This chapter describes methods for funding community programs in prison in the context of national and international political economy of mass incarceration.

Localizing Prison Higher Education

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Every dollar invested in the education and training of incarcerated people returns five dollars in savings to state coffers (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013). The benefits of such investment are also naturally expansive. Returning more job-ready men and women to our most troubled communities helps brake the ghetto-to-prison revolving door that has helped to build the largest prison complex on earth (Page, 2004; Wacquant, 2000). Among the 720,000 men and women who leave prisons and jails each year in the United States, more than two thirds are reincarcerated within three years after release, and over three quarters after five years from release (Cooper, Durose, & Snyder, 2014). Every person who leaves prison with an associate’s degree is approximately 75% more likely to avoid reincarceration, less likely to victimize others, and more likely to be able to support families inside the legitimate economy and thus to break the generational cycle of incarceration that plagues up to 70% of the children of imprisoned people (Christian, 2009; Parke & Clarke-Stewart, 2002; Patillo, Weiman, & Western, 2004; Schirmer, Ashley, & Marc, 2009). If we bracket the charged (and, for the past 40 years, politically exploited) question of who “deserves” rehabilitative services and take a purely utilitarian view of the prison-education policies that best secure public safety, reduce tax rolls, and help poor communities regain their human capital, there is no viable argument against higher education for incarcerated people.

But we cannot afford to be unrealistic about such questions. When, in a primary debate, Governor Rick Perry drew cheers for his authorization of 234 executions in Texas, he tapped into the vein of penal populism that since 1973 has effectively turned much of U.S. criminal justice policy and practice away from offering detached, research-based arbitration of the greatest good for the greatest number in dealing with lawbreakers and into a state-sponsored apparatus of public vengeance. The opposition evoked by Governor Andrew Cuomo’s 2014 proposal that New York
State help fund college-in-prison programs (Bakeman, 2014) demonstrates that antiprisoner sentiment confronts even modest moves toward making prisons into truly correctional institutions. Politicians opposed to such funding called the proposal “incredible,” “shocking,” and “insulting” to law-abiding students, and “simply beyond belief” (“Republicans,” 2014). Yet such programs—funded by the states and the federal government—had operated nationwide just two decades earlier. Until 1994, when Bill Clinton signed legislation making prisoners ineligible, one tenth of one percent (0.1%) of all Pell grants funded more than 350 college-in-prison programs across the country. Yet the opposition that Cuomo’s modest proposal evoked suggested that such funding had never been imagined by anyone, anywhere, at any time. As welcome as state and federal funding would be, it will continue to come and go with the political winds. (Penal populism and mass incarceration have enjoyed thoroughly bipartisan support.) The issue, however, is not whether the public wants to see a reduction in prison populations that cost taxpayers $75 billion a year (Schmitt, Warner, & Gupta, 2010). The touchy issue is what we do with prisoners while they are incarcerated. Even conservatives recognize that we are paying too much for incarceration numbers, far beyond what is required by public safety (Reddy & Levin, 2013). Over half the states and the justice department are revising mandatory sentencing; many are developing drug and mental health courts that sentence offenders to treatment rather than prison time. Others, aided by the 2008 Bush administration Second Chance Act, focus on reentry: putting in place the supports that ex-offenders need in order to stay out of prison. The political third rail in this case is what happens to incarcerated people while in prison—during years when a vocal part of the public believes, and prison-invested politicians have claimed, that prisoners have one proper occupation: to suffer state-sponsored punishment.

Based upon the evidence of the value and savings to all citizens of prison higher education, yet realistic about both an economy that now depends upon the tax-funded make-work project of excess incarceration (the nation’s third largest employer across all sectors and levels of criminal justice work; Wacquant, 2009) and current antiprisoner state and federal politics, this chapter looks at one effort to create a new paradigm for who is responsible for incarcerated Americans while serving prison time. This is a paradigm taken in part from European models but adapted to the American penal landscape. I’ll begin with an outline, in very broad strokes, of penal practices in Northern Europe.

