalency Diplomas than on American campuses receiving degrees (Franklin, 2006). As Lawyer and Dertinger (1993) writing for the American Bar Association’s journal *Criminal Justice* pondered, “[w]here else would we find, in such large numbers, individuals who are so educationally, economically and socially disadvantaged?”

A point never mentioned by the politicians in the vitriolic lamentations over prisoner-students receiving financial aid as traditional students struggled to meet ever rising tuitions was that Congress never fully funded the Pell Grant program to its maximum allocation-level, and in fact, had from time to time actually reduced its annual appropriation (Blumenstyk, 1991). Adjusted for inflation, the “purchasing power” of Pell Grant aid has not increased since 1975 (Marklein, 2003a). Where Pell Grants had once covered most of the average cost of public university tuition, by 1999, the grant met only slightly more than half of the tuition expense (Marklein, 2003b). During the 1980s, inflation-adjusted tuition increased more than three-fold over state and federal financial assistance (Wagner, 1993). In the last two decades of the 20th Century, working- and middle-class incomes stagnated, necessitating a greater proportion of family incomes, doubling from an aggregate of 13 to 25 percent, to fund higher education expenses (Marklein, 2002).

These problems, largely created by the very same grandstanding politicians that wanted an end to Pell Grants for prisoners, were not mentioned as requiring redress. These factors could be cogently postulated
as having had a greater influence on families’ abilities to pay college costs than money provided to prisoner-students. Instead, standing on the proverbial necks of scapegoated prisoners, the elected chose to expel tens of thousands of prisoner-students from the ameliorative experience of higher education.

Finally, and most telling, when prisoners were barred from the Pell Grant program, not one additional grant was – by virtue of the very same needs-based formula – awarded to traditional students (Welsh, 2002). Funding that had gone to prisoner-students, equally divided among the millions of grant recipients, amounted to an extra five dollars per semester (Pachter, 1994). It was an insignificant gain accompanied by devastating consequences.

**Why Should We Care?**

Before prisoners became ineligible for Pell Higher Education Grants there were more prisoner-students in American prisons than there are presently. Yet the penal population today is *twice* the size it was then (Taylor, 2004). Three years after the financial aid cuts, prison-based college programs and enrollments had declined by half, with almost all penal systems reporting negative changes in their higher education opportunities (Tewksbury et al., 2000). State systems, reacting to the example and loss of federal funding, eliminated prisoner-students eligibility for their grant programs (e.g., New York) and / or have even recently closed their prison-based programs altogether (e.g., Utah) (Taylor, 2004). Yet over the years, the Pell Grant appropriation has doubled without one grant or one cent assisting prisoner-college students (Gallagher, 2003).

Why should we care? What is the big deal if convicted felons do not have the opportunity to earn college educations while serving their sentences?

The answer is: because they get out. It is in society’s best interest criminologically, economically, and socially to provide and even encourage prisoners to complete as much education as possible. The more education prisoners acquire while inside, the safer, more stable and richer our commonwealths will be. In other words, as succinctly put by a former director of the American Correctional Association, “[i]f you’re sitting next to a convicted felon on the bus, would you rather he spent seven years in prison opening his mind and learning a skill, or staring at a crack in the wall?”

Over 70 percent of the nation’s prisoners have prior felony convictions and / or previous terms of incarceration (Bureau of Justice Statistics,
Average recidivism rates have increased to nearly seven out of ten parolees since the reductions of all forms of education and therapy programs (Langan and Levin, 2002). Prisoners who earn college degrees, however, have common recidivism rates of 20 percent or even down to single digits when earning baccalaureates (Taylor, 2004). Criminologists Ross and McKay (1978) observed that “nowhere else in the literature [of correctional programming] can one find such impressive results with the recidivistic adult offender”.

Upon parole, unemployment has been identified as a prime recidivism factor (Robinson et al., 1990). Less than half of ex-offenders find full-time employment (Innes, 1988), while three-quarters of college educated parolees find steady employment at family sustaining wages (Taylor, 1994). Stevens and Ward (1997), analyzing the North Carolina Post Secondary Education program, made special note that prisoners “who earned four-year degrees were not re-incarcerated during the three year period after their release, and all but one of the individuals found employment relating to their degree”. According to a recent USA Today editorial:

> Like it or not, college has become the new high school. This reality is why forward thinking educators and government officials are looking for ways to ensure more high school graduates go on to get associate, if not bachelor, degrees. That’s especially important for poor and minority students at risk of falling even further behind and becoming part of a permanent underclass (Gallagher, 2007).

On average, states invest as much per student ($24,000) supporting their public school-earned baccalaureate (Gallagher, 2002) as they spend annually per prisoner ($25,000) incarcerated (Zedlewski, 1987). The standard return on the states’ higher education investments are approximately $2 million in economic stimulus and $375,000 in state tax revenues during each graduate’s working lifetime (Gallagher, 2002). This return-on-investment in the prisoner-student becomes further manifest when factoring in all the socio-economic savings from significantly reduced criminal behaviours, coupled with the increased state and federal tax revenues, and the productive and consumptive economic stimulus generated by the more highly educated worker. Consider this positive economic outcome as opposed to all too common disruptive anti-social actions and demand for revenue-draining social services that recidivistic convicts can create.

The primary goal of education and treatment programs is that of crime reduction (Gray, 1994). In one of the first assessments of prison college
programs nearly 35 years ago this holistic benefit with all its attendant economic benefits was summarized as:

Simply, and aside from humanitarian concerns -- it is cheaper in the not-so-long run to pay [adequately] for effective anti-recidivism measures, than to finance law enforcement, justice administration, and penal services and apparatus (Lockwood, 1991).

The front end investment in these programs is more than compensated by the social welfare realized by the emergence of more self-actualized and self-supporting citizens. As J. Michael Quinlan, the former director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons during the Reagan and Bush I administrations so bluntly put it:

I frequently use the term, ‘Pay me now, or pay me later’. Society should recognize... that the cost of college is really very insignificant [i.e., 10 percent of a year of the annual cost of incarceration alone] when you compare the cost and damage done by crime (Marks, 1997).

In 1930, the rate of African-American incarcerations was three times that of Anglo-Americans. By 1990, that ratio had increased to five times the number of blacks to whites. In 1996, there were eight African-Americans to every Anglo-American incarcerated in proportion to the racial composition of the nation. At the end of the millennium, one in three black men aged 20 to 29 was under some form of correctional supervision. One of the effects of this focused criminal justice effort is that by their thirties, almost twice as many black men will have been cycled through the penal system as will have received baccalaureates (Raspberry, 2003).

Charles Sullivan, the executive director of the public advocacy group Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE), claimed during the exclusionary legislation debate that it “smacks of racism since the majority of the penal population is composed of minorities” (Berkey, 1993d). Thus, Sullivan reasoned minority groups had been disproportionately affected by banning prisoners from the Pell Grant program. With more black males in prison than on college campuses (Justice Policy Institute, 2002), Sullivan wondered, as absurd as the idea was about having to go to prison to get a college education, were we then going to close off that avenue as well? The answer was apparently and astoundingly, yes.
Across the country, the enrollment demographics of prison-college programs supported Sullivan’s contention. The composition of incarcerated collegiate student bodies generally mirrored the makeup of the penal populations (Taylor, 2004), creating the most generally racially integrated university settings in the nation. Besides experiencing significantly reduced recidivism, these prisoner-students were some of the best behaved and also served as some of the few positive role models in a milieu normally bereft of such. Robert Powell, the assistant academic affairs officer at Shaw University observed in 1991, “if you want to educate black men, if you want to reclaim that talent out there, you have to go into the prison” (Warden, 1991). Ironically, Shaw University created its own prisoner-student fee-waiver scholarship program that was later negated by the state prison system, because it was in conflict with policies prohibiting such prisoner-exclusive funding programs.

**It’s Time**

Inclusion of prisoners in the Pell Grant program *will not* deprive a single qualified traditional student of funding, *will not* substantially affect students’ grant awards, *nor* will it cause an overall program cost increase. Such inclusion will, however, allow thousands of prisoner-students to return to the edifying experience of college classrooms.

The American Indian Higher Education Consortium, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities and the National Association of Equal Opportunity in Higher Education along with the Correctional Education Association, the Institute for Higher Education Policy, CURE and the NAACP all endorse the restoration of eligibility for financial aid for “disenfranchised populations, including prisoners” (Zook, 1993). Pell Grant funding eligibility is crucial to expanded and equitable post-secondary education opportunities in United States prisons.

It’s time to restore prisoner-students Pell Grant eligibility. It’s time because it’s in the best interest of all of society, if not simply for the hope it provides for the possibility of a better future for all Americans – even the incarcerated that will one day be amongst us all. With 600,000 prisoners now released every year (Austin et al., 2007), it’s time.
ENDNOTES

1 Reporting on the issue, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* offered the following analysis of the politician’s possible motivations: “…Senator Hutchison’s proposal, the latest rendition of an idea that has been offered before, will be tough for some in Congress to oppose because to do so opens critics to charges of being sympathetic to criminals… Ms. Hutchison, who faces re-election next year, needs all the political firepower that she can muster. She is under indictment on charges of official misconduct while she was the state treasurer for alleged actions that occurred during her successful senate campaign earlier” (Zook, 1993).

2 In an anecdotal example of this putative concern, widely cited in the 1993 Senatorial debate, a Pennsylvania police officer, frustrated that his daughter was denied a Pell Grant while prisoners in his state received free college educations, sarcastically quipped, “[m]aybe I should take off my badge and rob a store” (Berkey, 1993b). The problem with this logic is that even if (and later when) prisoner-students were excluded from the Pell Grant program, this policeman’s daughter would still not receive this type of financial aid. The dramatically quoted police officer’s frustration was disingenuous to cite and perhaps his was a hypocritical ire to boot. The family’s income exceeded the Congressionally set grant ceiling by $4000, and he admitted he had not saved for his daughter’s education (Berkey, 1993c). Moreover, the father was eligible for over $30,000 in forgivable federal education loans through the exclusive Perkins Loan Cancellation Program for law enforcement and correctional officers, a program not available to the average citizen regardless of their need or income (Taylor, 1997).

3 Post-secondary correctional education (PSCE) reduces recidivism. Thomas (1974): Burlington County College of New Jersey prison college program – 10 percent program recidivism rate compared to the 80 percent national rate. Thompson (1976): Alexander City State Junior College prison college program – 16 percent program recidivism rate compared to the 70-75 percent national rate. Blackburn (1979): Maryland Correctional Training Center’s PSCE program – “positive effect in reducing recidivism among participants”. Blumstein and Cohen (1979): State Correctional Institution Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania PSCE – “inmate students with the highest risk of recidivism experienced a statistically significant (at the .05 level) reduction in recidivism when compared to the control group of 108 variables”. Gaither (1980): Texas Department of Correction Treatment Directorate – “participation in the junior college program definitely results in lower recidivism rates”. Duguid (1981): University of Victoria of Canada prison college programs – 14 percent program recidivism rate compared to the 52 percent matched group. Chase and Dickover (1983): Folsom prison college program – 0 percent baccalaureate program recidivism rate compared to the 24 percent standard first year recidivism rate. Sabastian (1983): New Mexico State Penitentiary college program – 15.5 percent program recidivism rate compared to the 68 percent overall recidivism rate. Holloway and Moke (1986): Lebanon Correctional Institution of Ohio college program – 11 percent program recidivism rate compared to 30 percent

REFERENCES


**About the Author**

Oregon's Anti-education “Corrections” Policy: A Surprise?

Scott B. Steffler

Over the last nine years since I have been incarcerated, few things surprise me anymore. I have been through court proceedings that defy both reason and common sense. I have seen violence akin to a war zone. I have seen maladaptive behaviours of every sort. I have also experienced some of the most megalomaniac and tyrannical personalities that I have ever bore witness to in my entire life, most of which are personified as “correctional officers”. But I never thought I would see the day when “correctional officers” would work in concert to suppress a prisoner’s education, especially one which the prisoner is paying for through his own means.

I came to prison in 1999 with only a General Equivalency Diploma and no other formal education. In 2002, I sought and obtained a private grant, enrolling in correspondence courses through Ohio University. This grant was given to me by a very generous private corporation.

For the first year, things went considerably well. I decided to pursue a degree in psychology and was making fairly good progress. Then came a train of fickle changes in the approach taken by the State of Oregon Department of Corrections toward prisoner education. With those changes came a battery of “you can’t do this / that’s”. The new procedures made it next to impossible to receive textbooks without first filing a hurricane of paperwork and grovelling before “counsellors” who were given full discretion to proctor exams. If the good “counsellor” did not feel like proctoring exams, they did not happen. The chance of finding a “counsellor” willing to assist with test proctoring was essentially 50/50. The anxiety of being unable to meet deadlines and various other course requirements was certainly due to all the discretion invested in these “correctional officers”.

In 2004, I got into a fight and was sentenced to 17 months in solitary confinement. Naturally, these “correctional officers” articulated my placement in the hole as a forfeiture of my college education. Consequently, on a “correctional” whim, my college education along with my $25,000 grant went sailing down the toilet. They told me that my “choices” were the reason why I was going to flunk out of college, as if 17 months in solitary confinement was not sufficient punishment. My college education, something the “Department of Corrections” neither supplied nor supported, had to go.

After filing a barrage of grievances and complaints, including one to the Governor of the State of Oregon, I was granted an exception so I
could finish my existing courses and avoid flunking out of college. I was told that my education would then “be put on hold” until I was released from solitary, at which time I could order new courses through the mail.

Upon my discharge from a lengthy stay in solitary confinement, I was moved to a maximum security penitentiary where I ordered a new set of courses. Once they arrived in the mail, however, the materials were immediately confiscated by “correctional officers” as a new policy was implemented barring anyone with a sentence of eight years or more from taking college courses, even if they paid for them with their own money! Since I am serving a life sentence, this new policy ruled me out. I filed additional grievances and after my courses were held in limbo for nearly five months, an exception was made and I was allowed to finish my new courses. Afterwards, I would be permanently barred from taking additional courses because I am a lifer.

Not two months after I was given my courses, the penitentiary erupted with unusual violence. Back to the hole I went. This time, however, I was sentenced to about 20 months as I got busted with a knife. In solitary, I requested my courses so I could finish them and avoid flunking out of college. My appeal fell on callous ears. Instead of the usual “you’ve got nothing coming” rhetoric, I was given a much more sanitized excuse: “we have insufficient staff and resources”. This catch-all excuse is as golden and as accepted without question as “for security reasons”. All of my subsequent grievances and complaints were to no avail.

Faced with these barriers, I requested an out-of-state transfer to either the Federal Bureau of Prisons or the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). The vehicle for such transfers is the Interstate Corrections Compact, which allows prisoners to be transferred to and from other states to maximize program resources. Unlike Oregon, the Federal prison system and CDCR support and encourage prisoners to enrol in college courses, even in supermax prisons like Pelican Bay. My request for a transfer was denied without reason. Only after pressing the matter further was I told that a “new policy” – always a new policy – prohibited transfers to the Feds or hardship transfers to anywhere else. This arcane “policy” is nowhere to be found in the laws governing the Compact, so for all practical purposes, it appears the whim of “correctional officers” trumps statutory law.

I seriously doubt I will ever be given my courses again. As a prisoner, I can order books through the mail, but once deemed to be college textbooks these are instantly confiscated. Not everyone incarcerated in Oregon has the same difficulties that I do, only if you are serving a life sentence or you sometimes disrupt the warden’s “ideal prison environment” should
you count on being unreasonably restricted. In fact, there is little logic
in using a self-improvement program as an incentive carrot, especially
when it is not even accessible. But logic has no place here.

I try to explain my plight to my grant provider, but they think I am
crazy. “Why would correctional officers do that?” they ask me. How
does one answer such a question without sounding crazy? They almost
pulled my funding in the past because they thought I was not taking my
education seriously. Without access to my course material, I am doomed
to fail out of college by time default. Once I fail, my $25,000 grant goes
down the toilet as well. On the streets, not even the President of the United
States has the authority to force someone to flunk out of college, yet in
prison, “correctional officers” can do it on a whim.

Few things surprise me, but experiencing an organized and systematic
effort to force a prisoner confined in a “correctional institution” to flunk
out of college surprises me to no end. I tell “correctional officers” they
need not worry that I would do anything foolish like get an education, be
granted parole, succeed, and not come back to prison, thus threaten their
job security. I tell them I will be here forever, so they will always have a
job. They smile and tell me “it’s not about that”.

ABSTRACT

Scott Steffler grew up in the State of Washington and worked as a farmer/
mecanic until his arrest at age 21. He is a first-time felon and since
August of 1999, Scott has been serving a sentence of life without the
possibility of parole. During his incarceration, Scott has educated himself
on a wide range of subjects including psychology, history, science and
foreign languages. He has also written a novel that is in the process of
being published and is currently working on a second book. His primary
goal is to prevail on his appeals and ultimately be released to raise a
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Higher Education in Prison: 
The Palo Verde Model 
Eugene Alexander Dey

For decades, in an example of social responsibility, college and prison administrators worked closely together towards a common goal – higher education. When Congress established Pell Grants in 1965 as part of a national movement to increase civil liberties, prisoners directly benefited from the funding mechanism (Taylor, 1992). By the early 1980s, roughly 350 colleges and universities used Pell grants to fund a myriad of post-secondary correctional education programs (PSCE) (ibid).

Research compiled over 20 years showed recidivism rates dropped from 70 percent to 20 percent for those who received at least an Associates degree (Taylor, 2004). The results were greater for those who earned a Bachelors degree and even more impressive for prisoners who received a Graduate degree (Taylor, 1992).

However, in the tough on crime 1990s, the ideology of extreme punishment, mind bending warehousing and untreated addiction would replace common sense so to win the war on drugs and the war on crime, and dispose of those unable to cure themselves. Under this heavy-handed model, the Congress in 1994 excluded prisoners from the Pell Grant program (Dey, 1994, p. 18). Without this financial lifeline, by the end of the ‘90s only a handful of PSCE programs survived (Dey, 2005a), returning us to the penological Dark Ages of the pre-Civil Rights era.

Due to America’s fixation on crime and punishment, the national prison population swelled to 2.3 million prisoners by the mid-2000s and beyond (The Sacramento Bee, 2008, E6). Above the influx of state dollars pouring into the local economies, prisons built in rural locations created some unforeseen opportunities for prison-dependent communities (Dey, 2005a). Colleges in remote outposts of the prison-industrial complex are frequently in jeopardy of losing their accreditation and funding because of problems maintaining full-time enrolments (FTE) (ibid). This correctional-educational manifestation is common in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), the largest prison system in the country with 33 institutions and roughly 170,000 prisoners (Beyer, 2008, p. 1).

Seeing an opportunity where no other existed, Palo Verde Community College, located in the sparsely populated desert region of southern California, became determined to take advantage of the untapped resources at Ironwood State Prison (ISP) (Dey, 2005b, p. 9). Beginning in 2000, with courses offered entirely through correspondence, Palo Verde
graduated 30 ISP student-prisoners in 2003 with Associates degrees (ibid). With hundreds enrolled, ISP now has a class regularly graduating from Palo Verde College (ibid).

Educators at Lassen Community College (LCC) took notice and decided to follow Palo Verde’s lead. Nestled in the mountains of northern California, Lassen County is the home of two state prisons, the California Correctional Center (CCC) and High Desert State Prison (HDSP), plus a brand new federal prison in nearby Herlong. With three prisons, Lassen County is one of the largest penal colonies in the world, dubbed Prison Town, USA (Galloway and Kutchins, 2007) in a documentary. This is the perfect location for a community college to begin teaching in a correctional environment (Dey, 2005a).

Lassen College, on the brink of failure as an institution of higher learning, decided to apply the Palo Verde Model of PSCE administered through correspondence. Beginning with 60 prisoners in CCC and HDSP in the spring 2005 semester (Dey, 2005a), the fall 2006 semester would realize LCC’s first class of graduates who would receive Associates degrees in Liberal Arts.

Like Palo Verde’s, LCC’s program has thrived. At the beginning of the summer 2006 semester almost 200 students were in CCC and HDSP, plus around 50 in Herlong. This is a win-win for all involved. Lassen College receives much needed FTEs and the prisoners, primarily from impoverished backgrounds, receive an education free of charge.

The CDCR now has a growing number of fully funded Associates degree programs. Above the Palo Verde Model of correspondence, Patton University in Oakland has been teaching at San Quentin in Marin County since 1996 in a privately funded program that also offers Associates degrees (Dey, 2005). This is a far cry from the 350 Associates and Bachelors programs prior to 1994, but PSCE is beginning to make a comeback on a much smaller scale.

**POWERFUL TESTIMONY**

How higher education transforms a convict into a scholar occurs in increments. As the college curriculum soaks in over a number of semesters, the prisoner morphs. A lifetime of using their cognitive skills primarily to promote another agenda, providing higher education to them while in prison gives them a chance to use their intellect in a legitimate manner.

