

An inmate's research: Insights on receiving a college education while incarcerated

When I first came to prison, I realized that idleness was my enemy. I did not want to waste the next 20 years of my life, so I quickly became very motivated. However, the question remained-what to do? College programming (specifically, the master's degree program in sociology offered at the Eastern New York Correctional Facility) gave me the opportunity to do something productive with my life. A more important and unexpected outcome was that it also changed my life.

When I finished the program, I wanted to give something back. I decided that, given the current negative political climate surrounding inmate college programming, the best way to support the program would be to undertake research substantiating the benefits that post-secondary education offers offenders. Self-efficacy Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her ability to get things done. People with a strong sense of self-efficacy believe that events are within their control, rather than attributable to fate or chance. As a result, this type of person tends to be less likely to take negative actions in stressful situations.

Further, recent research suggests that inmates with a strong sense of self-efficacy are less likely to be affected by anxiety and depression, and are more likely to undergo "positive" change, to handle release into the community smoothly and to have lower recidivism rates.

My research, therefore, examined the relationship between self-efficacy and post-secondary education by looking at the self-determinacy (desire to change) of inmate students. I believed that inmates who attend college and graduate out of a desire for personal change would have higher self-efficacy scores than inmates who either did not attend college or failed to graduate.

However, the resulting analysis revealed that it is desire to change, rather than an interaction between change and successful college programming, that significantly influences inmate self-efficacy.

Post-secondary education was, however, found to be the type of *voluntary* programming most sought by self-determined inmates. Although an association between college programming and self-efficacy could not be verified, this relationship emphasizes the importance of the availability of college programming as part of the rehabilitation process. The best proof possible... The abolition of inmate post-secondary education is currently a popular sound bite for aspiring politicians. However, there are strong arguments supporting its availability.

Many inmates pursuing post-secondary education begin with less than a high school diploma. Therefore, those who ultimately complete college (with an associate, bachelor's, or master's degree) spend between 6 and 10 years working extremely hard, on their own initiative, to reach their academic goals. This type of commitment alone should illustrate college programming's value as a rehabilitative tool.

On a more personal note, college programming has kept me busy and productive, has given me career choices and has allowed me to plan for the future. Most of all, it changed my life by giving me hope.

⁽¹⁾This article is based on a presentation delivered (via videotape) to the 46th annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, November 1994, Miami. Please direct any correspondence to Edward Parker, c/o Philliber Research Associates, 28 Main Street, Accord, New York, 12404.