Adapting European to U.S. Penal Practice

Nordic prisons base policy and practice on normalization: If prison time is to prepare for reassimilation into life outside, this can best be achieved by making life inside as much like life outside as possible. Part of this normalization is achieved by connecting prisoners with the local community.
outside prison walls: public-school education is provided not by prison-service employees but by local educators who agree to work inside; medical personnel also come from the outside—with the qualifications and standards expected by the public—rather than, as we do in the United States, having the prison hire the least able of medical providers (Chang, 2012); the same is true for clergy, vocational trainers, and the like. Nordic prisoners establish and maintain contacts with people in the world outside, where they can continue supportive contact when they leave prison (Directorate of Norwegian Criminal Service, n.d.; Larson, 2013; Pratt, 2013). This is possible because Nordic incarceration rates are extremely low—about 10% of those in the United States—and prisons are small (Walmsley, 2011). Prisoners can be housed in or very near the communities they come from. The doctors, teachers, and clergy they meet inside are those they will meet as neighbors and mentors outside.

We know that continued contact with family and home communities is a primary factor in motivating ex-offenders to stay out of prison (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2011). Yet the United States practices geographic exile as part of its punishment regime. Prisons have been offered as make-work gifts to rural, predominantly White communities, whose political representatives are the first to attack college programs that not only threaten prison longevity by reducing recidivism but also threaten to redraw districts determined by counting prisoners into local populations, even though U.S. prisoners cannot vote. It is as unrealistic to imagine prisons inviting in local service providers with whom ex-offenders might maintain constructive relationships outside as it is to expect incarcerated families—who are overwhelmingly poor and urban—to travel regularly to visit their loved ones upstate. European-style normalization is simply unrealistic given the geographic realities of U.S. incarceration. What we can adapt from European models is the localization of responsibility for prison service, reform, and higher education, and we can do this anywhere we find a viable geographic proximity between a prison, a community college, and other institutions of higher education.

The Idea in Practice

In 2009, with funding from a private philanthropic foundation, I began organizing a community college program, leading to an associate’s degree granted by Genesee Community College (GCC), inside Attica Correctional Facility, in western New York. The Attica-Genesee Teaching Project (AGTP), with full tuition paid by the foundation to GCC since January 2011, has supported GCC faculty who offer four courses per semester enrolling 15 incarcerated students each. Though I teach today at a private, four-year institution, my first full-time appointment was at a two-year campus of the University of Wisconsin system. There I witnessed firsthand the organic relationship that community colleges bear to the communities
where they stand, the commitment of community college administrators to local service, and the hard work contributed by community college faculty who provide the first step up for the majority of those first-generation students who seek to improve their condition. Though Attica has a well-earned reputation as a hard, punishing institution, the facility offered a willing superintendent, deputy superintendent for programs, and academic education supervisor, all working under a state commissioner who was a tireless advocate for higher education inside. Over half the Attica population of 2,200 men sent written notice of interest in the program (contrary to popular belief that incarcerated people who seek education inside are the exceptions), and 880 of these held a high school diploma or GED. The then-president of GCC wanted to renew the legacy of providing college courses inside Attica that he had initiated in 1972—after the bloody uprising of 1971—and had been forced to end in 1994 when Pell grant funding was withdrawn. He assigned the AGTP’s day-to-day operations, curricular planning, and faculty recruitment to a dean so efficient in her work that the program expanded after its first two years—from offering three courses to twelve men each, each semester, to offering four, fifteen-student courses—without increasing its total annual budget. The bulk of this savings came from appealing to publishers for donations of the required texts.