Getting a suspect to answer questions are the tools of law enforcement. As a matter of protocol, if not survival, prisoners are disinclined to cooperate with inquisitors. But a prisoner participating in PSCE at CCC is
different. They tend to be enthusiastic in their willingness to talk openly and honestly about the transforming power of PSCE, especially when a fellow prisoner is asking the questions.¹

For African Americans, who make up 45 percent of the nation’s prison population (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000), PSCE provides a chance for members of a severely disadvantaged minority group to remove themselves from the downward spiral of crime and incarceration. B.C., currently serving a sentence at CCC, completely understands why African Americans are more likely to go to prison than college. At the time of the interview, B.C. was scheduled to graduate in fall 2006. He found the justice system and the media culpable for the internment inflicted on generations of African Americans.²

The judicial system is at fault for unevenly meting out justice to African Americans. The media is at fault for promoting the idea of, among other things... vilifying blackness. These media tactics serve to keep many African American men delusional and prone to crime. Also, they cause blacks to be seen as [deserving] of prison in the eyes of the rest of society.³

B.C. has a 15-year sentence for a second degree robbery⁴ and a criminal record going back to the 1980s. However, the college program offers him a chance to try to salvage a life lost to crime and deviance.⁵

What college has done to my outlook on life, [is] improve it. That is, I’ve always had a view of life that was more positive than negative. So college has me visualize greater things for myself when I’m released than I could see when no college was offered at all.⁶

At a greater disadvantage than any other demographic group under the system by which justice is administered, B.C. is one of the few incarcerated African American males enrolled in a program that will potentially break the cycle of incarceration. The college curriculum has given him the chance to establish tangible goals that transcend the hopelessness and despair generously offered under the punitive model of warehousing and isolation.

I am intensely set on acquiring, at a minimum, a master’s degree in psychology before I parole. And though there is no BA – let alone master’s – program offered, I know that the squeaky wheel gets the oil. So I will convince some university to sponsor me.⁷
Although B.C. has an opportunity to parole and put his education to use, others in the program are serving life sentences and see things differently. For them, with the likelihood of spending the rest of their lives in prison and only the slim possibility of being released after decades of exemplary behaviours, higher education offers an opportunity to seek knowledge for the sake of learning.

W.E., also incarcerated at CCC, is a 38 year old former Marine from Reno, Nevada. Arrested in 1989 and given a life sentence for two counts of murder, W.E. never had a chance to complete any life goals, let alone his first tour of duty. Since his reception in the CDCR, college programs, prisoner rights and nearly every privilege have been eliminated as the punitive model’s thesis of punishment unfolded (Dey, 2006). When LCC began teaching in 2005, W.E. was “excited about finally being able to take college courses after 16 years in prison”.

Well-read, self-educated and at the time of the interview set to graduate in fall 2006 with the highest honours, W.E. was relieved to have something positive to report to his family.

This program has meant a lot to my family. It helps them immeasurably to know that I’m working toward getting some sort of degree and not simply languishing as most others in here do.

Regardless of the negative stigma murder convictions carry, W.E. has a family who loves him dearly (Dey, 2006). Like PSCE, maintaining close family ties fosters lower rates of recidivism, both of which place him in an ideal position to succeed if given the chance (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2008). A model prisoner who endeavours to earn a parole date once eligible in 2013, W.E. was impressed how PSCE works on fellow prisoners.

An education broadens people’s horizons, and shows them, often for the first time in their lives, that they can succeed through hard work and dedication. I’ve seen some of my classmates who were, frankly, knuckleheads, completely turn lives around because of this program.

Having witnessed the destruction of PSCE in the 1990s, W.E. believes the Lassen College program holds promise. Since the PSCE pilot program is administered through correspondence, rather than with classrooms and lectures, the Palo Verde Model can overcome traditional impediments like lockdown and ineffectiveness. “These in-cell courses are infinitely better than any CDC[R]-run education programs because,
if nothing else, they teach people how to learn and work toward a goal”, said W.E., who has been a student and tutor in vocational cabinetry for the last nine years.\footnote{11}

By contrast, CDC\[R\] vocations teach, at best, rudimentary skills – when they’re running at all – and are designed to generate meaningless certificates for skill sets that are useless in the real world. If anyone succeeds in learning anything it’s in spite of the system, not because of it.\footnote{12}

Since so many are long-term and life prisoners, the primary goal for many CCC students is to continue beyond an Associates degree if such an opportunity presents itself. However, soon to be released PSCE prisoners stand to reward society as someone less inclined to re-offend. In a state with a rate of recidivism holding fast at 70 percent, the worst in the country (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2008), PSCE gives the state a chance to fight crime by giving criminals the tools to change. Not everyone agrees, however. Many “tough on crime proponents” – primarily the victim’s rights movement – are of the opinion rehabilitating felons is the wrong approach if it involves early releases (Gottschalk, 2008, p. 1). In essence, “tough on crime” zealots accept the high price of long-term incarceration as the cost to protect the public (Furillo, 2008, A3).

California Correctional Center’s H.A. comes from one of the most violent ethnic groups housed within the CDCR. At 30-years-old, H.A., from Norwalk in southern California, has been in and out of trouble for fighting and gang-related activity since his early teens. Incarcerated in 2000 for assault on peace officers while in possession of a deadly weapon, H.A. continued his penchant for crime while in prison. Found in possession of a knife, he had his 2004 release date extended to December 2006.\footnote{13}

For CDCR prisoners like H.A.,\footnote{14} they are caught in the middle of a north-south California Hispanic gang war going back decades. However, close to fulfilling the requirements for an Associates degree at the time of the interview, H.A. considered what education meant to him – not gang-banging.

I now think and feel more positive about myself and my potential future. I have once again begun to give myself a chance. [I am] just relieved that I am thriving instead of just living.\footnote{15}

Life for a prisoner of Hispanic descent in a California prison is dominated by gang activities, referred to as politicking by some. In a
corrections department rife with gang and racial violence – a segregated system that fosters intolerance – meaningful incentives to encourage rehabilitation do not exist (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2008). Now given a viable alternative, H.A., a tutor in the education department, sets a solid example by concentrating on college education while paying as little attention as possible to the gang politics of prisondom.

A major part of rehabilitation is changing the mindset of the inmate... then behaviours change. Some programs like show repair... are useless. Education, especially higher education, gives an inmate like myself a completely separate focus in life. Instead of being concerned about what’s going on within the yard, college student/prisoners are worried about being prepared for tests and homework.\(^6\)

H.A. expects to have 55 units when he paroles, just shy of fulfilling the 60 units for an Associates degree. An honour student, H.A. plans to obtain a Bachelors degree in Marine Technology at Cal Polytechnic in Wilmington, California. While researching his post-release options, a resource-deficient area that exacerbates one’s propensity to recidivate, H.A. discovered he “will be able to apply for financial aid”\(^7\) – and perhaps succeed where so many have failed.

**MAKING A COMEBACK**

Participants in the Lassen College program are an anomaly. With rehabilitative programs a thing of the past, CDCR prisoners are allowed to exist and little more (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2008). Serving staggering amounts of time under draconian sentencing mandates like three strikes and mandatory minimums, the college programs are literally the only positives in an ocean of negativity (Petersilla and Weisberg, 2006).

However, for prisoners whose families can afford the costs, Coastline College in southern California’s Fountain Valley has developed a correspondence program tailored for the incarcerated. The state reimburses the college for the cost of tuition, but prisoners have to pay for books and other materials. With the Palo Verde Model doing well and Coastline offering an Associates degree for a fraction of the cost charged by distance learning institutions, PSCE is making a small comeback in the CDCR.\(^8\)
It is time this state abandon the lock ‘em up and let ‘em fester approach to public safety and corrections. “Insane amounts of tax dollars have been invested in California’s prison system with no positive results”, said B.C., who then served as chairman of the inmate council.\textsuperscript{19} Prisoners suffer from a myriad of problems above a lack of education, like co-existing chemical dependency and mental health problems – making prisoners one of the hardest demographics to treat (Dey, 2008). When educational and vocational training is coupled with treatment for addictive and mental health issues – known as the multi-systemic treatment model – this approach holds the most potential (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2008).

Ex-felons are returning to the streets worse off than when they entered... No corrections are being made by the corrections department. It’s time to get back to education and rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{20}

Despite the small numbers of prisoners who are receiving a college education, the vast majority have no faith in the CDCR. The agency is considered a national disgrace and in a state of crisis. Under threat of being taken over by the federal courts due to dangerous overcrowding and a murderous medical department, the state has been unable to deliver on long overdue reforms (Beyer, 2008, p. 1). For W.E., who has witnessed the elimination of every program of consequence in his 17 years of incarceration, always prepares himself for the worst because “they’ve killed every other beneficial program they’ve ever had, why not this one?”\textsuperscript{21}

A plethora of programs need adequate funding and support, plus they must converge in a multi-systemic approach. Even though opposition to the Palo Verde Model of PSCE has yet to form, like W.E. says, programs are subject to be cancelled at any time. While college through correspondence hardly compares to on-site and lecture classes, correspondence is better than nothing.

As the CDCR continues to spiral downward, the pilot college program and incarcerated students for whom it works are doing the best they can. Justifiably, W.E. is hardly a pillar of optimism.

I haven’t graduated yet, so there’s plenty of time left for the CDC[R] to kill the program. Seventeen years in prison has shown me that there’s no program so helpful to people that the CDC[R] won’t take it away.\textsuperscript{22}
Afterthought

Since drafting this piece in fall 2006, another local college, Feather River Community College (FRCC), worked their way into the equation in spring 2007. While the Palo Verde Model holds a lot of potential in the delivery of post-secondary education from a distance, FRCC has gone slightly further by offering an occasional lecture. Coastline provides lectures over the institution’s video channel. With LCC, FRCC and Coastline simultaneously teaching at CCC, Prison Town is becoming a prison college community.

As of fall 2008, dozens of prisoners have graduated from LCC and FRCC is set to graduate a small class in summer 2009. Some prisons, like the California Training Facility in Soledad, have hundreds of Coastline students. Most take a few classes at a time and prisoners regularly share materials to defer the costs.

Like most things involving the CDCR, success stories are in short supply. While B.C. and W.E. graduated with the highest of honours, H.A. returned to prison. Many other prisoners have dropped out, flunked out or subsequently been taken out. Prison is a tough place. With a generation of negative programming beating on the fragile psyche of the California prisoner, a few semesters of correspondence is not enough to meet all the needs of some prisoners. Many are unable to take full advantage of a rare opportunity, indicative of how difficult it is to foster change in a correctional setting, as evidenced by H.A.’s return to prison. College alone is not enough, but it should be one of the penological pillars on top of which rehabilitation is founded.

Endnotes

1 Prisoners are actually quite cooperative when they trust the interviewer. The author is a jailhouse lawyer and activist with a proven track record who is trusted by most, but some simply do not trust anyone.
2 In a face-to-face interview with B.C. in fall 2006 conducted at the California Correctional Center.
3 Ibid.
4 While going to college full-time, B.C. also successfully litigated his case on appeal in pro per and had his sentence reduced from 15 to 9 years.
5 Supra, Note 2.
6 Ibid.
7 With a 2009 release date, B.C. now plans to continue his education once released.
In a face-to-face interview with W.E. in fall 2006 conducted at the California Correctional Center.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

In a face-to-face interview with H.A. in fall 2006 conducted at the California Correctional Center.

Tough on crime proponents would rather spend scarce tax dollars to punish prisoners like H.A. than rehabilitate them. To them, gang members are truly the worse of the worst (Furillo, 2008). This heavy-handed attitude is amplified when gang members break rules while in prison, especially when it comes to violence and weapons, even though much of their behaviour is reinforced by the current policies (Dey, 2008).

Supra, Note 13.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

“Although the Department does not allocate funding for college programs, CDCR reports about 4,000 prisoners participate largely on their own in college course work, typically through correspondence courses” (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2008). In a system of 170,000, 4,000 students is merely a start.

Supra, Note 2. The inmate council rarely gets too involved in educational affairs in that their constituents, the general population, keep them very busy with a never-ending stream of complaints and grievances about prison conditions.

Supra, Note 2.

Supra, Note 8.

Ibid.

**REFERENCES**


**About the Author**

*Eugene Alexander Dey* is a prisoner at California Correctional Center serving a life sentence for a non-violent drug offence. A freelance writer, successful jailhouse lawyer and dedicated activist, Dey has won three writing awards from PEN America Center. He also has numerous pieces in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* and regularly contributes to other publications. In a college career spanning twenty years and hundreds of semester units, Dey has an application for a Bachelors degree in sociology pending at Sacramento State University. With four Associates degrees, including two from Lassen Community College and Coastline, Dey has been asked to take a lead role in writing a proposal for Feather River Community College to codify post-secondary college education across the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. To see more of his work, please go to www.myspace.com/eugenedey. You can write Eugene at the following address:

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The Convict Criminology (CC) Perspective was first organized in the late 1990s as a means to give a voice to ex-convict criminology professors. Like many critical criminologists, ex-convict criminologists were frustrated that prison research failed to reflect the views of prisoners. The best prison studies (Sykes, 1956, 1958; Sykes and Messinger, 1960; Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Irwin, 1970, 1980, 1985) were dated and did not predict the current “imprisonment binge” (Austin and Irwin, 2001). The war on drugs became one of the primary reasons for the mass imprisonment of millions of Americans. This included a significant number of working and middle class prisoners with an interest in higher education. This led to a growing number of men and women exiting prison to enter colleges and universities. A very small number of these majored in social science disciplines, completed advanced degrees and became criminologists.

Over the last decade, the CC group has grown as more ex-cons and non-cons contribute new research to the perspective (Richards and Ross, 2001:180; Ross and Richards, 2003:6). This “new criminology” reflects research illustrating the experiences of prisoners and ex-cons, and attempts to combat the misrepresentations by scholars, the media and government. It also proposes new and less costly strategies that are more humane and effective (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2002, 2003; Jones 2003; Newbold, 2003; Terry, 2003a, 2003b). The convict scholars are able to do what many previous researchers could not – merge their prisoner past with their present to provide a provocative materialist and reflexive approach to the academic study of their field. The Convict Criminology Perspective is also based on perceptions, experiences, and analytical ideas that originate by, for and with defendants and prisoners, which are then developed by critical scholars (Richards and Ross, 2001, 2003).

The CC Perspective is now incorporated into many university courses. For example, a CC course was offered at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh (UWO) in 2004, using a selection of books published by CC authors. Required reading included The Felon (1970), The Jail (1985) and The Warehouse Prison (2005) by John Irwin, Behind Bars (2002) and Convict Criminology (2003) by Jeffrey Ian Ross and Stephen C. Richards, The Fellas (2003) by Charles Terry, the ASC National Policy Committee article “The Use of Incarceration in the United States” by James Austin et al. (2001) and assorted issues of the Journal of Prisoners
on Prisons. The idea was to teach an entire course based on the work of Convict Criminologists.

At the same time, UWO Criminal Justice faculty – Chris Rose, Susan Reed and Stephen Richards – organized the Inviting Convicts to College Program. Today, this program teaches a free college level CC course both fall and spring semesters at two Wisconsin state prisons (Rose et al., 2005; Richards et al., 2006). The university CC course is taught at the undergraduate and graduate level, compared to the prison courses designed as a less rigorous version at the introductory level. In this paper, we discuss the courses being taught at the university and the prisons. We then present our findings from three surveys administered to students who have completed their CC courses from both the university and prisons.

INVITING CONVICTS TO COLLEGE PROGRAM: THE TWO WISCONSIN PRISO NS

Research indicates that college prison programs can help prisoners become law-abiding citizens when they return home to the community (see Lanier et al., 1994; Messemer, 2003; Welsh, 2002; Tregea, 2003). The passage of the Higher Education Act in 1965 created Basic Education Opportunity Grants (or “Pell Grants”). These grants were responsible for the creation of many Associate degree, Bachelor degree, and even Master degree programs in state and federal prisons. From 1965 to 1992, prison college programs flourished all over the country.

Then, despite these successes, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1993, and the Higher Education Reauthorization Act of 1994, making prisoners ineligible for Pell Grants and student loans. Since 1994, no person residing in a jail or prison in the USA can qualify for a federal student grant or loan to pay for college courses. To be clear, prisoners were never allowed to receive student loans. The impact of the law was to deny them Pell Grants. Because they are incarcerated, the federal law now denies them both grants and loans.

Nevertheless, there is a few small state or federal programs that do fund individual courses at a few prisons. These programs are of limited duration and help only a small number of prisoners. Typically, they fund a technical or community college for a year or two. When the money is spent the courses are gone.

Traditionally, prisoners in the USA paid for college correspondence courses and college courses at the prison with Pell Grants. Without access to Pell Grants many could not pay for these courses. In turn, without prisoners that could pay tuition college prison programs disappeared. Today, very few prison college programs exist in the United States.
With the support and cooperation of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, we have implemented a new college education program in two state prisons. Members of the partnership believe that the program is successful, and we hope it is adopted widely and helps to bring college programs back to American prisons. Inviting Convicts to College prepares prisoner-students to make an informed decision about enrolling in a college or university upon their release from prison. By taking this free non-credit “college preparatory program”, incarcerated students learn the academic skills required to succeed in college. The course serves as a bridge between prisons and university.

At UWO, we deploy pairs of undergraduate student interns to teach the courses at each prison. To qualify for these internships, students must first complete the CC course which focuses on the experiences of defendants and prisoners within the penal system. Deploying students in this fashion means universities do not incur the expense of reassigning faculty to teach the classes. The faculty members, in turn, are free to supervise a number of internships, including multiple placements of student interns in different prisons. The program is free for prisoner-students and prisons because we use students instead of professors to convene and teach the courses. Other universities may decide to use graduate students or some combination of both undergraduate and graduate students as teachers. We can envision graduate students implementing this program themselves with relatively little help from faculty.

**Course Content**

The course uses one textbook, *Convict Criminology* (2003), which is donated by the publisher. The text includes chapters authored by former prisoners who were or are now university professors. The book serves to inspire the prisoner-students and to introduce them to the Convict Criminology Perspective.

The courses are taught two hours a week, for fourteen weeks. The convict students are required to read the text, take two exams and write one paper. Midway through the course, the instructors bring college admissions and financial aid applications to the prison. They then help the convict students complete the forms. The reading helps the students to understand how higher education can transform their lives. The instructors use the reading to demonstrate how they can exit prison and become university students. Instructors also lead discussions of how students are socialized to live and work on campus. They explain how to develop good study habits, choose a major and become serious students. A number of former prisoners who have completed this course, including
one of the authors of this paper, have already started their studies at several University of Wisconsin campuses.

**Certificate of Completion**

Upon finishing the courses, the prisoner-students receive a certificate of completion signed by the Dean of the University and prison administrators. The students do not receive university credits for completing the course. However, the certificate does indicate that they may be prepared for academic success at the university. During the first four years of the program, we believe the certificate has helped a number of former prisoners gain admission to university.

Before their release from prison the prisoners had officially qualified for admission and financial aid. Their “release plan” from the prison included attending college or university where their financial aid checks were waiting. The typical student aid award was $10,000-12,000 for the year. Convict students show their certificates of completion, letters of acceptance, and student aid awards to their cellmates at the prisons, and this, in turn, inspired more prisoners to sign-up for the course. We now have long waiting lists at each prison. At the men’s medium security prison nearly 100 prisoners have requested the course.

Upon arrival at the university the student aid office deducted their tuition, room, and board, and gave them the remainder. The former prisoners are now university students living in dormitories, with meal tickets and tuition paid. This means they will not be homeless, sleeping on park benches, eating in soup kitchens or in other situations where they would be easy prey for police to arrest and return to prison.

**Convicts as “Invisible Minorities”**

The Convict Criminology movement suggests that prisoners, like anyone else, have the potential to be good students. “Non-traditional” (older) students now make up a growing population on many college campuses. These are older men and women pursuing higher education later in life, often times following the decision to make a career change, divorce, military service or stretch in prison. In our experience, we have found former prisoners and parolees to be high performing students who are committed to their studies.

Today, university administrators commonly discuss affirmative action and the need for diversity. Meanwhile, many college campuses are nearly exclusively white, while prison populations are disproportionately black
and brown. Universities that are seriously concerned about attracting minority students should look to their nearby prison. In prisons, they will find many minority men and women waiting for an invitation to remake their lives with the help of higher education.

We call ex-convict students “invisible minorities” because while university admissions committees cannot identify prisoners by skin colour, they nonetheless suffer legally prescribed discrimination (see Travis, 2002). Some universities openly discriminate against convicted felons to deny admission, student aid, campus employment and housing. Some admissions applications even include “felony questions”. Most schools of social work, medicine, nursing, law and business deny admission to applicants with felony convictions. Some go so far as to deny admission to persons with misdemeanour convictions.

Despite these discriminations, we view universities and prisons in many ways as parallel institutions. Most are state funded. Even private colleges and prisons depend on taxpayer monies. Further, college campuses and prisons often exist in close proximity, depend on the same public resources and operate in the same communities. In fact, some prisons are located very close to universities. Moreover, both institutional populations are similar in that they both consist of young men and women in need of training and education.

**Correctional Education and Recidivism**

Taxpayers want state employees to discover new ways to provide services without additional taxes. Universities and prisons working together to reduce recidivism and helping prisoners to become productive citizens is one way we can all serve the community. Early research on the benefits of education and its impact on reducing recidivism were far from conclusive, often showing mixed or contradictory results (see Martinson, 1974; Palmer, 1976). However, these earlier studies helped to shape the debate on correctional education by raising issues about the utility of such programs.

More recent research on the utility of correctional education programs has consistently shown reductions in recidivism or the length of time for recidivism for those completing a correctional education program while incarcerated. For example, the Correctional Education Association conducted a three-state (Maryland, Ohio and Minnesota) study examining the recidivism rate of a release cohort in excess of 3100 prisoners over a three year period. The study divided the group into those who participated in a correctional education program while incarcerated and those who did
not participate. Their findings show a 29 percent overall reduction in the recidivism rate for the group who participated in correctional education versus those that did not participate.

