

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/unlocking-potential/prison-education-as-a-pathway-for-reentry>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

As a leader of a correctional department, how do you see postsecondary educational programs vis-a-vis the mission of corrections?

All of our programming, including education, is critical to prisoner reentry. Part of the mission of the Department of Corrections is to prepare inmates for successful reentry back to the community. Probably the most essential components of reentry are sobriety, housing, employment, and family unification. Postsecondary education is a definite advantage in reentering the job market and achieving success after reentry to society.

What is the role of correctional departments in supporting postsecondary education programs provided by institutions of higher education?

In a correctional facility, although security is our paramount concern, security should never be an end in itself, but rather a means to creating an environment for education and reform of our population. By providing the appropriate safety and security, we foster an environment that is conducive to learning and that allows inmates who want to learn the ability to do so. Teachers of the incarcerated have chosen to follow a path that is extremely demanding; they are asked to fill the roles of parent, social worker, and psychologist for those in their care. As correctional professionals, we understand that our job is to support them and their efforts to educate the inmate population.

How do you achieve correctional staff buy-in and support for college programs?

We start with our mission statement that reads, The mission of the Department of Corrections is to protect the public by operating safe, secure, and humane correctional facilities. That mission is realized through supervision, proper classification, and appropriate treatment of offenders, and by providing services that promote successful reentry into society. Staff are taught this mission statement in the academy and it is reinforced throughout their career. We have evolved from being just jailers, regulated to turning keys and keeping inmates locked in. Our staff understands and accepts the importance of reentry and that programming is a successful part of the reentry process. The inmates success is part of our success. Early in my career, I learned that good programming is good security.

What concerns, if any, do you have as a correctional administrator with college programs in multiple facilities?

Whether the programs are at one or several facilities makes little difference. I don't have any real concerns about the programming itself. Providing it does present some challenges. There are obvious security concerns with bringing teachers and materials into facilities, arranging class schedules around other mandated programs. We clearly are not on a normal academic calendar. In the community, the primary focus of a student is his or her postsecondary education. In a correctional setting, inmates move through facilities, our residential community resource programs, and into parole. They physically relocate on their path to reentry. Their primary concern is their reentry. Education is only a part of that, not necessarily a primary part.

Is there a role for technology in the delivery of college courses in the correctional environment?

Historically, technology has not been accepted as a resource for inmates. However, as technology develops and the control of that technology improves, it becomes more accessible in a correctional setting. For example, while inmates today have access to computers, they are not permitted access to the Internet. As control and monitoring of the Internet improves, in the future, we would probably allow more access for inmates to the Internet. We have recently entered into a contract with a vendor that provides services through kiosks. The services provided initially will be for banking, grievance processing, and the purchase of music, but we hope to eventually expand to providing educational materials and services through the kiosks as well.

Do you think college education in prison is a scalable concept for states and departments of corrections?

Do I think it's scalable that I think we can have it at multiple facilities? *Virtually*, yes. In time, there is no reason why we cannot offer courses at the postsecondary level to virtually the entire inmate population. I emphasize *virtually*, because there are some people that are too disruptive to be in that kind of setting. Access across the state? I don't think that's something that would be prohibited. We have it in several of our institutions already. When you begin talking about public funding, the way that we are doing it in New Jersey is probably the best way to do it. That's to have it funded by outside entities, be it grants, benefactors, or anyone that's willing to contribute.

What are some successes you've seen in NJ that have come from providing college education to inmates?

We have more than 600 inmates currently involved in college programs. We have had two former inmates who have achieved the [Harry S. Truman Award](#). That says a lot. That was achieved without using taxpayers' direct funding. I think the model that we have works very well.

How do you think providing college education to people in prison will help impact their lives post release?

Programming and education are critical to reentry. Education will help an inmate attain employment. Employment is a major step in preventing an inmate from returning to criminal behavior.

The [Unlocking Potential: Perspectives on Education in Prison](#) blog series explores postsecondary education in prison and its benefits during and after incarceration through the unique experiences and insight of former students, educators, nonprofit leaders, corrections officials, reentry experts, and more.

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