What impressed me most powerfully over the course of two years of meetings, e-mails, and telephone calls involved in creating the AGTP was the depth of goodwill and breadth of vision among all of these people and offices. However myopic and mired in antiprisoner resentment and assumptions the conversation at the state and federal levels might be, at the local level, among prison and education administrators and academic staff, there was virtually no need to make the case for such a program. Goodwill and responsible, practical thinking existed in the key places where it was needed. Faculty who teach in the AGTP keep asking to teach at Attica again because the men there are so thoroughly engaged, prepared, and hardworking (both despite and due to having no access to the Internet, a library that hardly deserves the name, and no calculators). Yet none of the conversations leading to the now—three and a half years of successful curricular offerings would have taken place had I not brought the promise of full tuition funding. The question in my mind was whether it might be possible to recruit enough goodwill to obviate the need for so much funding support. Was it possible to create a program that pooled enough institutional volunteerism to reduce costs to a level that the local community might viably assume? Could local actors create a program independent from both the political winds that buffet state and federal funding (a theoretical independence, since no such funding is available), and from charitable foundations that not only deal with an excess of need and the instability of capital markets but whose very missions have become entwined with venture capitalist thinking and may be as volatile (Jacobson, 2013; “Venture Philanthropy,” 2013)? A consortium model might not “normalize” prison experience for those inside, but
it might normalize linkages between local public and private educational institutions and the prisons where local people earn their salaries and wages, and thus from which they support the local economies upon which institutions of higher education rely. The aim was to act toward prisons as a community responsibility, detached from shortsighted state and federal political debates that feed on the same ugly populism that fueled the creation of mass incarceration in the first place.

In January 2014, the Mohawk Consortium College-in-Prison Program (MCC) began delivering two 12-student sections of English 101 and one 13-student class in introductory biology at Mohawk Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in central New York. The MCC will offer one summer course and three courses in the fall. The consortium institutions are Mohawk Valley Community College, Colgate University, and Hamilton College. The total first-year budget will be $30,000—half the cost of holding one person in prison in New York State for one year (Henrichson & Delaney, 2012). The savings to taxpayers, if numbers from past experience hold and the program reduces the recidivism rate for these 37 men by 75%, will be $1,887,000 for each year after their release. (This is savings in repeat incarceration costs alone. It does not include the tax contributions these men might make once employed, nor the savings realized by reducing the likelihood that their children will go to prison.) To break the fixed-sum, either/or thinking that pits the price tag to educate imprisoned people against the struggles of free-world students to meet rising tuition costs, this savings could potentially provide 157 free-world students free tuition to complete an associate’s degree. Like the AGTP, the MCC exists because of the engaged professionalism, flexibility, and creativity of local actors: a community college president with a deep sense of community service; community college and private college staff, administrators, and faculty; and the correctional facility’s very supportive superintendent, deputy superintendent for programs, and academic supervisor. The key to maintaining such low program costs and thus high potential social return is local, private college contributions of faculty under the community college’s program of “dual credit.”

The Administrative Key

Many community colleges offer dual credit to high school students. Qualified high school teachers (holding a master’s degree or beyond) can offer courses in which students earn both credit toward their high school diplomas and credits toward an associate’s degree or, eventually, a four-year degree. The student pays no added tuition, since high school faculty teach these classes. Mohawk Valley Community College (MVCC) is the administrative and curricular home of the MCC. MVCC administrators agreed to extend the dual credit model (though only one form of credit is offered) to incarcerated students. Community college tuition costs are zero for all correctional-facility students enrolled in courses delivered by faculty not
normally employed by MVCC. Deans at Colgate and Hamilton have each agreed—as an act of good community will and public engagement—to offer one course release each year (on full salary) to a faculty member willing to teach in the MCC. The labor contract covering MVCC staff stipulates that MVCC faculty have first choice of any courses offered as part of the MVCC curriculum. When they do choose to teach in the MCC, full community-college tuition costs must be covered. The $30,000-a-year budget is, in effect, a contingency fund to cover those courses that MVCC faculty choose to offer, as well as books (though the textbooks for the first semester were donated after appeals to publishers, with the cost of one title covered by a single, private donation). Paper and other personal supplies are purchased by prisoners from the prison commissary—a policy that the prison administration imposes in order that imprisoned people invest in their own education. In theory, the MCC could operate with a much smaller budget than it does now. Costs will fluctuate from semester to semester as MVCC (on the cost side) and private college faculty (on the savings side) feel more enthused about and seek to get involved with prison teaching. (Oversight of the program, curricular planning, and arranging course logistics are handled in conversation between the head of academic education at the facility, the head of community education at MVCC, myself, and others as called for.) Yet the funding now provided to the MCC by a private foundation is so modest that, after a pilot grant period of four years, such funding might be assumed collectively by the participating institutions or by local granting agencies.