Batiuk et al. (2005) used a quasi-experimental design to assess the impact of different correctional education programs on recidivism. Using a cohort of prisoners released from prison between 1989 and 1992 in the State of Ohio, they disaggregated their cohort into two main groups – those who participated in correctional education and those who did not. They further subdivided the participating group into the four different correctional education programs offered within the institution: 1) General Equivalency Diploma; 2) high school; 3) vocational; and 4) college. They followed this cohort of prisoners through 2003, nearly 13 years after their initial release, to determine if they recidivated (by committing a new offense or if they had their parole revoked) and the length of time from release to recidivism. Incorporating an event history analysis, the authors calculated a “recidivism hazard” rate, essentially defining the odds ratio of recidivism. Their results indicate that compared to the non-participating cohort there was a 62 percent reduction in the recidivism hazard rate for those who participated in a college level correctional education program. With these successes in mind, it makes little sense to turn to imprisonment, especially devoid of robust education programs, to address crime when it costs the state less to support one college student than return a man or woman to prison (Steurer and Smith, 2003).

Evaluating the Program

The Two Prisons

We have been teaching the Inviting Convicts to College Program inside Wisconsin state prisons for four years, once during the fall and again in the spring semesters. The courses are now taught at two state prisons, one for men and one for women. Oshkosh Correctional Institution (OCI) is a medium security prison for men. OCI presently has a rated bed capacity of 1,494 with a prisoner count that exceeds 2,000. This institution has no college prison program. Taycheedah Correctional Institution (TCI) is a maximum and medium security facility for women with a prisoner count of nearly 700. It is the primary prison for women in Wisconsin. This institution also has no college prison program. OCI is located 5 miles from the UWO campus, while TCI is 20 miles away.
The Three Surveys

The purpose of this research is primarily exploratory. The survey consisted of 10 questions with fixed or closed-ended responses, followed by several open-ended questions. The questions asked students what they thought of the course and the Convict Criminology Perspective. The prisoners responded to the closed-ended questions (the value, quality and usefulness of the courses) and their views are reflected in their written responses to the open-ended questions.

For this report, we decided not to analyze the closed-ended responses, as the number of respondents is small (n=30). Instead, we decided to present their written responses to the open-ended questions. We decided that their answers were more interesting than our 10 questions. Clearly, the students wanted to express themselves without the constraints of our questions.

The survey was distributed to each of the three classes at the end of the course. We used a simple convenience sample. We were not able to draw a random representative or stratified sample. As the number of respondents is very small (n=30), our findings cannot be used to generalize to a larger population. Table 1 shows the number of responses from each of the three institutions, as well as the average age and age range for each of the classes. The average sentence and sentence range is also included for the students from the two correctional institutions.

Table 1: Demographics for survey respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Oshkosh Correctional Institution</th>
<th>Taycheedah Correctional Institution</th>
<th>University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of responses</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of respondents</td>
<td>29.25</td>
<td>24.25</td>
<td>22.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range of respondents</td>
<td>23 - 45</td>
<td>16 - 30</td>
<td>20 - 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average sentence (in months)</td>
<td>60.63</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence range (in months)</td>
<td>15 - 150</td>
<td>48 - 144</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Student Responses

We have organized our report of the surveys by group, first the UWO students, then the male prisoners, followed by the female prisoners. The responses of each group are organized around different themes. We briefly introduce each theme and offer commentary as a means to tie the responses together analytically.

In general, the university students and prisoners (male and female) approached the subject matter from different standpoints. The university students took the course and read the books as a means to think their way into the study of prison and prisoners. In contrast, the prisoners used the course to plan their way out of the prison. They understood that Convict Criminology was about transformation and planning a journey that might take them out of prison and into college. The female prisoners demonstrated the most critical understanding of the course readings.

The UWO Students

The university students report that the Convict Criminology course was very different from their other college courses. Two university students wrote that the course offered a different way of looking at the criminal justice system:

I appreciate a different way of looking at the criminal justice system and those individuals under managerial jurisdiction (27 year old male UWO student).

The course is a great learning tool that offers a different viewpoint normally not discussed within criminal justice courses (21 year old male UWO student).

Two other students found the course less boring than most:

This course breaks the monotony of our normal one-sided courses (22 year old male UWO student).

For the most part, the readings were written with a lot of emotion and integrity that you don’t find many places. It was a pleasant change from the mindless drawl usually found in criminal justice textbooks (21 year old male UWO student).
The university students understood the course as unique. They found the reading, class presentations and connection with the prison kept them interested. As a result of this unique course, the university students learned to view prisons and prisoners from a new perspective. One male university student wrote how it opened his eyes:

[The course] opened my eyes to the harmful effects felt by convicts while imprisoned and after release that are perpetuated by the system (21 year old male UWO student).

One university student said it gave him another view of the prison system:

I felt that Convict Criminology was a very valuable class for me. I felt that the books I read had a very different take on the correctional system. It was good to have another side of the story. I think that a person who wants to study the criminal justice system would be selling themselves short if the only information they were given was from the outside. I felt that this class gave me another view of the system. I feel that I have a more complete understanding of the system than I did before this class (22 year old female UWO student).

The course helped the university students to better understand the prisoner point of view. Reading Convict Criminology Perspective authors and an issue of the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, was the first time they read what prisoners and former prisoners thought about prisons.

The CC Perspective was both educational and transformative for the university students, who reported that the course changed their own views of prisons and corrections. Reading about convicts that become professors helped one UWO student to consider a career in corrections:

It [the course Convict Criminology] has caused me to give more thought toward a career in corrections…in a positive sense that is (27 year old male UWO student).

The course reminded another university student not to be so judgmental:

The course reminded me not to be so quick to judge and that there are a multitude of ways a person can end up behind bars (27 year old male UWO student).
A third student heard the voices of the convict authors in the books:

I think this course was very valuable for me in many different ways. For example, it gave prisoners a voice and humanized them in a way that I have never encountered. For those naïve students who view prisoners as vile monsters, their opinions must have changed also. Finally, it helped me empathize with prisoners’ situations (21 year old male UWO student).

The transformation of convicts into professors taught the students to think of prisoners as human being, rather than categories. They began to consider how people change over the course of their lives.

The university students enjoyed reading about ex-convicts becoming professors. These criminal justice students began to appreciate how difficult it is for ex-convicts to be accepted in academia. They appeared especially interested in the struggles ex-convicts have once they are professors.

I enjoyed reading about the struggles faced by ex-convicts in trying to secure a place of employment within academic settings. I know Dr. Richards [UWO ex-convict criminal justice professor, and internship supervisor] and Dr. Jones [ex-convict Marquette University criminology professor, and guest speaker] discussed it, and it really gave life to the struggle of ex-cons (21 year old male UWO student).

Another university student was amazed that an ex-convict could become a professor:

The class was interesting because this is a subject within the criminal justice system that is typically not addressed. The idea of ex-convicts becoming instructors and professors following lengthy prison sentences is absolutely amazing. It is as if they [Convict Criminologists] are the light at the end of the tunnel (22 year old male UWO student).

The strength of the Convict Criminology Perspective is former prisoners using social science research tools and methods to reinterpret what they observed and lived in prison. As former convicts trained to do science, they see their prison time as an extended participant observation or forced ethnographic experience. At the very least, their years in prison
provides a more accurate picture of what happens inside the correctional institution or penitentiary. The autobiographical accounts in Convict Criminology can be very compelling reading for a criminal justice student. One university student was impressed by the validity of the information he read in the assigned books:

No one except the Convict Criminologists would be able to provide us valid information about being a convicted felon. Therefore, their input is the most accurate one can receive (22 year old male UWO student).

The Convict Criminology course provided a space where university students learned about criminality by reading literature written by people who have experienced the criminal justice system first hand. One university student reflected on the need for more alternatives to prison:

One thing I learned from the course is that we need to find alternatives to locking up non-violent offenders up. They pose no threat to society in a harmful way. Our resources would be better used if redirected elsewhere (23 year old male UWO student).

Another student commented on the content of the course:

I think that the interesting content of this course is something that the vast majority of people don’t have a clue about. I think that more people should be exposed to this information (22 year old male UWO student).

A third student was sceptical at first and then came to see the experience as valuable, even eye-opening:

I was rather sceptical in the beginning of the course and even thought the first few weeks, that I didn’t see the point of this “new criminology”. The straight-forward writings and opinions of the authors made it a valuable experience… Most of all the course reading was very “page-turning.” Incorporating criminology with real life success stories really worked well… I felt this class opened our eyes to a new side of criminology. This course strays from the conventional views of what criminology is limited to. When we can study every aspect of the science, we can truly understand it (22 year old student).
At the very least, the student responses suggest that they understood Convict Criminology as a new criminology, different from what they read in other courses. A number of them liked reading about real life success stories.

The university students report that they want the courses to continue at both the university and two prisons. As we have two ex-convict professors in our department, the Convict Criminology course will continue at the university. The collaboration between university faculty and the prisons is always subject to challenges. For example, some politicians may not like prisoners receiving a free college level course. One female university student understood that some of her fellow students were the instructors at the two prisons. She liked the fact that course was helping prisoners:

I believe the course gives great insight to people outside the system to what goes on inside. Also what the class is doing for people inside [prison] is great (22 year old female UWO student).

A male university student wrote that the course should continue both at the university and the prisons:

This class needs to continue for students and prisoners. This may be one of few chances to help people succeed in a system that focuses on failure (22 year old male UWO student).

This small sample of relatively conservative criminal justice students gave no overtly negative comments on the questionnaire. The university course appears to be popular with students. Still, we understand that some students might want to keep their concerns or complaints to themselves.

**The Oshkosh Correctional Institution Male Prisoners**

The prisoners from OCI were equally enthusiastic about the course. They looked forward to the class every week. The course gave them hope they could still be “somebody” one day:

This course made me realize that being a convicted felon doesn’t mean that you can’t succeed (29 year old male prisoner).

A second prisoner elaborated on accomplishing something, hope and believing that somebody cares about them:
I would recommend this class to anyone doing some time. It gives you feelings of accomplishing something. It might kick start some others to look at furthering their education. It would be terrible to stop offering this class. This class gives the hopeless individuals some hope. Nobody cares about our future and this class is offering some hope (45 year old male prisoner).

Many prisoners have both a bleak past and potential future. After many years in prison, these men suffer from clinical depression. They have few reasons to believe that anybody cares about them. The course gives the prisoners some reason to think they can improve their lives and inspired them to plan a new future through higher education. Completion of the course shows them they could be successful at university. The class reading introduced them to the study of criminology. The textbook demonstrated that they were not alone:

I’ve seen and understand I’m not alone and the struggles I’ve faced are similar to others in the Convict Criminology text. I’m inspired to see that others became successful after serving time in prison (30 year old male prisoner).

The course inspired them to apply for admission to university:

This course has been very valuable not only because it has shown me what a college course is like, it has also taught me lot about criminology which has become very interesting to me (31 year old male prisoner).

The course inspired me to go to college (23 year old male prisoner, now enrolled at UWO).

The program has inspired a number of male prisoners to go to college. Some of these men are completing their undergraduate degrees at different universities in Wisconsin.

*Taycheedah Correctional Institution Female Prisoners*

Out of all the respondents, TCI prisoner-students offered the most sophisticated commentary about the corrupt prison system. To think through the course content they referred to a number of recent lawsuits, newspaper articles and court decisions related to conditions at the prison:
So many people know of the corruption and yet so little is being done to help (27 year old female prisoner).

The course let me know that at least someone was looking at the real prison system. And the actual truth behind how they are really run. Nobody really hears how it really is behind razor wire, only what political heads want them to (28 year old female prisoner).

…this course was very valuable because a lot of things I felt were confirmed. I sometimes felt that the concerns I had involving politics, the government, the D.O.C. system as well as police officials, and federal agents were probably a case of paranoia due to the race issues and the discrimination towards convicts (30 year old female prisoner).

These responses suggest the female prisoners have many serious concerns about prison conditions. Some of these were male officers raping their cellmates, the lack of adequate medical attention and suicides.

The course inspired the women to continue their formal education. Three of the female convicts responded:

I would absolutely recommend this course to a friend, especially the women I’ve met in prison (30 year old female prisoner).

The course is very inspiring to a lot of people (16 year old female prisoner).

The class has proven to me that even though I am a felon and am in prison, that when I get released, I can still go to college and become successful (24 year old female prisoner).

They especially liked reading about convicts becoming professors. Each of the autobiographical chapters in the book focuses on day-to-day life in different prisons:

The reading material was more easy to get into because it’s a topic that all of us on the inside can relate to, which really makes it almost absolute that we would all be interested (28 year old female prisoner).

The interest level is very high on my part because I’m here, and people very close to me are in prison as well, so this subject hits
the bull’s-eye when it comes to present day life (28 year old female prisoner).

The course encouraged the women to continue their formal education. Every semester a number of the women exit prison to enter technical schools, community colleges or university. Following their experience with the course, many women prisoners wanted to join the larger Convict Criminology movement. They clearly had a deeper understanding of the importance of CC as a political statement and activist agenda:

But to know that I can become more than I expected as an ex-con is very encouraging (30 year old female prisoner).

I am very excited to know that there is a whole world of successful ex-cons who are willing to help me be all that I can in the event of striving to excel and that they will allow me to stand with them to make a change for those who are and have been incarcerated (30 year old female prisoner).

One woman wants to be a professor or researcher:

I plan to be a part of this criminology movement and maybe become a professor or some kind of researcher (30 year old female prisoner).

Another woman understood that the movement was about giving prisoners a voice:

I wish the findings throughout this course could be used to help make a stand and statement to the rest of the world about how bad the criminal justice system really is. Because those of us on the inside have voices that could prove very valuable, and we need to be heard (28 year old female prisoner).

Compared to the university students and male prisoners, the female prisoners were more likely to understand Convict Criminology as a movement they could join.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have discussed the Convict Criminology perspective, the state construction of convicts as “invisible minorities” and the overall impact of correctional education on recidivism. In order to combat the
racial divide in higher education and provide those incarcerated with the tools to reintegrate successfully upon their release from prison, we outlined our Inviting Convicts to College Program. Ideally, more universities could go to prisons and offer non-credit college level courses. At the very least, they could send staff every semester to local prisons to assist the men and women to complete admission and financial aid forms. They could also provide academic advisors that were trained to counsel former prisoners on their campuses. Finally, they might consider ways to make their university a welcome place for formerly incarcerated men and women.

Prisons warehouse men and women that desperately need higher education to remake their shattered lives and to overcome the legal discrimination they face. One way we can help prisoners overcome the obstacles they face is to invite and support their efforts to enter college. We are prepared to help if you decide to begin your own program.

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I quit high school the first time in May 1964 just before the end of my second go at Grade 10. I left again in November 1964 on the heels of a two week suspension for fighting at a school dance. During my years in public school, the teachers’ generally commented that I “could do better given my ability”. In high school, the remarks became more psychological as I became more rebellious. My file was littered with statements such as “there has been a change in his attitude”, “he avoids expression of his inner feelings” and “has a hostile attitude toward the adult world”. They were not seeing it wrong!

I entered prison in October 1967 hauling a three and a half year sentence. My two uncles and two cousins, who were all Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) officers, had me destined for a life of crime. I spent reception at the Big House – Kingston Penitentiary – and transferred to Collins Bay Penitentiary a few months later to complete my sentence. Early in my sentence, I recognized a thirst for education, both formal and informal. Kierkegaard (2004, p. 124) said, “Freedom is man’s capacity to take a hand in his own development. It is our capacity to mould ourselves, the basic step in achieving inward freedom is ‘choosing one’s self’”. I served cell time reading, working on correspondence courses, listening to one of three radio channels and strumming guitar. During the day, I joined seven other students in the one-classroom school where I worked on my correspondence courses, which included English literature, composition and mathematics. One guy I admired was completing a university degree. He answered any questions I had. I saw a university degree as unattainable but attractive nonetheless. It would be the university – that great proletarian parking lot – that would become my home for many years and remains so to this day.

The big push in corrections then was to take trades training including automobile mechanics, carpentry, electrical, plumbing, welding, barbering and so on. After a few months, I enrolled in the automobile mechanics course and completed my correspondence courses in the evening.

I was also an avid reader and started in the prison library to search for something readable – a massive mission at the time. I did find My Shadow Ran Fast (1964) by Bill Sands – founder of the Seventh Step Society, On the Yard (1967) by Malcolm Braly – which Kurt Vonnegut Jr. described as “a great American prison novel”, and Man in Black (1968) by Johnny Cash. Ten years later, Braly (1976) wrote a great piece of non-fiction entitled False Starts: A Memoir of San Quentin and Other Prisons,
with Vonnegut once again praising his work as the “clearest account of American crimes and punishment that I ever expect to read”. Braly (1976, p.153) in this second effort said, “most of what we learn only serves to limit us” (education), “easier to hear Freud and Jung than Dillinger and Floyd” (psychology), and “a man is always guilty of any crime he has ever committed” (Hegel/philosophy). He cited as his favourite book Ayn Rand’s (1943) The Fountainhead. When he was sent to camp he described it as, “Folsom with Muzak” (Braly, 1976, p. 362).

I fell deeply and hopelessly in love with the printed word. I was beginning to realize and would later have it substantiated many times, that ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’. Manuscripts to the administration – including one by my friend Roger Caron (1978) kept getting scooped – were on par with an escape map, a gun carved out of soap or hacksaw blade. The power of words could transfer a prison bureaucrat to the minimum security in Siberia to oversee the forestry and saw mill program where prisoners regularly sawed off toes and fingers, including their own. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I was becoming a cultural junkie and book lover. Every Saturday night we had a movie in the gym. Clint Eastwood in The Good, The Bad and The Ugly (1966), A Fistful of Dollars (1964), and For a Few Dollars More (1965). Lancaster in Birdman of Alcatraz (1962), and Paul Newman in Cool Hand Luke (1967) and Hud (1963). Back in the cell, I listened to Dylan’s “I Shall be Released” and “You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere” – which we dubbed the National Parole Board’s favourite song – on the headphones. I also listened to Creedence Clearwater Revival cranking out swamp rock and Hendrix questioning, “Hey Joe, where you goin’ with that gun in your hand?” Not to mention the rough and rowdy early Stones and Animals. Yet it was the printed word that kept tugging. I would go to the library and glean through back issues of Time Magazine – doing time, reading Time. For me education was becoming ‘freedom inward bound’, coursing through my brain cells. This applied as long as I had enough leeway to tap into my creative spirit for assignments and essays. Eric Hoffer (2006, p. 68) stated, “The real ‘haves’ are they who can acquire freedom, self-confidence and even riches without depriving others of them. They acquire all of these by developing and applying their potentialities”.

I was released from prison on parole on December 2, 1968. The National Parole Board was now listening to the Beatles “Ticket to Ride”. I was provided a paper suit, cardboard shoes and thirty dollars worth of monopoly money. I enrolled in the government sponsored Program Five to complete my Grade 12 at night school. I registered in English, typing,
They actually trusted me with chemicals in my hands. Construction work through the day supplemented my meagre stipend. I fought jack hammers, chain saws, picks and shovels. Manual labour provides a form of education, especially in the form of self-discipline. Tracy Kidder (2006, p. 141), an American journalist said, “Presumably the stonemasons who raised the cathedrals worked only partly for their pay. They were building temples to God. It was the sort of work that gave meaning to life”.

One day, my English teacher spotted potential. I wrote pens dry and wore out typewriter ribbons for her. Here again, I met a classmate on his way to university. I was fascinated and slightly tempted to consider the same. I was more encouraged when my English teacher assigned me to a school debate on abortion. Facing the whole school as a member of a four person team in favour of therapeutic abortion, I was simultaneously frightened and challenged. Memory does not serve if we won or lost.

Following completion of Grade 12 I applied to community college in the Law and Security Management Program. We were required to undergo a police check. Once mine came back ‘hot’, the college Dean called me into his office in an attempt to have me withdraw from the program and switch into Municipal Administration. Hesitating from flattening his face, I went for a long car ride, plugged an 8-track in the dash – Lightfoot, Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Cash and Dylan – vowing I would fight the Dean’s decision. Thoughts of hiring a lawyer, calling my Member of Parliament or going to the press crossed my mind. But I thought any of those choices could backfire, so I called my parole officer whom I trusted and asked him if he would ‘go to the wall’ with me. He assured me he would and did not disappoint. As we met with the Dean, my parole officer spoke with authority and decisiveness as he virtually, which each word, sent off a ‘heat seeking missile’ which the Dean could not duck. As my teaching master in Law and Security wanted me to stay, the Dean was effectively stymied. I was allowed to remain in the program. I learned a lot because during that meeting I once again recognized the power of the word, spoken timely, authentically and with radical conviction.

In college, I supplemented my required courses with options in abnormal psychology, the sociology of punishment and criminology. Outside of school, I was into Cream, the Beatles – especially the Magical Mystery Tour – and ‘rolled ones’. As one of the few with a vehicle, I was rented frequently to motor others to Rochdale College – Trudeau’s free university experiment – in Toronto for replenishment.