A Historic Moment

Prison higher education can change and literally save the lives of incarcerated people. Educators and administrators should also be mindful of the enormous service that local action yields to the nation at large. The prison and jail population outnumbers our fourth largest city, but it is spread across the same broad map that community colleges serve. When 60% of Black male high school dropouts will see the inside of a prison cell by age 35 (Western, 2006), and we know that higher education can help imprisoned people not return to prison, the service that community colleges provide as a matter of course is the service most desperately needed on what many today consider the most pressing civil rights front of our time. Faculty and administrators who go into prisons to help incarcerated people change the trajectories of their lives are among today’s most vital, frontline civil rights workers.

This is a historic moment—one in which we are offered the chance to dismantle the state of de facto penal apartheid that sees whole cohorts of poor people of color swept up into prisons and jails, largely for nonviolent drug crimes perpetrated at higher rates among middle-class Whites (Alexander, 2010; Knafo, 2013). Equally important, the singular
genius of community college expertise in quietly engaging and creating synergies between local resources and people of all races, classes, and political persuasions can remove the debate on prison higher education from the decidedly low level of politicized and highly emotional and misinformed demagoguery that rages whenever discussion of state or federal funding for prison higher education arises. Community colleges, which serve the same communities supported by a tax base fed by the salaries and wages paid to prison workers, and where formerly incarcerated people are most likely to seek their education—while sitting beside the children of prison workers—are the natural, honest brokers for new thinking about the relations between prisons, institutions of higher education, and the community at large.

Today, community colleges link education and the economic health of local communities at the same time that elite colleges and even four-year state universities are retreating from this role, since these institutions are chasing more out-of-state tuition dollars in order to make up for loss of state funding (Woodhouse, 2012). These increasingly noncommunity institutions draw students from and send them home to other regions, states, and nations. Community colleges are not only the natural but the most experienced and able institutions for transforming a state and national problem—mass incarceration—into a local conversation about who is responsible for the rehabilitation, education, and training of prisoners whose presence in the community, though behind prison walls, brings state and federal dollars to local communities. With their frontline experience in the work that distinguishes American higher education from higher education in other developed nations—making higher education accessible to all citizens, of any age or condition, at affordable costs—community colleges can also help elite, private institutions break through the walls and razor wire of high tuition and obsessive attention given exclusively to competitor institutions far from the local community. Elite institutions need community colleges today in order to see the way to true (that is, locally networked and sustained) public service. High-priced private colleges too often serve what is, in effect, an exclusionary purpose: seeing that the children of some rich people meet and bond with the children of other rich people and keep themselves at the front of the line for the most desirable jobs and careers (Espenshade, 2013). In its knowledge of and commitment to serving the local community—including the prison workers whose tax dollars support the same roads and schools and civil infrastructure that elite-institution faculty and administrators and students rely upon every day—the community college can show neighboring institutions the way to treating and remedying, locally, the same state and national prison crisis that many elite college and university faculty build careers by analyzing, theorizing, and critiquing. Community colleges are the natural venue and the wise counselors through which elite college faculty who write and theorize about inequalities driven by race and class can actually address inequality on its most pressing front
(rather than simply pursuing diversity through rainbow representation of the children of the affluent among non-Whites).

The Mohawk Consortium makes clear that by working with the practical expertise, the administrative creativity, and the commitment of community colleges to local service, elite colleges can be engaged in paying back some of the debt they owe to the prisoners who are unlikely ever to appear on their campuses, but who also bring the infrastructure-supporting tax dollars that elite colleges need in order to serve their affluent clientele. The financial savings realized by states that host such collaborative efforts might then be committed to lowering the costs of public higher education. This would give the public reason to support and cheer on prisoners’ academic success rather than reason to resent it. The result: Educated prisoners return to their communities as contributors to the health, safety, and economic stability of troubled neighborhoods; all aspiring students get a better shot at an affordable education; inequality on the ground is reduced.

Everything described here has been done and can be practiced more widely. The political will is all that’s wanting—or the intelligence to do these things below the political radar, where sensible people, bound by the community college’s mission of public service, can see the complementarity of their aspirations, their needs, their debts, and a more equally flourishing human future.

References


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