Upon graduating, I left to attend London Teachers’ College but before leaving I decided to attend my college graduation ceremony. You see,
I was named to the Dean’s Honour Roll having achieved a 3.5 grade point average. The sulking bastard had to present me with my diploma at convocation and an additional letter of congratulations which stated: “I would like to offer my congratulations for your outstanding academic achievement ... This distinction will aptly demonstrate your success at Loyalist – a success that, I hope will be extended throughout your career”. It was sweet! My friend and poet Al Purdy met me at Ameliasburg. Several beers later, I let the bad memory of that Dean dissolve.

Once in London, I immersed myself in my education courses but began extensive self-initiated studies, delving into local history: the Black Donnellys, the Underground Railroad at Dresden, slave camps, secret societies and poetry. I would go to taverns to seek out information from patrons about local history and started hanging out in libraries. I used the method of the French mystic Simone Weil (1950) whereby she made her students write short notes on many subjects.

With a teaching certificate in hand, I was hired as a public school teacher and taught for the next seven years in western Ontario, the Ottawa Valley and the Northwest Territories. Along the way, I picked up a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology through summer school and correspondence courses at Trent University. I was also granted a Queen’s Pardon by Solicitor General Francis Fox in 1977. This, after the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) probed me and my neighbours – requiring everything except a urinalysis. Far more importantly, I met the woman who would become my wife and our only child’s mother. She came from a large family, quite poor, and like me she wanted to travel and live in other cultures. So we did.

The next phase of my education was religious and spiritual. I was raised in the United Church of Canada. My mother saw to it that I was baptized and in the Anglican Church at that, just on the off chance God was not a member of the United Church of Canada. I attended Sunday school and sang in the choir, but I was to rebel at fourteen and although I never denounced my faith, I removed myself from the structures of corporate worship and group enterprises. I maintained a prayer life and regularly read the scriptures. Saint Teresa of Avila (1957, p. 175) said this, “Words lead to deeds ... [t]hey prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness”. I reconnected in prison and attended Chapel led by an Anglican priest, the type of person God rarely assembles anymore. My fiancé and I were married in the church and our engagement in the church world would strengthen as we each became stronger disciples. We taught Sunday school, sang and gave our testimonies at the local detention centre.
The next phase saw me addressing some personal issues through a unique form of education called Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), generally conducted in an institutional setting. While teaching in the Northwest Territories I felt a ‘tap on the shoulder’, which I determined with the help of mentors to be God, what is normally known as a call or a vocation. I had just been offered a principalship and I had decided that the BA degree was as much formal education as I wanted. So as the New York poet Dorothy Parker would utter every time her telephone or door bell rang, I also uttered, “What fresh hell is this?” (Meade, 1989).

After much whining and denying the legitimacy of such an occurrence, I ended up on the green pastures of the University of British Columbia at the Vancouver School of Theology, registered in the three year Master of Divinity Degree program. This was oppressive education or what I would deem ‘assembly line’ education. While walking through the student study room, I noticed everyone had the same books on their desks, were required to complete the same assignments and be placed with the same old supervisors. It is like Greek and Hebrew were not penance enough! To remain sane, I sought out non-approved theological books, rubbed shoulders with non-approved field supervisors and vowed to transfer after my first year. More radically, over the Christmas holiday I was in Arizona at the feet of an Elder seeking sanity and confirmation of direction. He gave me four directions, so there was certainly choice here.

We moved to Ottawa and I entered Saint Paul University, a Roman Catholic seminary, in part because a Catholic priest mentioned to me that “we Catholic types are long on spirituality and short on social justice, while you United Church types are long on social justice and short on spirituality”. It had the ring of truth to me. I studied Greek, ecumenism, missiology and Church history – no Protestant should deprive themselves of studying Martin Luther at a Catholic university.

Then we travelled to Kingston and I completed my degree at Queen’s Theological College. That is when I went back to prison. The Chaplain at Kingston Penitentiary was a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) supervisor and I registered there for my third year field placement. Our group saw three outsiders and three lifers gather for two days a week for the academic year. I learned to express my anger more appropriately and to cry in that group. That was emotional headway for me as my previous prison experience did not encourage any form of non-violent emotional expression. My supervisor asked me to consider prison chaplaincy as a ministry. I told him I would give it some thought and prayer. It took twelve years, but I eventually took up this challenge.

After a year of internship at Whitehorse United Church in the Yukon – my deepest immersion in the ‘square john’ world – I was ordained and
sent to serve the Cree Nation at two reserves north of Edmonton, Alberta in Goodfish and Saddle Lake. A lot of informal education occurred there as I began, by invitation, to participate in native rituals and ceremonies, and was exposed to the oral tradition, myths and legends. It was a pleasant change to listen and learn, leaving reading and written assignments aside. I would eventually be led to vision quest and experience the arrival of a spiritual guardian. Here I learned the difference between knowledge-based – largely non-Aboriginal – and wisdom-based – largely Aboriginal – ways of seeing life or world views. After four years, I was asked by the indigenous All Native Circle Conference to establish a street ministry in the core area of Edmonton to work with Aboriginal people. As I began this ministry prowling the streets in blue jeans and a clergy collar, people would ask me to visit companions and friends who were serving time either at Edmonton Maximum (federal) or Fort Saskatchewan (provincial) facilities. At least half my time was spent in prisons.

‘Stirrings’ about working in prisons arose. I was becoming a bit more compliant with ‘spiritual buzzings’. I called my prison chaplain friend in Kingston and was encouraged to present myself in competition as a prison chaplain. The timing seemed right. I sought discernment through ratification. I interviewed at Kingston – Prison City, North America – and was successful at landing the Protestant chaplaincy position at Joyceville Institution, a medium security penitentiary. I served five years there, but was nearly terminated after one for publicly denouncing the Solicitor General for cancelling a lifers conference he had committed to. You see, the Professional Code of Conduct for Civil Servants says: “one is not to unduly or harshly criticize the government of the day”. In bureaucratese: “don’t bite the hand that feeds you”. In my language: “put the screws on me and I’ll screw right out from under you”.

Following five years of service at Joyceville, I landed the position of Regional Chaplain with Corrections Canada – now Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) – overseeing all chaplains in the Ontario Region. This is a better position than one might think. The opportunity to follow religious or cultural grievances fell on my desk, as well as all that human resources entails – not issuing gag orders to chaplains. I emphasized that “at its best, a prison chapel is a sanctuary and the chaplain a voice of conscience”. Beside my Prison Pardon, this quote was nailed on my office wall, “education is the most powerful weapon that we can use to change the world”, coined by Nelson Mandela who served 28 years in prison.

After five years at Regional Headquarters, Queen’s Theological College wanted to get involved in the restorative or transformative justice movement. An agreement was arrived at, whereby I would be on
secondment to Queen’s from CSC for a three year period as Director of the Restorative Justice Program. One of our assets after five years is our class diversity and how it lends itself so naturally to adult learning. We draw police and parole officers, chaplains, lawyers, convicts, victims, volunteers and students from psychology, sociology, criminology and theology. We also always have an international student from a foreign prison system. The novices bring their enthusiasm, while the veterans bring their experience.

A lot has come full circle for me. Martin Buber’s (1923) *I and Thou* had a lot to say to me. Buber’s main point in the book is that there are two ways of relating to other people in our lives: as objects – “how can I use that person?” – or as subjects – “I know what I’m feeling; what is the other person feeling?” In Buber’s terms, there are “I-It” and “I-Thou” relationships. In an “I-Thou” relationship, we see the other person as a subject, someone who comes to the encounter with needs and feelings of his or her own. In “I-It” relationships, we see the other person as a means to an end. We are concerned only with our own feelings, not with the feelings of the other person. The prisoner is now a preacher, the high school dropout a university faculty member, and the angry young man is now more poised, more responsive and less reactionary. Stephen Reid (1986, p. 197) captured this phenomenon so well in *Jackrabbit Parole*: “It’s strange how real life works in the end. Your heroes are all dead or were never heroes at all; the wretched become the saintly, the disdained, the noble”.

I have a lot of learning to continue. Books, story-tellers and teachers have enriched me so. Many people along the way gave me a helping hand with no strings attached. And my experiences were learning places, some tough lessons, while others were easy and comforting. As the teachable moment arrived for me, a teacher would appear. Anything I am able to pass on is my way of saying thank you to all those teachers who stopped to help me take the next step in my life.

As for education and CSC, I see some arbitrariness. The organization conducts most of its own research and statistics. It also formulates (or does not) policy and procedure on the same. Yet it appears from other sources as well that education lowers recidivism rates unlike any other program. In conversation, one prison education director said, “[e]very person has potential. There’s evidence that the higher the grade level (of the prisoner), the lower the recidivism rate”. Another statistic touted on the television program *Counterspin* on November 15, 2000 was that an offender with a college education sees his or her chance to recidivate drop from eighty five to one percent.
Amid this evidence, CSC still will not pay for university courses for prisoners as they once did. So in essence, CSC does its own research yet policy development may or may not coincide with their own findings. This is a portion of an op-ed piece I wrote in the *Kingston Whig-Standard*:

> When a citizen is sent to prison it is as punishment, not *for* punishment. It should never descend to cruelty. Rights and freedoms should not be curbed more than is absolutely necessary. The minimal denial of human and civil rights should be the yardstick. A person doesn’t forfeit his or her citizenship when he or she is sent to prison. There are people who still vastly underestimate the loss of physical freedom and wish to heap much hardship upon convicts. Trying to squeeze every last entitlement from a prisoner places the public at risk. The practice creates an unpredictable individual. Excessive deprivation and harsh revenge can create a mean person. The cessation of funding for university courses seemed to fall on the heels of over-zealous media presentations of a high profile offender who was getting his paid. It was that ‘credible’; poof it was gone! To keep it gone reference is made to it during every federal election. And it tends to raise the ire of the public when in an op-ed piece a single parent on welfare with a university aged child makes mistaken reference that offenders get their university courses paid for while they do not. Those of us who have utilized higher education to assist in our rehabilitation need to continue to share our stories with fierce conviction. Maybe one day, poof it’ll reappear! (Carter, 2000, p. 8).

Voluntary education is a valuable resource to any prisoner so inclined. I do not believe in forced education or the inclination of CSC to bring every offender two grades beyond what they arrive with vis-à-vis their case management plan. I contend that one’s personal program is far more important than the official one the ‘Man’ sets up. It is as evil to force in a so-called positive direction as a negative one. When one discovers or determines on their own to enter the world of education, then we usually see a motivated person likely to learn at an above average rate with an enthusiasm, as that whole realm of personal and social development enters their awareness, resulting in new resources at one’s disposal in which to tap as the situation of circumstance calls for.

Whether one bases their decisions on anecdotal or empirical evidence, whether one mixes an element of subjectivity with objectivity, it appears that the call to education is valid, opening one to a whole new world of
thinking and feeling. Education is certainly worth more than a second glance and has opened many a prison door. But the greatest benefit is found in the liberation of the mind whereby one feels released from limited thinking and possibilities, opening the way to new visions and methods of getting by in this modern, fast-paced world. As Karl Marx (2004, p. 126) said, “education has a specific function of keeping us all from becoming ‘de-humanized’”.

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I am not entirely sure how to go about detailing the way I see the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) undermining educational potential or their systemic methodology of rendering people useless through mindless institutionalized existence. There are just so many ways in which CSC conduct underlines the contradictions and failures of meaningful education in the prison system. It feels ridiculous to even begin to try and explain the failures as they appear so obvious, so huge and so loud as I look at the years unfolding behind and in front of me. Education is such a broad and complex issue that spreads across life and the prison environment in so many ways. Without reservation it is clear that education takes place in the prison environment in addition to and in spite of the activities formally labelled ‘education’. We learn from everything, no matter what. The real questions are what are we learning from the prison experience, what effect is it having and what ripples (tsunami) can we expect to touch (ravage) our shores in the future? For context, I have decided to share some of my intended and unintended educational experiences.

Growing Up

When I arrived in prison, I came as a 20 year old who had been on my own more or less since the age of 12 or 13, so I had very little schooling excluding a hard knocks diploma from the back alley curriculum. I had a chip on my shoulder that obscured my perspective, much like many prisoners I have met over the years. At that early point in my life, I also felt that I possessed infallible insight into my own problems and everyone else’s. It came as a considerable shock to me a little later in life to find that I had developed a distinctly flawed take on the world, and a somewhat narrow and self-serving closed mind. I was never wrong about anything. I also never voluntarily accepted any responsibility for any of my issues and problems. I have since learnt that I had a lot to learn and that is still the case.

As I reflect upon CSC and myself, I can see that the Correctional Service of Canada has suffered and continues to suffer the same problems I had. However, I grew up and as I grew up, I challenged myself to keep trying to accept my personal responsibilities. On the other hand, CSC continues to labour under a ridiculous culture of denial and a corporate lack of accountability. The system yields a distinct lack of insight, while being convinced they are right about everything.
In my early teen years, I had acquired the stance that everyone else was to blame – at least in some way – for my problems in life. My teenage sense of moral outrage and entitlement was reinforced by horrible things that happened in my young life. I was quick to blame my predicament on others, especially those in authority. It was difficult to come to terms with the fact that I was the main author of most of my personal tragedies. Every problem was perceived as confirmation that the system and those who worked in it were against me, if not out to get me. It took a lot of struggling before common sense and maturity allowed me to develop a wider and more realistic perspective. I have a long complex history in the prison context and while I accept my responsibility for many of my problems and shortcomings, I know that many of the problems are products of the broken and inherently ineffective system, in part due to the obstructionist efforts of certain decision-makers. I understand that many apathetic, angry, unhappy and some considerably unbalanced people work in the prison system. It would seem that most prison workers fail to conduct or are not capable of conducting an in-depth analysis of what their occupation is doing, and why it is destined to be the constant and predictable social failure that it is.

With the help of friends and family I began to develop useful and balanced insight. With these changes I developed the skill of learning from my mistakes. I began to look at my problems, failures, and mistakes more as challenges or obstacles and set backs, which I had to think my way around and work harder to solve or overcome. There is a personal and intellectual honesty required to face anything in life. Prison is no different. As a prisoner you need to look at the reality of your situation and deal with the facts and circumstances. You will survive better if you can remain flexible, and open to new ideas and opportunities. All of the many problems I have faced over the last quarter century of imprisonment have allowed me to learn something new. In those lessons I have improved everything related to my world. Although truth be told, some of the lessons have taken longer than others to sink in and there is still a natural resistance to abandoning the known for the unknown, but we all deal with that which we have to deal with.

**Correctional Failure and Labels**

The idea that Correctional Service of Canada is against the education of prisoners is a tangible concept rife with tantalizing, if inexplicable, complexities. I am painfully aware of CSC resisting tooth and nail all of my educational pursuits, but I am also witness to their facilitating, albeit
grudgingly, the post-secondary efforts of other prisoners. I recognize that my outspoken and public observations about the flawed nature of the prison system have generated a pervasive and official reactive inclination toward shutting me up and shutting me down at almost any and every turn. I am sure this is not an experience exclusive to me but I am not sure how many prisoners in Canada generate much critical review – audio, graphic and written – directed at the prison system. The majority seem to come from the United States of America. It is probably more accurate to consider that the prison-industrial complex has developed extremely effective “divide, conquer and then keep separated” agendas, which keeps prisoner activists effectively shut off from the world and therefore silent. I also note that the prison system has developed extremely effective methods of keeping prisoners co-opted, scared or distracted and thereby effectively neutered.

There are many subtle ways in which the system “naturally” scares and shuts people up or stunts normal human development and self-validation; for example, through institutionalization and through fostering a dependency upon the judgement and validation of others. There is an insidious labelling process that at once validates the prison system and invalidates prisoners as defective. They call us “offenders” as if this is all we are and all we ever will be, contributing to the internalization of a carceral master status (Goffman, 1963). They call us “inmates” as if we are in a hospital and they are going to make us better. They call the cages they lock us in cells, rooms or residencies to sanitize what is going on. They assign us “Correctional Treatment Plans” as if they are treating us for a condition that they will cure. They call what they are doing “corrections” to distract people from the harsh and relentless truth of the punishment going on in prisons. They give guards titles like “correctional workers” for the same legitimizing and distracting purposes. They label “the Hole” the “Environmental Control Area” in order to legitimize the punitive nature of long-term segregation. The criminal justice system stigmatizes people who come into contact with it by reducing their identities to critical, demeaning categories. Erving Goffman’s (1963) work speaks to the inherent short-sightedness of the system which can only conceive of or interact with prisoners according to criminalized and medicalized labels.

Other complicit players in the label game are the co-opted criminologists, psychologists and psychiatrists who all too willingly jump on board the tragic but lucrative incarceration game. The labels these professionals apply to prisoners are based upon extensive co-opted or prison-based clinical and statistical research. This psy-sciences
group that seek to ‘pathologize’ prisoners rely upon coercively imposed, and therefore naturally unreliable tests upon an imprisoned population with high rates of illiteracy and functional illiteracy. The culmination of which results in prison decision-makers taking passive managerial roles and pointing to statistical rates of recidivism to deny prisoners release opportunities, blinding “them to a more proactive approach” (Hart et al., 2007). Critical scholarship also confirms that risk assessment models long favoured by correctional officials and social agencies to predict the likelihood that a convicted prisoner will re-offend are “fraught with problems and give a false sense of security” (ibid).

Dr. Robert Hare (1970), after paying an illiterate group of impoverished and addicted prisoners to participate in a series of testing came-up with the Psychopathy Check List revised (PCL-R) (Maden, 2003). This scheme is used by CSC to deny parole or lower security transfers if the prisoner receives a high score. These high scores have also been used to deny prisoners access to treatment programs on the premise that programming might make it worse (ibid).

We have learnt to accept these labels as legitimate, and thereby accept and perpetuate a deceptive education which validates a destructive fallacy. I cannot count the times I have heard a prisoner embrace a label thrust upon themselves, at once lamenting about being rated with such a damaging status and complaining about how all their efforts were overlooked. It is obvious to me that the abstract and fluid benchmarks of the prisons system place little to no consideration on the prisoner’s efforts to improve their lives, their situation, their future and indeed themselves. Still we prisoners – out of necessity – seek to know how to change the institutionally and statistically based label. How indeed? It is, after all, impossible to question the correctional psychic-fortune-tellers and tarot card reading networks. It is a faultless, self-justifying system reinforced by the narrow minded, short sighted “get-tough-on-crime” authoritarian agenda spreading across the political landscape. Truly the media, politicians, and government criminal justice and prison bureaucracies have learnt how to sway public opinion with sensationalized fear mongering.

**The Snake Eats Itself**

It was with considerable thought that I chose the title of this paper, *Education in Prison or The Applied Art of “Correctional” Deconstructive Learning*. I settled on this title after a laborious fifteen seconds. I thought it was at once suitably confusing and contradictory. I wanted to
encapsulate the Orwellian nature of the prison corporate worlds and their predisposition to generate the appearance of an educational system, while simultaneously either demolishing the prisoners’ social skills and other natural or earned abilities while also crushing personal motivations and / or simply failing to provide any meaningful educational opportunities. I argue that the system’s built in failure factors have deep and enduring roots that feed off themselves. Like a snake eating itself, the self-perpetuating desire to punish people is a long unfolding human trait which flourishes unfettered in the social, criminal justice and prison context.

There is a schizoid predisposition for the prison-industrial complex to at once celebrate rehabilitation and pretend to incorporate learning opportunities, while on the other hand removing tangible educational opportunities. It is an exploitive and manipulative endeavour embraced and jettisoned as the political climate dictates. If called to task about not providing enough educational or rehabilitative opportunities, the prison system claims the need for cash infusions and more staff. However, when provided, the new cash is invariably siphoned off into security based endeavours as the ever consumptive CSC is ravenous for more fences, chains, walls and guns.

As reduced educational and recreational opportunities predictably translate into prisoner unrest or violence, the system then claims they need more cash and more security to deal with the unruly prisoners. As the years have gone by, I have seen a marked reduction in recreational funding and reductions in post-secondary education. I have seen the introduction and then removal of computers from prisoners’ allowable cell effects. It is reasonable to recognize that long-term prisoners will be computer illiterate in society’s computer age. It seems clear that this policy is indicative of the extremely narrow range of possible futures and employment opportunities that CSC envisions for those under its control. The notion that a prisoner could excel in more creative and technical sectors of the workforce seems quite foreign to CSC and to other prison agencies. What other purpose does this serve than to potentially hamstring released prisoners?

**Resisting the Education Blockade**

As an activist, I have been involved in helping my fellow prisoners with learning to read, write and speak English on a variety of levels at different periods over my sentence, in an effort to be useful. In the late 1980s, I was involved in a tutoring initiative put on by Frontier College. After I received their (non-CSC) training and certification, I began to
As time went by, I noticed that the guys I was working with who could not put a sentence together – verbal or written – were being passed by the Millhaven prison school at Grade 9 and 10 levels. This was clearly a statistical scam perpetrated by the school for some kind of funding manipulation – a statistical slight of hand which still occurs today. I resigned as a tutor and while I continued to work with prisoners on the cell block, I refused to be a party to that kind of official fraud.

I long ago noticed a distinct silence in release planning for prisoners and set about writing a book to help provide a basic strategy for prisoners to follow to improve the likelihood of receiving parole and hopefully staying out of prison. I held weekly seminars in the lifers group meeting room, but the prison’s “Social Development Department” banned me from the room and ordered me to stop helping other prisoners with their release planning. Apparently they feared I might be politicizing prisoners – which I was not – and that it would make more work for CSC as more prisoners were applying for parole, temporary passes and transfers – which I did. The Parole Planning book was recently banned from CSC prisons. It seems the reason can be attributed to the above comments and the organization’s resistance to prisoners acquiring or sharing knowledge with each other about the prison experience. It is clear that the result, if not the intention, creates or further exemplifies the anti-education backdrop. It almost goes without saying that most of the people in prison have arrived in the corrupting confines of the prison experience through some violation of the social contract. But just what is it that we as a supposedly enlightened society intend to do with prisoners once we have commandeered their lives and placed them in cages? As was stated by the Daubney Commission Report (1988):

It is now generally recognized that imprisonment has not been effective in rehabilitating or reforming offenders, has not shown to be a strong deterrent, and has achieved only temporary public protection and uneven retribution… The use of imprisonment as a main response to a wide variety of offences against the law is not a tenable approach in practical terms.

In this light, we need to ask ourselves three questions as prisoners, as citizens and as a society: 1) what are we teaching in prisons?; 2) what are prisoners learning from their experiences?; and 3) do we learn from our mistakes?

Consistent to the corrosive prison legacy is the predisposition of the prison guard’s sub-cultural sense of misplaced personal offence
and outrage towards prisoners. Even as guards have sought to establish a professional status, they have been unable to shed the true nature of prison and what it does to people, both guard and prisoner. The frightening implications of the 1971 Stanford Experiment (Zimbardo, 2008) as it relates to an angry work force with aggressive, abusive, and self-interested constituents should remain front and center to any dialogue about prison. The desire to intellectually neuter the general prison population remains desirable for prison administrators, bureaucrats, guards, and opportunistic politicians who exploit a frightened and apathetic public. We are all being led down the path, quite unquestioningly, toward harsher prison conditions as we have seen in the 2008 Canadian federal election campaign. As prison guard unions, police associations and victim’s rights groups begin to acquire higher levels of sophistication, they lobby more effectively to achieve their desired punitive and restrictive ends. There is little to no reliance upon social science evidence, and all major decisions seem to be reactionary and draconian. Prime Minister Stephen Harper highlighted his disdain for empirical evidence when rejecting professional criticism of his party’s crime bills which seek to impose life-25 sentences on children as young as 14 years old, criticism which he attributed to an out of touch elite living in an “ivory tower” (Whittington, 2008).

It is without reservation that I recognize prison to be the worst classroom on the planet. Prison is inherently degrading, painful and caustic. The education earned by the subjugated, punished and oppressed is altogether damaging. The applied totality of the prison experience compromises any of the good intentions that may have been included in the plans of social engineers and the legislators who pour good money after bad in the pursuit of a correctional pipe dream. Cages that are restraining people inside a mean spirited prison system staffed with unaccountable prison workers can never reform people nor can they rehabilitate anyone. The Quaker Committee on Jails and Justice when making submissions to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs stated:

Positive growth cannot occur in an environment where one has minimal rights and responsibilities, no freedom of choice and is denied normal human contact. There are few substantial trade programs, little or no effective schooling available, and no opportunity to grow and develop as a responsible citizen (MacGuigan, 1976).

When I have made this argument before, some people have asked me to explain the dichotomy in relation to my personal growth and education
while in the prison system! I believe that my personality type, which apparently lends itself well to managing adversity, is able to thrive under pressure. It is my observation and experience that this is not the experience of the vast majority of people.

**PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

All available evidence demonstrates that educational upgrading, even in prison, results in increased self-esteem, critical thinking and self-discipline. These personal gains combine to reduce the likelihood of a released prisoner coming back in conflict with the law (Porporino and Robinson, 1992). It is apparent that this result may occur because the ‘educated’ person is more able to effectively look for and secure employment, and generally is more likely to feel socially viable and useful to others, perhaps developing a sense of purpose. Yet without any rational explanation, CSC has reduced educational opportunities for those prisoners who desire it and to add insult to injury, it forces remedial educational processes on those imprisoned adults who do not wish it. This creates the misleading impression that CSC is promoting and facilitating education. I have observed that CSC wields mandatory minimum education levels as a tool to punish prisoners and as a method to artificially raise people’s security levels.

Prior to my forced exile, I had received a Grade 8 education so I had little in the way of academic training or experience. I had always been in trouble at school and that left me with a clear dislike of the school atmosphere. At the beginning of my sentence, I was incarcerated in the Special Handling Unit (SHU) and they offered a “pilot project” art course to prisoners in “phase II”. I tried to enrol, but was denied access. I presume the reason – and I was told several – was because I was an administrative nuisance. When I was let out of the SHU, four Christmas’ later I had developed – learnt – a troubling verbal stammer and at times every thought would vacate my mind, unable to recall what I was thinking about. This was likely due to years of social isolation and little verbal communication. People respond differently to stressful events. At any rate, I was later released from the SHU on probation to Millhaven Penitentiary, a maximum security prison. One of the lessons I learnt was that CSC wanted to perpetuate the aura of danger, both through insinuation and the actual applied label – teach people what is expected and they often oblige. I enrolled in school because I wanted – needed – to do something constructive with my time. I wanted to make sure that I would avail myself of any opportunities in these gulags, these
treacherous human warehouses. CSC allowed me to attend school. I was
given a mandated course of studies, which I completed and eventually
earned my high school equivalency. I signed-up for a university Political
Science course, but soon found myself discouraged with the prospect of
only being permitted one course per semester, which I felt would take
forever – apparently, I was not clear on my sentence parameters. I did
not foresee being able to apply Political Science to any aspect of my life
– clearly another example of my uncanny ability to misread the future. In
retrospect, I imagine that course of studies would have been amazingly
useful to the role I appear to have assigned myself – Justice Critic to a
party of one! In any event, I wanted to do something I actually liked
while my eternal punishment gently squeezed the life out of me.

I was still interested in art and started reading books on the subject. I
was soon through all of the books in the library and I had set my sights
on formal art instruction, which I quickly realized was sparse at best.
I started writing to all the schools, colleges and universities in Canada
asking if they would help me. After all, who does not want to help a
prisoner… right? I asked if they would set up a curriculum that I could
follow from inside a cell. To be fair, I did get a great response from the
Ottawa School of Art, which indicated they would set up a curriculum
especially for me, but it seemed too complicated due to red tape from
the prison. Eventually, I ended-up finding a course outline which was
available through correspondence and I applied to take the courses.

The official response to my art courses request was NO! The prison
bureaucrats explained to me that art, much like music, was not educational
and amounted to a waste of time. Discussions with them illuminated that
this position was predicated on the “if you enjoy it you cannot be learning
anything of value” principle, an argument which quite effectively
illuminates their essentially faulty rationale. I began to write letters,
complain, file grievances and eventually through a stubborn refusal to give-
up coupled with the intervention of Anglican Bishop Duncan Abrahams
from Saint James Cathedral in Toronto, I was successful. I had the good
fortune of meeting the Bishop through coincidence. When a friend and
fellow prisoner was being visited by Bishop Duncan Abrahams, I spoke
to him. He inquired about what was going on and I told him. He saw
something in me that he felt was redeemable (his words), wrote to the
prison administrators and sent CSC half the funds for the courses. Under
that kind of pressure, CSC yielded and allowed me to enrol. That whole
process took about two or three years from request to authorization.

Having capitulated in no way meant CSC were finished hassling me
about art, a technique favoured by administrators when prisoners are
perceived as going against the grain. In point of fact, they hindered and stalled my progress through the courses in a rotating war of attrition by confiscating all my art supplies and course materials. They also prevented me from buying needed art supplies and in the process of involuntarily transferring me, lost or destroyed my school materials and even stole my artwork. For context, during the passage of time in which I was trying to complete the course of studies I had been (voluntarily) transferred to Joyceville Penitentiary, a medium security prison. Then due to allegations of wrongdoing, I was shipped back to Millhaven. Twice I brought CSC to court over the transfer and before a second hearing could commence they shipped me to Collins Bay, a medium security prison, in order to avoid being ordered to do so by the courts. From this exercise, I learnt that CSC operates as a law unto itself.

An art course outline that should have taken a couple of years to complete took me from 1990 till 1998. I received my Honours Diploma in Graphic, Commercial and Fine Arts. While suitably intoxicated with my hard won accomplishment and believing – for some inexplicable reason – that my efforts would be acknowledged by CSC as evidence of my commitment to turn my life around, I applied for a transfer down in security. And I learnt that if something is not their idea then it is simply meaningless to them.

My transfer application initiated a Risk Assessment process and I was assessed by psychometrist Rob Rowe, who among many other things asked me what I now wanted to do having just completed the art courses. I told him I was thinking about taking a health and nutrition course. He advised me that this would indicate that I lacked focus. Following his lead, I asked him what I should do. He told me I should try to sell my artwork and thereby prove I now possessed a marketable skill. I understood this to mean that he felt that to have value, art must be traded as a commodity or product in accordance with the capitalist’s perspective. I knew I was being patronized and in the process of my success or failure, the system would be able to delay any movement in my case. Mr. Rowe indicated that this business pursuit would reduce my risk to society and make me a more viable candidate for lower security. Through this I learnt that I was not going to minimum security – that was ten years ago and I am still in a medium security prison.

I knew a business venture would be a huge source of problems for me and if I did not follow his direction, he or one of, if not all of
his counterparts in future psychological assessments would say I did not – could not or would not – follow direction or that I demonstrated resistance, and consequently, I would never be considered a “good” or “manageable” risk for lower security. I found myself introduced to another catch-22 situation. No matter what path I chose I would get the short end of the stick. If I followed his direction, I would meet all kinds of hostility, resistance and problems from the prison administration. If I did not follow his direction, reports from psychologists would define and redefine my inability to follow his direction. Thereby, I learnt I would not be going down in security.

I knew that the prison system did not approve of art as a viable educational pursuit and they would certainly not embrace me running an art business. I had to tread carefully, slowly. I sought out reference material on small business management and I got in touch with a small business start up group (SBS). The SBS helped me refine my business proposal and even provided a business start up mentor. Soon Jim Purdie, a retired business professor and concerned social activist, was put in touch with me by the SBS. Jim was a really nice and amazing person. With his help, I developed a great business plan. The administration eventually capitulated and permitted me to run the business. In reality, CSC had no intention to allow it (me) to succeed, but they wanted to appear as if they had given me the opportunity. CSC placed insurmountable hurdles in front of me and made it impossible to accomplish anything. They created a censorship board specifically for my cartoons and political work. That censorship board is still in place today, although they long since disbanded my business – apparently they have to keep control of my art. However, it was not all a waste of time. I learnt many skills and small business insight. Most importantly, Jim and I remain friends. I also learnt that CSC was more interested in denying real opportunities than they were in helping a prisoner develop the skills and tools to become a useful member of the community.

For additional context, over the years of my incarceration I have earned certification as a Frontier College ESL Tutor, I am a certified Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) Facilitator, a certified Peer Education Counsellor and have been working as a HIV/AIDS counsellor for eight years with excellent – albeit, absolutely meaningless – work reports from my supervisor and case management team. I have received written offers of employment upon release from the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, the Prisoners with HIV/AIDS Support Action Network (PASAN), The Irish Penal Reform Trust and Rittenhouse as a result of my committed volunteer work which I have performed for these agencies.
over the last decade. I have co-authored HIV/AIDS harm reduction documents that have been used in prison health and safety education, and training seminars around the world by Rick Lines and other UNAIDS representatives. I was recently awarded the 2008 Canadian Award for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights, an award presented by Human Rights Watch and the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network for my ongoing efforts around the HIV/AIDS crisis in the prison system. My artwork and writing has been published in a variety of venues for a multitude of purposes (educational, promotional, letterheads, pamphlets, cards and so on) and I continue to donate all my considerable – at least in volume – artwork to charities. In spite of all my efforts and the very clear development of “marketable” skills to everyone but CSC, my “Correctional Treatment Plan” records me as having considerable difficulty with employment. The “considerable difficulty” designation allows the federal prison authorities to keep my security status raised.

IMPOSING AND RESTRICTING EDUCATION AS PUNISHMENT

Correctional Service of Canada demonstrates in many ways that they do not value or support higher learning (CSC, 1999) and they continue to use mandatory education levels to force unwilling prisoners to attend prison schools, or stay in prison longer, regardless of their situation. The person may, for many varied reasons, not wish or need to attend school, but regardless they are forced into school. In these cases, the prisoner is not even permitted to take a test to receive a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and in this way CSC creates an oppressive atmosphere in the school with disgruntled prisoners who interpret prison schooling as a forced punishment, and the ensuing resistance to education is purposely cultivated by the organization. Currently, CSC is preventing prisoners from engaging in academic upgrading by correspondence in their evening hours in their cells, which is preferred by prisoners who cannot work in or do not wish to attend the school area of the prison. If and when prisoners fail or refuse to attend school, then their security rating increases as their education is tied into their mandatory “Correctional Treatment Plan”. Some prisoners may never be academically motivated, but if CSC continues to force unwilling people into engaging in abstract academic pursuits which have no apparent use or context to someone’s life, then the organization along with the prisoner can and will almost always be assured of failure. It can be argued here that CSC’s conduct exemplifies Reiman’s (2004) argument in “The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison”, where he suggests that the apparent failures of the
system are actually successes according to its unspoken logic of coercion, repression and self-perpetuation. If CSC actually created a system of education around trades or skill pursuits that directly relate to tangible employment opportunities and marketable skills then they would invoke a motivation and commitment to learning because prisoners would see that their work, the effort and the result will actually benefit them, but that does not appear on any horizon line.

**Historical Retrospective**

Since we have gone back a quarter century, I thought we could go back a little further to briefly review the conduct of our prison administrators. In 1835, Kingston Penitentiary opened, and forced total silence and seclusion with hard labour. Isolation, solitude, congregation and labour under a system of silence are indicative of the “Auburn System” (Beattie, 1977). These were the days of provincial and continental banishment and transportation to New South Wales and Van Diemans Land (Tasmania) as punishment, where many “transported” prisoners did not survive the 18 week sea journey. In 1933, as a result of changes to penitentiary regulations prisoners who worked in offices or workshops were – at times – permitted a half hour outside in the fresh air. In 1945, the rule of imposed silence was relaxed and prisoners were allowed to speak to each other during meal time and in their cells until 7:00pm. In the late 1940s, prisoners also began to be allowed to take higher education courses through correspondence at their own expense and families could provide prisoners books. It should be strenuously noted that in this day and age of 2008, families are not permitted to send prisoners educational books and CSC libraries are dismal. The prisons were very harsh environments that employed many atrocities such as the practice of hand cuffing prisoners to bars all day, putting the ball-and-chain on their legs during hard labour work periods or dunking them in troughs of ice and slush as “mental health care treatment”. Electroshock and physical beatings with whips and straps were gradually rescinded, as lights were placed outside some cells to allow “well behaved” prisoners to read at night. Prisoners were allowed to write one letter to family every three-month period. It is fair to note that electroshock, and three, four and five point binding still goes on today under the guise of mental health care.

After a couple riots and incidents, the Parliament commenced the Royal Commission which resulted in the 1938 Archambault Report and recommendations of greater “constructive application of recreation in the treatment” of prisoners. Prisoners were permitted to walk in pairs and
talk to each other. Competitive sports were introduced and prisoners even competed with outside leagues – something that has been abandoned by CSC in this day and age. Correspondence restrictions were removed and visits were allowed. Hobby activities were recognized as occupational therapy – something CSC actively discourages by hindrance and attrition today.

In 1959, the Minister of Justice assigned Allan J. MacLeod, Q.C., to study the Penitentiary System. The MacLeod Committee produced its report in 1960 and it became the blueprint for prison reforms. MacLeod was appointed commissioner and he announced an end to “soul destroying” work, long lock-up, and prisons existing in secrecy and isolation from the community. He warned guards that if they did not like the changes that they should find new work. Many changes occurred, but the enduring reality of soul destroying prisons and secretive prisons remain ever-present. Canada has essentially exchanged physical beatings and torture for long-term psychological torture with some of the longest sentences in the world coupled with some of the most restrictive, and arbitrary parole and release mechanisms. The “peace” or “correctional officer” faction of the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), which became a recognized union in 1967, has always resisted and undermined progressive changes. Over the years, this branch of PSAC has become effective at appearing forthright and concerned with public safety, while concealing its less than admirable intentions for the purpose of achieving its ideological backward and repressive goals. However, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a generally more inclined political will and vocal public pressure to avoid repeating prison failures of the past. In 1976, the MacGuigan Parliamentary Report (paragraphs 78-80) stated:

Prisons as they now exist, protect society only during the 2, 3, 10 or 20 years the inmate is in there; but if the institutions are boring, oppressive and lack programs preparing inmates for release, they come out angry, vindictive, frustrated, snarling like animals released from long confinement in a cage... Most of those in prisons are not dangerous. However, cruel lockups, isolation, the injustices and harassment deliberately inflicted on prisoners unable to fight back, make non-violent inmates violent, and those already dangerous more dangerous.

The MacGuigan Report produced some pressure and some change. By the late 1980s, there was a fleshing out of the base level skills training programs. The availability of educational opportunities providing prisoners with access to high school and university courses, as well as skills and
trades training with the opportunities to receive a ticket and/or recognized certification in mechanics, electrical service, barbering, painting, carpentry, among others increased. In the 1990s, with the introduction of a progressive Scandinavian Commissioner of Corrections, Ole Ingstrup, CSC experienced significant growing pains upon the introduction of the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (1992, C-20). Ingstrup tried to make progressive changes occur through the introduction of the CSC Mission Statement, but PSAC and bureaucrats within the organization resisted the changes at the ground level. Eventually through attrition, PSAC was able to capitalize on Canada’s waning political will and forced the Commissioner’s resignation. PSAC’s coup heralded a pronounced, albeit gradual, reduction in educational opportunities and skilled labour training which was replaced by “life skills” programming and the “CORCAN” industries, both of which are very expensive façades for education and skills training. The reality is that life skills programming is very sparse and often ineffective for a variety of reasons – I have been provided a total of nine weeks over a quarter century.

With regard to the CORCAN industries, usually only one or two prisoners out of each prison are taught marketable skills or earn credentials, and this appears to serve the purpose of exploitation. It is cost and labour effective for the CORCAN industrial plants to train one or two prisoners to perform those few jobs that require dedication, expertise and willingness to work. When CORCAN staffing compliment delegate prisoners to perform these jobs, it permits the staff to take a passive role and essentially get their money for nothing. Aside from the exploitative agenda driven sharing of skills there is nothing going on in CORCAN sweatshops that provide prisoners with useful marketable skills. The vast majority of CORCAN employment is assembly line component manufacturing that is often outdated. However, because the CSC CORCAN employment scheme pays prisoners at higher rates than usual prison jobs, many prisoners either do not see or overlook their exploitation in exchange for additional pennies. Poverty is a powerful motivator. While operating as a sheltered workshop for the prison-industrial complex, CORCAN operates as a financial sink hole through which tax payers are thoroughly gouged.

We are almost at 2010, and CSC has fully eradicated all meaningful employment training and release preparation. It also has a meagre amount of their considerable resources directed towards prisoner life skills programs which most prisoners express did not aid them whatsoever for community living. The reality is that CSC has a program availability shortfall. Overcrowding in Canadian prisons continues to increase, at least
in part, due to the constant failure to place sufficient financial resources into providing *CSC mandated* pre-release programming to prisoners and thereby holding prisoners past parole eligibility release dates. It should be noted that CSC has never complied with legislated mandates to have programming available for prisoners prior to their reaching parole eligibility dates. While CSC continues to cite non-compliance by prisoners or funding shortfalls to explain programming non-completion or unavailability, the reality is CSC chooses not to designate the required and available monies to programming targets which would *according to their own stated beliefs and policies* most effectively address prisoner’s CSC imposed correctional treatment and reintegration needs. As a result, parole release timelines are unnecessarily lengthened.

In 1996, the Auditor General devoted a chapter of his fall report to Parliament on this topic detailing several areas in which CSC needed improvement. It is now *12 years after the fact* and prisoners still arrive at parole eligibility dates without having had the opportunity to complete their mandated programs. The Auditor General’s review of CSC’s failure to properly prepare prisoners for their parole eligibility dates went unheeded, as the organization continues to “splurge spend” fiscal year end surpluses with ridiculous make work and spend money projects. CSC continues to engage in redundant top heavy administrative spending while designating proportionally small amounts toward prisoner education, core correctional-substance-rehabilitation programming and release preparation, as well as community reintegration planning.

**SO WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?**

Underestimating the negative impacts of a life full of endlessly imposed deprivation is a social mistake that we need not repeatedly make. Whether the deprivation is in equality, acceptance, love, family, normal relationships, sexual contact, education, employment or reasonable financial compensation, or a sense of purpose, freedom or fair treatment under the law, or whatever needs, wants and desires the human condition experiences, the result heightens the individual’s push, pull or drive towards “it”. The deprivation in itself cultivates, embellishes and tightly focuses the desire, the need, and the want. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the longer deprivation is imposed the more pronounced the negative impacts on the individual, the family and the community, and thereby the more likely public safety is compromised. One of the defining hallmarks of CSC’s failure to produce positive results is their inability to look outside their narrow minded and short-sighted field of vision. It
is their petty, and corrupt perspective that dooms all of their official and very expensive endeavours to failure.

Prisoners pay a serious price for speaking critically about CSC practices. Most prisoners keep their heads down and their voices silent because they are cowed into silence. I am also painfully aware of a “correctional” variation of the Stockholm Syndrome which contributes to diminished critical resistance form prisoners. CSC seeks silence from prisoners because it makes their jobs easier and their short-term goals are more easily reached. I have learnt that in the long-run and short-run what happens in prisons compromises the long and short-term mental, emotional, and physical health and safety of prisoners, prisoner’s families, prison guards and society. It appears that most prisoners and most of the public accept whatever the CSC says as the inevitable truth or the inevitable way of the world. However, forced subservience under lock and key is missing the point.

ENDNOTES

1 It has been noted that I engage in anthropomorphism by inputting human behaviour to abstract processes or concepts – specifically to the prison system. It was suggested that some of my concepts become a bit mixed as a result. I am unsure how to do a better job on this area. I have come to understand that many prison workers simply become extensions of the system in deed and spirit. Their thoughts and therefore their decisions are not their own. They simply do what they have learnt is the accepted standard operating procedure within the prison-industrial complex.

2 “The Hole” is a punitive isolation cage, usually dark or endlessly bright.

3 A federal crime committee appointed by the Mulroney Conservative Government.

4 The Stanford Experiment was conducted by having students take on the roles of prisoners and guards, while being monitored for behavioural changes. The students sunk into their respective roles and the experiment had to be terminated due to the danger level the experiment exhibited. The prisoners and guards had become dangerous, abusive, violent and suicidal.

5 The phase systems consisted of 4 phases: 1) twenty three and a half hour lock-up with yard by yourself; 2) increased time in the yard with a limited number of others; 3) increased time out of your cell; and 4) probation in a maximum prison – usually took years to get through it.

6 I had filed a complaint of theft against a guard who stole five cartons of cigarettes out of my cell. The following day, I was placed on a restricted diet that provided five hundred calories a day and I lost thirty pounds. Then the prison accused me of using heroin and cocaine thereby explaining my weight loss, dealing drugs, beating people up, running a crime ring and murdering a fellow prisoner – all of which proved to be false allegations. CSC apologized in writing for starving
me and returned my cigarettes, but by this time I was in Millhaven maximum security.

7 Opportunities in Kingston is a small business start up group that operates in the community which receives federal, provincial and local government assistance.

8 The censorship board was headed by my case management officer and he would never meet with me.

9 Prisoners with HIV/AIDS Support Action Network (PASAN) is an agency that works with HIV positive prisoners trying to ensure they are receiving appropriate medical treatment, and assistance in prison and upon release.

10 “Marketable Skills” is only a term I use because they use it – I would prefer to characterize it as “useful skills”.

11 CSC fails to provide any funding for post-secondary education.

12 “Binding” is the practice of using straps or handcuffs, restraining beds and chairs to immobilize prisoners, which has resulted in many deaths.

13 The branch of PSAC that deals with prisons falls under the purview of the Department of Public Safety – see www.psac.com.

14 It is clear that activists like Claire Culhane, Prisoners Rights Group, and academic discussions championed the cause of the prisoner and reluctantly to make a significant pressure. It is also clear that the combined pressure has waned for a variety of reasons. A couple of clear factors are: 1) the passing of Claire Culhane; 2) the increased sophistication of PSAC, police associations and victim’s groups; and 3) the criminalization of protesters.

15 The Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA) is legislation that CSC continues to repeatedly undermine and ignore with impunity.

16 Life Skills Programming (for the purposes of this paper) includes programs dedicated to the wide variety complex problems that are faced by people such as, but not limited to: 1) Alcohol & Drug Addiction; 2) Sexual Conduct; 3) Violence; 4) Cognitive Reasoning; 5) Employment; and 6) Friends & Associates.


18 Program participation is coerced and delivered by prison staff that often lack meaningful program subject insight or lack credibility with prisoners. Programs are of short duration with little to no follow-up or facilities to practice learnt concepts.

19 Stockholm Syndrome occurs when individuals identify with, and develop trust and affection for their captors.

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Serving a life sentence in prison, Peter Collins knew he had to come to terms with the consequences of his actions and so dedicated himself to working for positive social change. Since the late 1980s, when the official position of the Correctional Service of Canada was that intravenous drug use, tattooing, and sex were illegal – therefore not happening – until today when prisoners continue to be denied access to clean needles and syringes, Peter’s tireless efforts to defend the health and human rights of prisoners have often led to strained relationships with prison officials, undermining his efforts to get paroled. While in prison, Peter earned an honours diploma in Graphic and Commercial Fine Arts, as well as a certification as a Frontier College ESL tutor. He is an Alternatives to Violence Project facilitator and Peer Education Counsellor. Peter was
instrumental in setting up a Peer Education Office in his prison and has advocated on behalf of fellow prisoners on issues ranging from health access to employment. He also wrote a book helping prisoners prepare for successful and safe release into the community. Regularly donating his time, expertise, and artwork to numerous charities and social justice initiatives, Peter’s dedication has contributed to improved health and safety in the prison system, and by extension, in the community at large.
The American prison population continues to grow. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, as of December 31, 2006, there were 2,258,983 people in American prisons and jails. The Federal Bureau of Prisons is the largest prison system in the United States. As of February 2008, the Federal Bureau of Prisons listed 114 institutions with a total prisoner population of 200,931. The majority of federal prisoners are housed in institutions miles away from their last place of residence, serving extremely long sentences for non-violent offences (Mumola, 2000). Research has found that one major impediment to visiting loved-ones in prison is the distance to the prison (Casey-Acevedo and Bakken, 2002). Visitors face transportation and financial barriers to visiting (Tewksbury and DeMichele, 2006). It is an exhausting, resource-intensive process for a family member to make one visit to a prison (Christian, 2006). Consequently, 41.1 percent of federal prisoners never receive a visit from their family (Mumola, 2000), and are more likely to serve their time in social isolation and feel the pains of imprisonment more acutely. One way to reduce those pains for federal and state prisoners is through volunteer prison visitation work, which is shown to help prisoners cope with life in the penitentiary and build relationships (Duncan and Balbar, 2008).

People may decide to volunteer to visit prisoners for religious, spiritual, moral, ethical, social, personal or professional reasons. Numerous religious organizations sponsor and encourage volunteers to visit prisons. Visiting prisoners is consonant with religious principles that encourage service to others. In a similar way, people who share a more secular world view might volunteer to visit prisoners because they believe that they have a moral or ethical obligation to provide assistance to those who are deprived of their freedom. Research suggests that visiting promotes empathy, tolerance and an appreciation of one’s own quality of life (Duncan and Balbar, 2008). Further, prison visits initiate the process of reintegrating prisoners into society by acknowledging the intrinsic worth of men and women placed in prison, which aids in strengthening the bond between individuals in prison and society.

Academics may find volunteering to visit prisoners is a convenient way to enter prisons to study prison conditions and to provide a form of accountability for the prisons (Duncan and Balbar, 2008). Indeed, the Convict Criminology perspective (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and
Richards, 2003) supports the idea that researchers enter prisons to learn from prisoners. The experiences of entering the prison, interacting with guards and the conversations with prisoners cannot be found in a textbook or research article. These experiences may be shared with students to enlighten, and enrich their knowledge of prisons and the treatment of prisoners. In fact, some prisoners have conveyed their hope that their story will be told, their voice will be heard and somewhere along the line, having been heard, someone will declare the ineffectual “war on crime and drugs” to be over.

Ex-convicts may volunteer to visit prisoners as a way to heal themselves. Since ex-convicts have experienced the desolation of prison, they might become a volunteer visitor to help men or women who are currently incarcerated cope with such feelings. Whatever the reason for visiting, there is no doubt that visits reap benefits to all involved. This paper discusses the benefits of prison visitation based on the experiences of three volunteer prison visitors. While we have been visiting men and women in numerous federal prisons for many years, the focus here is on what we have learned from male prisoners at one federal prison. The institution will not be named to protect the prisoners.

Benefits of Prison Visits for the Prisoner

Prisoners benefit from volunteer prison visits in a variety of ways. In particular, prison visits give the prisoner something positive to anticipate which helps prisoners cope with the amount of time to be served. Volunteer prison visitors may provide emotional support and educational guidance, as well as promote pro-social values. They help prisoners stay connected to the outside world, particularly those prisoners who do not receive visits from anyone else. Volunteers may also help prisoners cope with disappointment, model commitment, promote trust and develop a sense of hope for the future.

Visiting Helps Prisoners Cope with the Slow Moving Pace of Prison Time

Prisoners tend to have a profoundly different sense of time and space. Some prisoners report that the prison world moves in slow motion, with very little changes from one day to the next. Behind the wall or inside the fence, they live in a miniature artificial world that you walk across in a few minutes, devoid of variation in sensory stimulation. Recently, one prisoner explained to us how such sensory deprivation creates a sense of timelessness within prison. Thus, a day in prison is much longer than
a day in free society. Consequently, for the prisoner, a visit is a special event that changes the individual’s perception of time and makes it move just a little faster. The visit is especially important for prisoners who are housed in administrative segregation and experiencing a more severe type of sensory deprivation.

On any given day, federal prisons confine countless individuals in disciplinary or administrative segregation – what the prisoners call “the hole”. The first type is used as a response for violating prison rules and can last from one day to months. This may be for missing count, failure to obey an order, defending oneself in a fight or failure to make one’s bed. The second type is decided by the warden and has no specific limit. This form of isolation may be inflicted on prisoners with gang affiliations, a need for protective custody, or, as we have observed, on those who are being punished for filing lawsuits. Many federal prisons also routinely sequester prisoners with infectious diseases (e.g., HIV, AIDS, Hepatitis C) in segregation cellblocks. If they bleed, have sex or share other bodily fluids with others or threaten staff with contact, they go to the hole. Prisoners that complain about the lack of medical attention, inadequate medication and the inability to navigate hallways or stairs because of infirmities or injury may also be sent to the hole. Administrative segregation also houses prisoners that have psychological problems. In large and crowded federal penitentiaries where older prisoners are doing life sentences, many elderly men request time in the hole as sanctuary, a break from the action on the tiers, hoping for a little peace and quiet. They are tired of all the drama and games of the young men that seek to dominate cellblocks. Provided the hole is quiet, assuming the mentally damaged prisoners contain their screaming and pounding on cell doors, they might get a little rest in solitary confinement and then politely ask to return home to their cell in general population. During their imprisonment, many federal prisoners spend time in segregation – some even die in segregation alone.

We have especially enjoyed the smiles of the men we have helped release from segregation, since the only time they are allowed to leave their cells is when they receive a visit. The men from segregation arrive at the visiting room wearing “carrot suits” (orange jump suits), handcuffs and leg irons. We ask the correctional officers to remove their restraints. Our first visit with one man was very emotional, as it was the first time he had been out of his segregation cell in many months. This elderly man, who had just undergone heart bypass surgery, was so grateful to be out of his cell that he wept through most of the visit.

Volunteers can also engage in minor actions that help reduce the prisoner’s sense of deprivation and encourage their dreams. For example, our group of volunteers has mailed print-outs of internet jokes, trivia,
instructions on card games and information about new cars. Additionally, instead of notifying prisoners of our visit dates by letterhead, members of our group pick up various state post cards or use pictures that they have taken as note-cards. We have been told that these cards and pictures are used to decorate their cell. We also send holiday and birthday cards to remind the prisoners that we are thinking about them, even when we are not visiting.

**Prison Visitors Provide Emotional and Educational Support**

Prisoners benefit from the emotional support, as well as the pro-social interaction that takes place during visits. Additionally, prisoners may benefit when visitors are able to provide educational guidance and advice about exiting prison to enter college (Richards, 2004; Rose et al., 2005). Our group, for example, has sent college enrollment information, donated college textbooks to the prison library, sent college level books to prisoners, provided letters of references for college entrance and assisted several prisoners in entering graduate school. One even completed his doctorate.

Providing a sympathetic ear to prisoners who are experiencing problems – other than being incarcerated – is a way to demonstrate emotional support. Crying with a man who had learned on Christmas day that the mother he had not seen in ten years had died, as well as providing an ear for his expression of anger and feeling of injustice that he would not be able to attend her funeral, is an example of such support. Likewise, listening to the concerns of men that have been torn from their children, and who are expressing their sense of frustration and helplessness at not being with them to celebrate happy times or provide guidance during difficult times is another case in point. Our particular group has two female visitors that hug the men at the beginning and end of the visit. This simple human interactive touch may be the only positive touch they receive throughout their sentence.

**Helping Prisoners Maintain a Connection with the Outside World**

Being in prison, of course, means being cut-off from direct contact with the larger world. For many prisoners, this loss of contact can produce a profound sense of impotence, dislocation and being boxed in within the small world of the prison. Volunteer visitors can help broaden the prison social world by providing a connection to the outside social world, particularly for those prisoners that do not receive visits from family or friends. Volunteer visitors can also help prisoners stay abreast of the various
changes that take place beyond the walls of the prison. For example, while it may be difficult for prisoners to obtain information on changes in the law that influence release dates, volunteers may easily obtain and share this information during visits. Prisoners share their anxiety over being released and their fear about not being able to adjust to a world that has experienced such change. They also discuss the fear of being in a free world and uncertainty about how to interact with disappointed family members. A conversation with an individual who was recently released from prison revealed his fear of open spaces and being touched. Another conversation with an individual (only 22 years old) soon to be released revealed a sense of worthlessness and being unsure how to interact with his family because of the shame he felt. Volunteer prison visitors may be able to help prisoners talk through these fears and reduce their anxieties.

Finally, prisoners benefit when visitors are able to provide post-release guidance to help prevent individuals from returning to prison for technical violations. Engaging in discussions with prisoners about global and local changes may be helpful in reducing anxiety, particularly for prisoners who have been in prison for a long time. Promoting trust through such discussion may help prisoners discuss other issues that create anxiety about re-entry. Such discussions are especially important for prisoners nearing the end of their sentence, as the information learned and the support provided may help reorient them to the outside world.

Volunteer Visitors Can Model Commitment which May Help Prisoners to Develop Trust

Many prisoners have faced rejection and have been let down by others, both within and outside the prison. Moreover, because prisoners are aware of the hidden agendas maintained by other prisoners and correctional staff, prison tends to breed a certain cynicism about the intentions of others. The result is that prisoners are constantly on guard. They have learned through experience that trusting others too much creates the potential for disappointment and under some circumstances may be detrimental to the prisoners’ physical well-being, even leading to suicide or murder. By being consistent and committed in visiting prisoners, volunteer visitors may help promote the prisoner’s ability to trust.

Our group visits the prison once a month, consistently. We have maintained a regular presence in one particular institution for fifteen years. The least experienced visitor in our group has been visiting for over two years. If life circumstances such as illness or bad weather prevent one of us from visiting, the rest of the volunteers always show up on visiting
day. We visit family style, meaning we visit as a group with the prisoners sitting in a small, intimate circle in the visiting room. Visiting as a group helps to promote trust, as we share our lives with each other, creating a social support group of volunteers and prisoners for each prisoner in the group. For example, when we are visiting the prisoners, not only talk with the volunteers but they talk with each other sharing information about such things as jobs in the institution, recipes, which people in the institution might be useful or supportive and who to avoid. Such conversations are particularly helpful to new prisoners. The relationships the men form within our group extend beyond the visiting room, providing the prisoners with support and information beyond the visit.

The prisoners that we visit change from month to month as the men are transferred to other institutions, released to community custody or die. Since the prisoners in our group keep in touch with each other outside the visiting room, they are able to share with us what has happened with a member of the group if he is not present for a visit. By staying in touch with each other within the institution, the prisoners in our group promote a sense of commitment to each other as they strive to provide the volunteer with information to be used to follow-up on the prisoner that is absent. This sense of group connectedness may provide some sense of emotional security for prisoners living in such an unstable environment.

Over the years, we have two to five visitors meeting with five to fifteen prisoners in the prison visiting room. The list of men requesting a volunteer visit is never-ending. Unfortunately, the number of volunteers is small. To promote the commitment to visiting with each man in the group, we base the number of male prisoners that we visit on the number of visitors. For example, currently, we have about three prisoners for each volunteer visitor in the group. There have been times when the ratio of prisoners to volunteers was larger and times when it was smaller, but a ratio of three-to-one seems to promote better conversations. We also change seating arrangements at least once during the visit, so that each of the volunteers has a chance to visit with each of the prisoners.

**Volunteers may Help Prisoners Cope with Disappointment and Develop a Sense of Hope for the Future**

Perhaps one of the most difficult realities faced by prisoners is the sense of hopelessness and despair that incarceration creates, particularly for long-term prisoners. Because we have visited these men over a number of years, we have witnessed the swings in emotions, the ups and downs that prisoners experience including disappointment over a visit that did
not materialize, a death in their family, a divorce, an unanswered letter, a failed parole hearing (for prisoners sentenced before 1984), the lack of caring by other prisoners and correctional staff, and the fear of what will happen upon release. Prison is about disappointment and fear, including fear of the unknown.

By visiting, prison volunteers have an opportunity to provide support in times of disappointment. Volunteers can provide encouragement, alternative perspectives on events, condolences or just hugs, which can help prisoners cope with negative events. In our group, the visitors also share their feelings, life’s disappointments and listen to the advice of the prisoners. Through sharing positive life events and hardships we develop a bond that is mutually supportive. This bond allows us to engage in discussions with prisoners that focus on their educational, employment and other goals they may have for life after prison. As we discuss their goals, the volunteers serve as a sounding board and may provide helpful guidance or make them aware of resources that they can use once they are released. Through continued commitment to visiting, mutually reinforcing care and concern, our group has promoted trusting relationships and have demonstrated to prisoners that there is a world beyond the walls where some people are willing to give them a chance. When volunteers and prisoners engage in discussions that focus on the future, an increased sense of hope can be developed.

**Benefits of Prison Visits for the Volunteer Visitor**

Volunteer visiting creates a sense of community and by serving others, volunteer visitors receive both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Extrinsic rewards include, for example, the gratitude the prisoners express. Service to others, in itself, provides the intrinsic benefits that are embedded within the visiting experience.

*Volunteers Receive Inexplicable Gratitude*

The prisoners that we visit always express a heartfelt appreciation for our time. Their gratitude is at times overwhelming and very difficult to articulate. As prisoners enter the visiting room, their smiles stretch from ear-to-ear and their exuberance uplifts the entire group – prisoners and visitors alike. During group conversations, prisoners mostly try to set a positive tone for conversations, the exception being when there has been a death or divorce in their families. When there has been a disturbing event that someone needs to share, all are respectful and supportive.
The prisoners only miss a visit when they are extremely ill, which occurs rarely.

One of the most touching gestures that the prisoners engage in to show their appreciation for visits is to do their best, given their limited resources, to present themselves well for the occasion. For example, the men iron designs (criss-cross seams) into their uniforms, are always freshly showered, smiling, guard their language (particularly with the female volunteers) and have usually saved some special interest topic to discuss. Special topics for conversations include news items from media sources, movies, family events and books they have read. Of course, we have regular conversations about sports, sometimes politics, the poor quality of prison food, prison rumours and legal proceedings related to their sentence. While some may spend a good deal of their time “venting” about their particular situation, most show their appreciation for the visitor by asking about the visitor’s life. They also comment on any difference in our appearance, follow-up on comments we may have made during the last visit and apologize for our wait to get into the prison or any other impediment we may have encountered on our journey to the visiting area.

Volunteers Are Introduced to the Realities of the Prison System

Although there is much to learn from studying academic research on prisons, no amount of reading can prepare one for the realities of the prison visiting experience. This experience begins with the first glimpse of the razor wire perimeter, ends with being locked between two sets of bars waiting to be processed out and includes all that is learned in between.

Gaining entrance into the visiting room can be difficult and demeaning for visitors. One of the consequences of prison overcrowding is prison visiting room crowding. When the visiting room is crowded, families (including children), friends and others may spend hours waiting in line to enter the visiting room. This wait takes place outside the prison, in all types of weather, with no protection from the elements. On holidays the visiting room will always be packed, as many prisoners receive visits only once a year usually around Christmas time. Additionally, the Patriot Act and Homeland Security measures have generated greater restrictions on visiting and on freedom of movement for prisoners.

More recently, federal law for entering prisons has become more restrictive which has led to visitors being detained, and being subjected to body and cavity searches under certain conditions. There are also restrictions on the type of clothing visitors may wear. Such rules may
change without prior notice and result in visitors being turned away after traveling long distances or subjected to a strip search. A female member of our group was forced on her first visit, despite the fact that she is a member of a professional volunteer organization, to remove her clothing from the waist up, don a hospital gown with no ties and undergo a search after her under-wire bra set off the metal detector. In one prison that we visit, a new restriction against wearing tan slacks was recently posted and those wearing this color of pants were asked to leave. If they lived or were staying nearby, they could go home or to their motel rooms to change their attire. But if they did not live nearby, they either had to skip the visit or go to the store to buy new clothing. Also, some female guards appear to be severe in their treatment of female visitors. For instance, they regularly arbitrarily tell female visitors to wear appropriate clothing and make inappropriate comments on hemlines or blouses.

When our group arrives at the institution we wait in line, on a good day, approximately thirty to forty-five minutes to enter the main building. Although visiting time begins at 2:30 p.m., the prison does not begin processing visitors until that time. Upon entry we sign-in, show identification, and lock keys, wallets and purses in a locker. We also remove shoes, belts, watches, ear rings, rings and so on, before we walk through a metal detector, present our hand to be stamped by the prison guard and line up to proceed down a hallway to the “sally port” entrance to the visiting room. The first set of metal bars clang open and a correctional officer directs us into the sally port. The bars clang shut, locking us inside, between two doors. Then, another officer from the visiting room instructs us to place our stamped hands under a black-light. The second door then squeals open as an officer directs us into the visiting room with an iron door clanging shut behind us. We proceed forward and present our visiting list to the officers stationed on a platform overlooking the visiting room. The room is filled with tables barely two feet high and plastic chairs. There are restrooms for men and women, a row of vending machines, a separate space for children to play and at the opposite end of the room, another sally port from which the prisoners enter. The prisoners must submit to strip searches entering and leaving the visiting area. We collect a few tables and chairs, arrange them together and take our seats to wait for the men to arrive.

Although our treatment by correctional staff is often cordial and professional, some staff appear to make it their duty to inconvenience visitors. Staff presiding at the front desk at the entrance to the institution may relate to visitors in a very mechanical manner and
give a not-so-subtle reminder that they are in control. The guard at the desk determines how long you wait to enter the prison and how quickly visitors are processed into the visiting room. In general, we are reminded that anyone who visits prisoners deserves to be punished too. Despite our treatment, however, we rarely voice strong complaints, nor do other visitors to the prison. Both visitors and the men inside know that if there is a major problem created by a visitor, the people who will pay the most are the prisoners. For example, if visitors complain about treatment by correctional staff, a prisoner may have privileges taken away inside the prison after a visit.

Federal prisoners must have all visitors authorized and listed on their official visiting list. This is a list approved by their case manager and limited to five to ten people depending upon the security level of the prison, which may include immediate family, other relatives, friends and associates. All visitors are also subject to criminal background checks and federal investigation, which is standard procedure for any visitor entering U.S. federal prisons.

In addition to the difficulties faced by visitors entering the prison, the prisoners also face many challenges to visiting. If a prisoner is suspected of receiving contraband during a visit the prisoner’s cell may be “tossed” (searched). Over the years, we have learned from the people we visit that prisoners receiving frequent visits are more likely to have their living quarters searched. They are also subject to disciplinary proceedings if any unauthorized item – not issued by prison, sold in commissary or in their approved property list – is found in their possession or living space. The rule is that prisoners will not enter or leave the visiting room with “anything” (i.e., scraps of paper, pen or pencil, food, personal items) except their uniforms. Creating further difficulties in visiting, some correctional guards may deceitfully impose a reduction in visiting time, a method of informally imposing additional punishment. For example, despite the fact that the prison is notified in advance of our scheduled visiting day along with the prisoners waiting to be called out for the visit, the visiting room correctional officer may delay calling the prisoners to bring them to the visiting area.

Visiting can be further complicated by the fact that prisoners are frequently transferred to other institutions, without notice, for seemingly obscure reasons, making visits impossible. Many times these are involuntary or “midnight transfers” where the prisoners are bussed out in the middle of the night with no warning or opportunity to tell their family or friends that may be visiting that week. The prisoners call this “diesel
therapy” as they are transported on prison buses all over the country. While in transit – by car, bus or plane – they are in holdover status, with no access to commissary accounts to pay for phone calls. They receive no mail and depending upon the security level may not be allowed to mail letters. It may be weeks or months before they have an opportunity to notify their family of their relocation. Over the years, we have had many men on our list transferred to distant corners of the federal prison system. They disappear into the vast network of U.S. Government jails, detention centers, correctional institutions and penitentiaries, and we never see them again.

In general, a prisoner may fear a transfer, being placed in a new environment where he or she must start over making friends, forming alliances and replacing personal property lost during the process. After months on the bus, sleeping in “holdover units” at prisons along the way, they finally arrive at their designated institution. Once assigned to “general population” in the new prison, it may take them weeks to see a case manager, re-establish an officially sanctioned “visiting list” and receive permission for family, friends, attorneys or volunteers to schedule visits with them. Often times, when prisoners find out they are being transferred, they leave a verbal message with another prisoner, thanking the volunteers for their time, apologizing that they did not have the opportunity to say goodbye, and asking that the volunteers try and track them through the system in order to send them a new prison volunteer visitor to check on them.

Environmental conditions in the prison can make visiting physically uncomfortable. Prisons lack a sufficient amount of air-conditioning and heat, even in the visiting room. In the summer, the air-conditioned prison visiting room is hot. In the winter, the heated visiting room is cold. The prisoners tell us their housing units have no air-conditioning, maybe a few fans and the summer temperature in the housing units can reach upward of 100 degrees. They also have inadequate heating in the winter. Prisoners insist that the visiting room is the most comfortable place in the institution. Further, prisons are infested with rodents and roaches – we see them in the visiting room. The prisoners also tell us that when more prisoners are packed into cellblocks and dormitories, the population of rats and bugs increases. In some institutions, the kitchens have been closed by the board of health, due to roach infestations.

In addition to the sensory deprivation and restrictions on freedom inherently imposed through incarceration, prisoners are subjected to further punishment when, for example, searches of cells or lockers
are conducted within the prison and prisoners lose personal clothing items they have purchased, family photos or legal papers. We have also visited with blind, crippled and desperately sick men, some in wheel chairs, who complain about the lack of medical attention, forcing them to manage such medical problems as diabetes through nutritional control. Such nutritional control is made difficult, since prison food, for the most part, is so bad – rotten meat, fruits and vegetables – that most prisoners work to buy their food from the commissary at an increased price compared to prices outside the prison. Prisoners tend to keep commissary food (e.g. canned tuna, soups, snacks) in their lockers. When they run out of these items they resort to eating what they can find in vending machines, if they can afford the prices. We have also discovered that handicapped prisoners, who have been released early to half-way houses, may be returned merely because the half-way house is not handicap-accessible.

Most importantly, what we have learned from visiting prisoners is that being removed from society is only the beginning of the punishment. One of the true pains of imprisonment is grief. These men grieve, on a daily basis, over the loss of interaction with their families and friends. They grieve over the loss of the ability to share with their loved ones life’s special moments such as birthdays and holidays, and they grieve most profoundly over the loss of the ability to share in the final days of a loved one’s life. Most of these men experience a sense of shame over their circumstances, and as a result, are constantly trying to engage in self-improvement through work, reading and education. Although these men want their freedom, some are afraid of be set free because they have become so institutionalized.

**Benefits of Prison Visits for Society and the Prison**

Both prison and society benefit from prison visits, since prison visits are correlated with reductions in recidivism. More than 600,000 men and women were to be released from America’s prisons in 2004 (Nolan 2004). For every prisoner released, two out of three will violate their parole conditions or be re-arrested within three years (Bureau of Justice Statistics Report, 2002). There is almost universal consensus among state correctional agencies and legislatures that quality visitation reduces recidivism (Kupers, 1999). For instance, Florida’s 1999 Statute 944.8031 reads as follows:

The Legislature finds that maintaining an inmate’s family and community relationships through enhancing visitor services and
programs and increasing the frequency and quality of the visits is an underutilized correctional resource that can improve the inmates’ behavior in the correctional facility and, upon an inmates’ release from a correctional facility, will help to reduce recidivism.

We know that prison visits help to reduce recidivism and this is supported by research (Ohlin, 1954; Holt and Miller, 1972; Kupers, 1999). Jacoby and Kozie-Peak (1997) found that mentally-ill prisoners benefited from a higher quality of life after release if they had quality visitation, supporting the findings of Bonta et al. (1998) which showed that the major predictors of recidivism are the same for mentally-ill prisoners and for those without a mental illness. Research has also indicated that prison visits helps prisoners adjust to the prison environment and to the broader social world after they are released from prison (Casey-Acevedo and Bakken, 2002). It is with these points in mind that we argue that prison authorities ought to facilitate prison visitation rather than continue enacting obstructionist policies which make the process unnecessarily difficult.

**CONCLUSION**

We have shared the personal observations of our group of visitors. If you were to ask the prisoners being visited, we are sure they would have their own observations. As professors of criminology, in many ways we owe them a debt of gratitude, as they schooled us on prison realities. These realities can be shared and this sharing may improve prison conditions by promoting volunteer visitation, as well as highlighting impediments to family visits, medical care, poor nutrition and lack of appropriate preparation for release. In a more profound sense, like Kafka’s (2002) “Hunger Artist”, these men have taught us humility, patience and to appreciate what freedom we may have.
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS


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Dr. Preston Elrod received his Ph.D. in Sociology from Western Michigan University and currently serves as Professor in the Department of Safety, Security, and Emergency Management at Eastern Kentucky University where he teaches courses on juvenile justice, crime prevention and school safety. Among his published works are studies on citizens’ attitudes toward the death penalty, juvenile justice policy development, public attitudes toward electronic monitoring, the effectiveness of interventions for juvenile probationers and the experiences of adolescent jail prisoners. He is the co-author of Juvenile Justice: A Social, Historical and Legal Perspective, second edition (2005). Dr. Elrod is the former Co-Director of a model school-based delinquency reduction program. He has worked in juvenile justice as a court intake officer and as the supervisor of a juvenile probation department. He is involved in a variety of community activities and serves as a prison visitor, Co-director of a community delinquency prevention project and is a member of the Executive Committee of the Madison County Delinquency Prevention Council. His present research focuses on school crime and victimization.
The relative paucity of academic discussion concerning the education of state and federal prisoners in the United States can be traced to a large extent to the tendency of scholars to subsume education within the more general rubric of programming. This is not to say that education is not recognized as an important, even vital element in addressing prisoners’ abilities to develop and maintain skill sets that will enable them to return to society and remain there as productive members. Indeed, studies have shown that recidivism rates inversely correlate with levels of education (Nagelsen, 2004). The specifics of the process itself however, the manner in which educational programs are designed, funded and made available to prison populations, remains one of the least examined areas in related disciplines.

The situation is exacerbated by fiscal constraints, often imposed by legislatures and prison administrations that routinely eliminate any program or service that could remotely be construed as “coddling” prisoners, especially when the subject is framed as a zero-sum proposition that posits opportunities for prisoners as antagonistic to those of society. As Johnson (2003) describes the attitude, “[n]othing constructive could be done for prisoners”. Pell Grants for prisoners were rescinded in 1994 for precisely this reason and this left prisoners, often wards of the state, at the mercy of those who incarcerate them for their rehabilitation. The passing of time has only served to aggravate the problem as a look at the recent data shows that educational programs in prisons across the country have been gutted, and prisoners that I speak to regularly tell me that they are spending more and more time locked in their cells with little to do.

If few educational programs exist to provide statistical reliability, then academic discussions of their philosophical significance and their existential relevance remain speculative. Given these institutionalized failures, research into the intellectual development of prisoners, leaves only one option, the writing produced by the prisoners themselves.

While teaching in a postsecondary program at New Hampshire State Prison for Men in Concord, I validated how writing relates to – and has an impact on – the cognitive development of the particular writer. It was particularly evident in the prison environment because the men and women spend so much time isolated from the real world. My introduction to the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons affirmed the connection between that development and the structured, written expression of thought as an
indicator of an evolutionary process, both social and academic (Nagelsen and Huckelbury, 2007). My experiences eventually led to a project that took me to prisons across the United States to interview prisoners whose work had been chosen for publication in a book dealing with prison issues and incarcerated writers. Each of the writers had vast experience with prison and the use of writing as a tool for sanity, for healing and for building autonomy in a world where little exists. The contributors had also previously won a PEN Prison Writing Award. As the subsequent book illustrates, the men and women who write from prison often demonstrate an astonishing potential that could benefit from a structured learning environment, one that concomitantly validates their self-worth, and directs and encourages a talent that could be of practical benefit (Nagelsen, 2008).

Any serious study of education inside prisons today must therefore include a close reading of the written work produced by the prisoners themselves, frequently self-directed but always an expression of personal growth. A warning however is in order, as Johnson (2002: 294) reminds us: “[t]o compete for the attention of prisoners, programs must appeal to their self-interest in direct and immediate ways”. Writing does precisely that, which is why it can at least partially serve the same laboratory function as the classroom.

By putting pen to paper, prisoners find an immediate route to self-expression. Editorial feedback, whether from the staff at the JPP or in mainstream periodicals, validates their work and brings them into contact with men and women on the outside. By allowing this form of self-directed exploration, both educational achievement and social fluency advance, contrary to the resentment often fostered when tedious or boring programming is forced by staff “recommendations” or viewed only as a means to an end. Writing is an educational experience that continues to provide benefits beyond the classroom.

In the current climate of rising costs and political animus, writing by prisoners becomes in large measure the only available vehicle to counter the stultifying existence they encounter daily. Education and writing in particular, opens the doors to a closed world, providing prisoners with voices that have previously been silenced. The academic discourse around the necessity for educational programs in prisons should be of vital concern. It is in the best interest of prisoners and the community that we educate men and women who will be returned to society so that they can contribute in productive and meaningful ways.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Nagelsen is Director of the Writing Program at New England College in Henniker, New Hampshire, where she has taught for twenty-four years. She is an essayist and a fiction writer as well as the author of two writing manuals. She teaches first-year courses as well as advanced essay writing courses such as the art of the essay and content based writing. She also teaches in the Criminal Justice program where her course focuses on teaching students about prison from the point of view of prisoners. Her most recent published fiction can be found in the fall 2005 edition of the *Henniker Review, Tacenda, Bleakhouse Review* and in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* Volume 14(2), an issue addressing aging in prison. She is a frequent contributor to the *JPP* and is currently Associate Editor. Susan is the editor of an anthology of work by incarcerated writers entitled *Exiled Voices, Portals of Discovery* (2008) published by New England College Press. The book features thirteen incarcerated writers with an introduction to each written by Nagelsen and is being used as a textbook in courses focusing on criminal justice issues.
RESPONSE
What We Have Continued to Exemplify
Jon Marc Taylor

When Justin Piché requested that I write the response to this issue, a revisitation and update, on the theme of education on prisons, I was paradoxically flattered and melancholic. After nearly three decades of incarceration with the concomitant isolation from the mainstream of society, I feel more and more the forgotten soul, the “crazy aunt kept in the basement” so to speak. It thus is reaffirming personally to be remembered and reassuring professionally to be recognized for the career of arduous and persistent work obtaining an education and striving to educate others. My depression arises out of taking measure of how much has been lost over the intervening years. Sadly, I fear, what I achieved cannot be repeated from where I exist today.

Yet there is hope. The hope that burns eternal in the human soul and as Andy Dufresne in The Shawshank Redemption (1994) proselytizes: “hope is the most crucial thing in prison to keep from going mad being overwhelmed by the endless systemic repression of regimented prison life”.

When Justin’s packet arrived from that exotic foreign land of Ottawa, Canada – hey, after twenty-eight years of maximum security imprisonment, a trip to the regional hospital is a drive through a safari park of verdant farmlands and strip mall hamlets – shipping all the manuscripts for the forthcoming issue, the institutional mailroom had withheld all but the cover letter and the draft of the issue’s introduction. In the myriad of maddening policies, this state penal system limits envelope enclosures to five items / pages beyond actual correspondence. This is simply another example of many (e.g., the prohibition of receiving free books even directly from distributors or publishers, the denial of stamps as enclosures, the refusal of prepaid correspondence courses and so on) restrictions continually creeping into prisoners’ lives to further isolate them from the outside world. Some of us learn to live and even struggle to grow within these needless confines, but many, if not most of the newer “fish” simply do not and learn the hopelessness of the situation that the system wishes to inculcate via the bludgeoning of ever more pedantic restrictions.

After reading Justin’s letter and introduction piece, I so wanted to contribute to this issue. Having long ago grown beyond the trap of being upset by the obtuse enclosure policy, I was not emotionally bereft but
nonetheless disappointed that I would not be able to contribute to the journal that published my first (circa 1989) academic-quality article. Then an epiphany of sorts.

As I read through the introduction manuscript I kept recognizing familiar prior contributors. They were old friends of a sort, having never met but within the synapses of our minds, I know them though for their erudite prose, insightful and critical contributions to the now recognized field of Convict Criminology. I found myself nodding my head as I read through Justin’s literate “Why?”, I pondered, “shouldn’t I contribute my voice even with systemically imposed limitations, using the very repressions as a cogent example of what we all face from one degree to another?”

My response to this issue is thus: BRAVO! As I wrote my response to the 2004 issue (Taylor, 2004), which I was honoured to co-edit with Professor Howard Davidson, we have learned to fight the good fight. Encouragingly all but Richards and possibly Beck are new contributors to me. Bravo my brethren for voicing your insights from the ever more cloistered compounds. As this response so dramatically evinces, the struggle for education is ever more arduous and thus more crucial than ever.

From just reprising the introduction I have grown more appreciative of what our Irish brothers achieved and exampled via their struggles as conveyed by Laurence McKeown (2001: 148). As Charles Huckelbury (2004: 33) has so clearly outlined, the end result of education presents the system with the dichotomy of a socialized (i.e., rehabilitated) citizen but also a person that can cogently “begin to question our subjugation and treatment”. No wonder society is schizophrenic in its philosophy of prisoner reintegration. Teach them enough to successfully facilitate their lives amongst the bourgeoisie and the “uppity” prisoners to ex-cons then challenge the system as a whole. Of course we must forebear the obvious revelation that such behaviour is the very exercise of citizenship in a free society and is infinitely preferred over the backlash of the recidivistic criminal act or wanton affliction of terroristic hopelessness.

All the obstacles to overcome are very real and more numerous today than when I took my first semester of classes twenty-six years ago. All the reasons for education and expression in prison are more necessary today than they have ever been. The numbers of prisoners in the carceral state of America has grown to be the largest in shear number and per capita in the world, and have by that critical mass become a social class unto themselves. It is in the short-term peace and long-term economic interests
of society to reintegrate, to recapture these souls into the mainstream of the social order, rather than continue to shun them into a neo-Mad Maxian world of peripheral and predatory existence.

The *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* and this particular issue continues to make the case. If only to speak truth to power. If only to mark the line in the proverbial sand. These voices refuse to poetically go into the good night without a fight. This issue and all the issues of the *JPP* are critical to the “common body of knowledge” that if not only today, one day, will be among the lanterns held by the few good men and women that will have helped to guide us out of the darkness of the prison-industrial complex. And if not, then heaven will have known, we did indeed learn to fight the good fight.

Bravo.

**REFERENCES**


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**PRISONERS’ STRUGGLES**

Fighting Prison Censorship:  
An Interview with Paul Wright  
*Seth Ferranti*

*Prison Legal News* is a 48-page monthly with a circulation of nearly 6000 that has published more than 200 issues since its inception in May 1990. This makes *Prison Legal News* the longest running prison publication in US history. The publication can be found in prisons across the nation, as well as in public libraries, Ivy League law schools, judges’ chambers, and even in the offices of prison wardens and correctional officials. *Prison Legal News* has broken dozens of stories whose legal and political reverberations have been felt on both sides of the razor wire. For prison issues and news from the inside, the publication is cutting edge. It stays on top of legal decisions that affect prisoners and their cases, prisoner’s rights and censorship issues. It reports on cases, educates prisoners about their rights, and at the same time is also an example of prisoner’s rights to information and the press.

The newsletter was started from inside by convicted murderer turned jailhouse lawyer turned prisoner rights advocate, Paul Wright. Wright, who did 16 years in the Washington State system after a botched robbery of a cocaine dealer which left the dealer dead, started writing the newsletter from inside after being subjected to the alienating, arbitrary, brutal and dehumanizing environment of prison. He felt the need for circulation of information about what was happening in different prisons amongst prisoners. *Prison Legal News* provided this information. It has been a constant battle for Paul. He has fought prison censorship since the jump, filing over 20 lawsuits in an effort to curtail prison officials from banning the publication in American prisons. He has done some very important First Amendment lawsuits around the country that have exposed the fears prison administrators have about prisoners having and sharing information about their cases and the conditions they are subjected to.

Since his release in 2003, Paul has continued to publish *Prison Legal News*. He has expanded it in fact, setting up a website with an extensive legal archive on prison related issues. He has also been speaking at conferences and seminars on the state of American prisons. The hard hitting content of his publication has caused tons of controversy amongst prison authorities. Paul paid the price for publishing the newsletter during his incarceration, as prison officials retaliated against him and tried to intimidate him into not writing for or producing the publication. He was
never told he could not write, but he was subjected to all types of arbitrary
and discretionary decisions that affected his routine and status in prison,
including having his material confiscated, being transferred, thrown in
the hole, and facing disciplinary sanctions for bogus incident reports
– all this because of his writing! Paul persevered and lived through the
unrelenting pressure the prison officials put on him. Now he is out, still
fighting the system and still fighting prison censorship. I sat down with
Paul and here is what he had to say:

Seth Ferranti: What is Prison Legal News about?

Paul Wright: We’re a small publication, but we’ve always had an influence
that is pretty far out of proportion to our readership. We’re targeting
people who are doing something behind bars and policy makers as well
as opinion makers on the outside. There are 2.3 million people locked up
in America. We’re the only publication that covers detention facilities.
That is a crying shame.

Seth: Why have you taken it upon yourself to challenge prison
censorship?

Paul: No one else will! Or else people do, but it makes little sense to
publish a magazine if your target audience cannot read it. The reason
we are censored is because it is the information prisoners need to have
the most. The sad thing is that few, if any other publishers who pay lip
service to the notion of free speech, actually care enough about their First
Amendment rights or those of their readers to do anything when their
rights are violated.

Seth: Describe the prison administration mentality for violating prisoners’
First Amendment rights.

Paul: They act with total impunity and are pretty much not accountable
to anyone, so they are free to violate the First Amendment rights of
prisoners and publishers alike. There is no downside to doing it for them.
They usually get away with it and occasionally when they do not they are
just back to square one. At worst, the tax payers are out some money for
the damages and attorney fees.

Seth: In prison culture today, it seems like prisoners are less willing to
fight for their rights. Why do you think this is?
Paul: Because it mirrors non-prisoners as well, where everyone is demoralized, beat down and defeated. They do not think they can fight for their rights and win. It has to do with American culture where people have no concept of loyalty to anyone or anything beyond themselves. Part of it is that the government is fairly powerful and ruthless in crushing any opposition. Prisoners tend to know this firsthand.

Seth: What are prison administrators so scared of?

Paul: An ignorant and uneducated class of prisoners is a lot easier to manage and manipulate than an educated and politically conscious one, which is why publications that are political or aimed at any kind of legal knowledge or education, like PLN, get singled out for censorship.

Seth: Do you feel like a crusader, why or why not?

Paul: Yes and no. No, because in many respects I think the American prison and jail system is so bad that if people knew what was going on things would improve. On the other hand, I think many people, even if they know, don’t care. Hence, I feel like it is a crusade to bring change about in spite of the unpopularity of the cause.

Seth: Why have the prison presses and magazines stopped when there are more prisoners now than ever before?

Paul: Apathy and indifference are hard to combat. Illiteracy is a real killer for magazines too. One of PLN’s strengths has been that none of its staff has ever had a background in professional publishing. If we had then we would have probably never started the magazine since in theory we should not exist. Other problems with why prison publications have pretty much gone under have been political infighting in some cases and the bigger issue is financial. There is little money in publishing a magazine aimed at prisoners, their family members and advocates. To do a decent job requires full time, professional staff and that requires money. PLN started out with a budget of $50 and an all volunteer staff. We are now at a $450,000 annual budget, six full-time employees, plus work study students and volunteers.

Prison Legal News is a vital and necessary publication for prisoners in America and the world at large. They print the decisions, cases and news that the mainstream media won’t print. They keep prisoners, their
loved ones and those in the criminal justice and legal fields abreast of
current situations and what is happening right now in prisons worldwide.
To battle prison censorship is a very righteous cause. It is one that Paul
Wright has embraced within the system and now on the outside. His
efforts should be recognized and commended.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seth Ferranti is the Gorilla Convict writer. He founded www.
gorillaconvict.com from the penitentiary, while serving a 25 year
sentence as a victim of America’s misguided War on Drugs. Incarcerated
since 1993 at the age of 22, Seth has grown into a man behind the fences.
He has not let his imprisonment stop him from publishing two books
– Prison Stories (2007) and Street Legends (2008) – and hundreds of
articles in magazines like Don Diva, Feds and Street Elements. His
Dream: Free Enterprise”, appeared in Volume 10(1&2) in 1999. He has
also published on websites like www.urbanhooksource.com and www.
A Crip and a Skin Head within arm’s reach is a situation that would usually have us all on edge – but this was a false alarm. Rather than sizing each other up or staring each other down, they laughed and joked like old friends. Serving a range of prison terms, hardcore felons all, we endeavoured to break new ground. Choosing to work on our dispositions towards violence, we volunteered to participate in an innovative workshop.

North Bay residents Alice Waco and Ann Boone are part of a small group of dedicated activists who are determined to offer incarcerated people a new direction. Regularly making the trip to the California Correctional Center (CCC) in Susanville, located hundreds of miles away, they facilitate workshops in their Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP).

Beginning at the infamous Attica Prison in New York in 1975, AVP is now practiced in 45 states and 25 countries on six continents. Rwanda has codified the process into their post-genocide justice system and the Australian school system incorporated it into their charter. At the Delaware Correctional Center, Delaware’s largest prison, a three-year cumulative study reveals AVP produced an 11.5 percent recidivism rate.

Alternatives to Violence is relatively new to this northern-California prison community, home of two huge state prisons and a small federal facility, dubbed Prison Town USA. But the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) is no stranger to the concept. Waco, the AVP coordinator, is quick to share warm anecdotes about the workshops at San Quentin (SQ). The previous warden fully supported the process, but they were denied access during Gray Davis’ tenure as governor. “Davis kicked us out the prisons”, recalled Waco, shaking her head. But the Schwarzenegger administration, with a better record on corrections than his predecessor, has allowed AVP back into the crisis-laden CDCR. Lamenting the fact that SQ’s new warden has not allowed the AVP group to return, Waco promotes responsible behaviour by not harbouring new hard feelings.

Now the Bay Area faction of AVP-California have their sights fixed on Prison Town USA. “We have been doing most of our work in California”, said Waco, whose group facilitates AVP workshops at numerous CDCR institutions. “For the last two and a half years… we have regularly been coming to Susanville”.

Carving a Non-violent Path
Eugene Alexander Dey
While most self-help groups in the CDCR are faith-based, conflict resolution takes a different approach. Unlike 12-step programs, anger management does not emphasize higher powers. The AVP Manual, an evolving treatise, recognizes a “spiritual power is inherent in humans”, but the process empowers “people to lead non-violent lives through affirmation, respect for all, community building, cooperation and trust”.

Having been in prison for the last decade, violence has become a permanent fixture in my life. Though I am alleged to pose a threat to society due to my lengthy rap sheet, the real threat is the corrupting influence of the nation’s violent prison system. Scores of fights, stabbings and riots dominate the mind’s eye. The only “segregated” system in the country, the agency is plagued by a myriad of systemic problems. A 70 percent recidivism rate is fuelled by issues of untreated addiction that co-exist in high number with mental ailments. These conditions are exacerbated by dozens of racial and geographical gang rivalries – generational intolerance being the norm.

Skin Heads and Crips do not enter AVP workshops inclined to be friends. With conflicts stayed due to a practice of reluctant tolerance, peace is always temporary. Away from the pressures of our peers, however, we are given a rare opportunity to relax. Often for the first time in our lives, we can interact with historical enemies in a secure part of the facility. Twenty-two hour workshops spanning three days, exhaustive exercises and role plays keep the workshops moving. Prisoners being stubborn, uncooperative and suspicion bound, the first few hours are tough. As facilitators we endeavour to break the ice. Getting to know prisoners from different ethnic groups is the necessary first step.

During a February workshop, the first at CCC’s Lassen Facility since the summer of 2007, the participants were tentative. Racial melees and numerous stabbings made our job as facilitators even harder. But difficulty is the nature of a prison workshop and we are up to the challenge.

Everyone is welcome to attend the basic course. The long range goal is to train prisoners to become “inside” facilitators. According to the AVP Manual, “anyone who really wants to be a leader can learn to be one”. However, these next two levels, “advanced” and “training for facilitators”, are offered only to those who display the characteristics of a potential leader. It is a struggle. Due to numerous lockdowns throughout 2006 and 2007, a three to six month training period took me well over a year to complete. At a facility with roughly 1,000, I
am one of only six facilitators. With the next group looking forward to completing their training, the waiting list is long.

Producing prisoners less inclined to commit violent crime is a trifecta of “wins” for self, system and society. Holding enormous potential, it remains a popular program. At some point, AVP must be one of the penological pillars on top of which rehabilitative reforms are founded. Waiting patiently for that day to arrive, I just take my recovery one workshop – and riot – at a time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eugene Alexander Dey is a prisoner at California Correctional Center serving a life sentence for a non-violent drug offence. A freelance writer, successful jailhouse lawyer and dedicated activist, Dey has won three writing awards from PEN America Center. He also has numerous pieces in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* and regularly contributes to other publications. In a college career spanning twenty years and hundreds of semester units, Dey has an application for a Bachelors degree in sociology pending at Sacramento State University. With four Associates degrees, including two from Lassen Community College and Coastline, Dey has been asked to take a lead role in writing a proposal for Feather River Community College to codify post-secondary college education across the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. To see more of his work, please go to www.myspace.com/eugenedey. You can write Eugene at the following address:

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On the Politics of Book Giving
books2prisoners Ottawa

Books2prisoners Ottawa is just one of hundreds of groups in North America who send books and other reading material into prisons and jails. Prison and jail conditions are sometimes akin to deprivation chambers, as numerous prisoner writings in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* attest. We think access to reading and educational material is extremely important in making it through the experience of imprisonment. We often receive letters from those to whom we have sent books, and they express how much receiving and reading books helps them survive inside. We send books as a sign of solidarity.

Yet books2prisoners Ottawa is not a charity. We are not motivated by some notion of salvation for us or for the prisoners. Instead, we are interested in tearing down the walls that stand between prisoners and those outside who have not yet been caught up in the criminalizing machine that is “criminal justice” in North America. In this regard, an equally significant part of what we do is organizing events that try to educate the general public about the politics of imprisonment. We are alarmed by the latest “get tough” move in criminal justice policy by the Harper Conservatives in Canada towards mandatory minimums, more prisons, detention and rendition, and support of and assistance in torture. With limited resources we attempt to let people know that these kinds of prison-intensification programs can be struggled against, and are being struggled against by folks inside and outside. We do not think more “humane” prisons and jails are desirable or even possible because prisons and jails are about practicing and perpetuating violence.

We are a small book sending and prisoner solidarity crew, but sometimes more good work gets done in smaller affinity groups than bigger, unwieldy organizations. Our books are received by donation and sometimes we buy prisoners a book if it is something specific like an astrophysics text. Funds are raised for mail-outs through organizing benefit concerts and through pay-what-you-can books sales. Via regular mail, we send books to individual prisoners in Canada and the United States. In addition to individual letters, we sometimes send larger requests — upwards of a thousand books — through Corrections Service of Canada (CSC) to federal prisons. Even though CSC has an explicit education mandate, many CSC prisons do not have libraries or educational programming. This is appalling. The issue is even more disconcerting in provincial jails and detention centres that do not have educational programming. Reconciling our abolitionist politics and our liaising with
CSC is not always easy, and we are trying to come up with ways to be even more autonomous.

There are many other groups that go by different names – BooksthruBars, BooksforPrisoners and so on – and not all groups share the same politics. A group in Boston focuses only on sending books to women inside prisons. There is a group in Oregon that runs out of a closet in a mechanic’s garage. There are groups in Indiana and Texas that have gigantic computer systems for keeping track of who sent what, where and when, which move thousands of books every week!

The book sending movement actually finds one of its roots in the prisoner solidarity efforts of the anarchist black cross (ABC) network. Books2prisoners Ottawa can trace its beginnings to ABC prisoner solidarity work being done in Montreal in the late 1990s.

More books2prisoner and prisoner solidarity groups pop up in Canada every month. Groups have recently started up in Regina, Winnipeg and Toronto. At the 2008 anarchist book fair in Montreal, different books2prisoner groups from Canada met for the first time to discuss how they operate and how they can work together on various projects. While all the groups operate autonomously, a national list serve was created to communicate about common concerns. At a broader level, whether it is folks organizing inside or outside, we are all struggling against bloated and corrupt bureaucracies, and we do not want to emulate them in any way.

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Prisoners on Prison Education
UN Special Rapporteur on Education

THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON EDUCATION SEeks TO HEar FROM PEOPLE IN OR FORMERLY IN DETENTION ON THEIR EXPERIENCE AND VIEWS ON THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN DETENTION

The Special Rapporteur on Education, Mr. Vernor Muñoz Villalobos (Costa Rica), has chosen to present to the United Nations Human Rights Council a report on the right to education for people in detention. The report is to be presented in June 2009. The aim is to clarify the content of the right to education in places of detention, to identify those with the principle responsibility for its implementation and to highlight the most notable challenges faced in that implementation. It also seeks to gather examples of innovative approaches to date, lessons learnt and to offer recommendations as to how implementation might be improved.

The Special Rapporteur wishes to hear from men, women and children in or previously in detention from all global regions, including those with disabilities and those without; from different races, religions, cultures and sexual orientation; from those in closed and/or open institutions; those who have chosen not to or have been unable to undertake educational programmes (formal and/or informal) and those currently enrolled; and from those with little or high levels of education.

If you are or have been in detention and wish to express your views or detail your experiences on the provision of the right to education in detention, the Special Rapporteur would welcome hearing from you. Please send your comments and all relevant information by way of postal mail to:

Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education
P.O. Box 1245-1007
Centro Colon, Costa Rica

or by e mail to: vernormu@yahoo.es

Alternatively, if you are in a position to distribute this request for information to people in detention, the Special Rapporteur expresses his gratitude and thanks in advance.

It is requested that comments are returned no later than 31 January, 2009.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE MANDATE OF THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

A Special Rapporteur is an independent expert appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council. S/he is usually called upon to examine, monitor, advise and publicly report back on human rights situations in specific countries or on a specific human rights theme. Mandate-holders serve in their personal capacity and do not receive salaries or any other financial compensation for their work. This independent status of the mandate-holders is crucial in order to be able to fulfil their functions impartially.

The mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education was established in 1998 and has been renewed regularly since that date, most recently in 2008. His specific role is to:

[g]ather, request, receive and exchange information from all relevant sources, including Governments, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, including non-governmental organizations, and other concerned stakeholders, on the realisation of the right to education on and obstacles limiting effective access to education, and to make recommendations on appropriate measures to promote and protect the right to education.

The right to education was first formally pronounced in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its article 26 stated:

Everyone has the right to education... Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Since that date, the human right to education has been reiterated numerous times, particularly in United Nations human rights treaties. Its meaning and content has been developed over the years, and it is now generally recognized that Governments have the responsibility to ensure that education in all its forms and at all levels should exhibit the following interrelated and essential features: a) availability; b) accessibility; c) acceptability; and d) adaptability. The aim of the Special Rapporteur is to contribute towards the recognition, respect, protection and fulfilment of these responsibilities.
As with many Special Rapporteurs, Mr. Vernor Muñoz Villalobos organizes his work around three main activities:

a) Thematic reports to the Human Rights Council: Each year, he focuses on a specific theme of his mandate. Topics addressed to date include the right to education of girls, the right to education for people with disabilities and the right to education in emergency situations. His thematic focus for 2009 is the right to education for people in detention.

b) Country visits: The purpose of country visits is to investigate the situation of the right to education at the national level. During the visits, normally two a year, the Special Rapporteur interacts, amongst others, with governmental and non-governmental actors, including parliamentarians, members of the judiciary, academics, the media and other members of civil society. After each ‘mission’ he presents a report to the Human Rights Council which analyzes the situation of that country vis-à-vis the concerns of the mandate, and offers recommendations to the Government and other relevant parties to improve that situation.

c) Communication with Governments: The Special Rapporteur seeks credible and reliable information on specific allegations of human rights violations on the right to education from a variety of sources, including Governments, non-governmental and specialised agencies, United Nations bodies and individuals. Upon receipt of this information he may decide to address the concerned Governments, and request their comments and observations on the case. These communications together with the replies of the Governments concerned are compiled every year in a report submitted to the Human Rights Council.
BOOK REVIEWS

An Ex-con’s Guide to Getting Ahead in Today’s Society
by J. Blount
Irving (TX): SJM Family Foundation, 52 pp.
Reviewed by Jon M. Taylor

The Ex-con’s Guide to Getting Ahead in Today’s Society is an invaluable resource guide that every released prisoner should have in their pocket the day they walk out of the prison into freedom. Published by the SJM Family Foundation, Inc., it is written by J. Blount, a former federal prisoner who has, as the cliché goes, literally been there and done that!

From the opening page entitled “Tips”, this text is packed with bits of forthright wisdom for soon to be ex-prisoners from the United States such as “don’t believe the hype” of all the horror stories one hears behind bars to “stick with your plan”. While real world suggestions and practical references are offered throughout, the primary emphasis of the guide is to assist the reader with obtaining education and job skills.

This references guide directs readers to specific programs and little known options, including 1200 low-cost and high-value community colleges, tuition free schools and programs, along with multiple nationwide and practical training options. It also addresses the all too important, everyday, how-to issues of personal finance practices, job searching services, voting rights, free medical care options, as well as volunteer and internship opportunities.

The author also shares illuminating and inspiring examples from her own life story. Detailing how she completed close to 30 “free” Independent Study Courses from the FEMA’s Emergency Management Institute, Blount explains how she transferred the continuing Education Units earned to a Credit Banking Service. For a $350.00 fee she received 26 college credits from a state university. As the author boldly writes, “[y]ou do the math!”

For less than $13.50 a credit hour she “was able to use all 26 college credits as electives towards [a] Bachelor degree in management”.

If I have a quibble with the publication it is that it lacks a Table of Contents or Index for quick topical reference, a quirk that will likely be rectified in future editions. Otherwise, soon to be released prisoners, parolees and their family members, as well as professionals in the justice and social service fields will find this guide to be an invaluable reference for planning and addressing the multiple practical needs that the newly released ex-con will experience when returning to society.
Getting Ahead is a readily useable 5 x 8 inch, well laid out 52-page flip guide that every ex-con should have. Every pre-release program should include this guide as part of its curriculum. It is available from the Information Research Network (P.O. Box 167365 / Irving, TX 75016) for $10.00 postage paid, with bulk discounts readily available. Get this guide and get a head start.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

In 1994, the Democratic Congress and President Clinton eliminated Pell Grants for prisoners. Within the next few years, most states followed suit and either totally eliminated or gutted their prison education programs. Prison and jail education programs beyond General Equivalency Diplomas (GED) and Adult Basic Education (ABE) became, and remain, a rarity. Of course, prisoner illiteracy rates remain sky high. All that changed is that prisoners seeking a higher education can no longer seek one within the prison system. The other alternative is correspondence courses. While there are books on the market discussing correspondence courses, they are all aimed at non-prisoners, virtually all of which require some degree of internet access.

*Prisoners’ Guerrilla Handbook to Correspondence Programs in the United States and Canada* (third edition) (PGHCP) is written by Missouri prisoner Jon Marc Taylor who has successfully completed a B.S. degree, an M.A. degree and a Doctorate by mail while imprisoned. This book was initially published in the late 1990s. The second edition was published by Biddle Publishing in 2002. The publisher retired in 2007 and Prison Legal News took over the publishing of the book as the first title in its new book line.

With the expert assistance of Editor Susan Schwartzkopf, the third edition of PGHCP has been totally revamped and updated. Many colleges no longer offer correspondence courses, having gone totally to online distance learning courses. This book offers a complete description of more than one hundred and sixty programs that are ideal for prisoners seeking to earn high school diplomas, associate, baccalaureate and graduate degrees, and also vocational and paralegal certificates. In addition to giving contact information for each school, Taylor includes tuition rates, text book costs, courses offered, transfer credits, time limits for completing course, whether the school is accredited, and if so by whom, and much, much more. What makes the book unique is Taylor’s first hand personal experience as an imprisoned distance learning student who has a basis for comparison and knows how to judge a college correspondence course from the perspective of an imprisoned student who does not have e-mail access or who cannot readily call his instructor.
Book editor Susan Schwartzkopf brings a masters degree in education and twelve years of experience teaching immigrants English language skills to the project. The introduction by Vivian Nixon, the executive director of the College and Community Fellowship which advocates for the inclusion of released prisoners in higher education, further bolsters the masterful expertise and experience brought together in this book.

Taylor also explains factors to be considered in selecting an educational program and how to make meaningful comparisons between the courses offered for the tuition charged. No money to pay for school? Taylor covers that too. Diploma mills? The book addresses how to recognize and avoid them. Any prisoner seeking to begin or continue their education behind bars will find this to be an invaluable road map. This is not just the only book on the market to address the needs of prisoners seeking a higher education while locked up—it does a fantastic job accomplishing its goal. It saves the prospective student countless money and time researching the best course for their needs. Cost is $49.95, free shipping. Contact:

Prison Legal News  
2400 NW 80th St. # 148  
Seattle, WA 98117  
phone: 206-246-1022  
website: www.prisonlegalnews.org

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Serving a life sentence in prison, Peter Collins knew he had to come to terms with the consequences of his actions and so dedicated himself to working for positive social change. Since the late 1980s, when the official position of the Correctional Service of Canada was that intravenous drug use, tattooing, and sex were illegal – therefore not happening – until today when prisoners continue to be denied access to clean needles and syringes, Peter’s tireless efforts to defend the health and human rights of prisoners have often led to strained relationships with prison officials, undermining his efforts to get paroled. While in prison, Peter earned an honours diploma in Graphic and Commercial Fine Arts, as well as a certification as a Frontier College ESL tutor. He is an Alternatives to Violence Project facilitator and Peer Education Counsellor. Peter was instrumental in setting up a Peer Education Office in his prison and has advocated on behalf of fellow prisoners on issues ranging from health access to employment. He also wrote a book helping prisoners prepare for successful and safe release into the community. Regularly donating his time, expertise, and artwork to numerous charities and social justice initiatives, Peter’s dedication has contributed to improved health and safety in the prison system, and by extension, in the community at large.

Peter Collins

Since August 10, 1975, Prison Justice Day (PJD) has been observed annually in Canada. The movement began in Millhaven Institution to commemorate “the first anniversary of the death of Eddie Nalon, who had committed suicide while in solitary confinement in Millhaven’s SHU [Special Handling Unit]” (Gaucher, 1991, JPP Volume 3, p. 98). Over the years, PJD has been instrumental in promoting the human rights of prisoners including the right to freedom of speech (see www.prisonjustice.ca).
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