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OVERCOMING ISOLATION: A COLLEGE PROGRAM CHALLENGES PRISON CULTURE THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

JIM EARHART*

INTRODUCTION

In fall 2007, Saint Louis University (SLU), a Jesuit institution, decided to spend its limited prison program funds on a fifty-one-year-old man with thirty-six years left to serve on his sentence. To a citizenry looking to get the most for its hard earned dollar, this might seem wasteful. Why allocate resources to a criminal who, even if reformed, may never see the streets again? The answer lies in a purpose, a scripture passage, and a vision. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, saw the purpose of education as enabling people to “do more and do it better” with the *more* meaning “paying attention to means in discerning what is ‘more conducive’ to achieving the end desired.”¹ The prison program’s foundational scripture, Matthew 25:31–45 reads, “I was in prison, and you came to Me . . . to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even to the least of them, you did it to Me.”² The university’s vision is to change prison culture through direct engagement with the prison population. The university’s decision to support a prison education program was not made in a fiscal vacuum. Money has to come from somewhere, and the absence of any broad public effort to fund higher education in prison necessitates funding from private sources. A university seeking private grant money must provide potential donors with justification for their eligibility requirements and selection process. How does a university choose to invest limited resources in a way that fits its own mission, meets the demands of donors, fills the needs of prisoners, insures the goodwill of the correctional institution, and provides a benefit to society?

An analysis that compares only dollar costs of prison operation and education to dollars savings of reduced recidivism yields incomplete and

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1. RONALD MODRAS, *IGNATIAN HUMANISM: A DYNAMIC SPIRITUALITY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY* 49 (2004).

2. *Matthew* 25:31–45 (New American Standard translation).

misleading results. Many, if not most, of the costs of incarceration are not quantifiable. The same holds true for measuring the benefits of inmate higher education to society. Society must get beyond the “bottom line” mentality. The only way to increase the effectiveness of prisons and the probability of releasing good citizens is to change a prison culture in which the norms of behavior are destructive to a civil society. The aim of Saint Louis University Prison Program is not simply to educate inmates but to nurture good citizenship, motivate its student-inmates to action, and provide a variety of platforms to engage and change the toxic culture that governs America’s prisons.

While economic costs and benefits of rehabilitation will always be issues, the primary focus of this essay will be the factors that determine the inmate’s attitude toward rehabilitation. The position taken is that inmate apathy is the single greatest impediment to successful rehabilitation, and only programs that engage and overcome the causes of apathy will succeed in reducing recidivism. Before addressing the central issue it is first necessary to demonstrate the limits of cost-benefit analysis in assessing the efficiency of dollars spent on higher education in prison. This is followed by a description of the causes, types, and levels of isolation experienced under the current prison system; the contribution of isolation in shaping prison culture; and the apathy it breeds in the prisoner. Next is a description of the college experience, especially one containing a moral element, and the profound effect it has on the inmate immersed in prison culture. Finally, there will be examples of what can happen when student-inmates are motivated to take action to improve the prison community, the potential change in prison culture, and the benefit this can have in all communities.

QUANTITATIVE COST AND BENEFITS

According to the Vera Institute Cost Benefit Analysis Report *The Price of Prison: What Incarceration Costs Taxpayers*, the annual average cost per inmate in Missouri is \$22,350.³ The Missouri Department of Corrections reports that this level of spending achieves a recidivism rate of 36 percent.⁴ Historically, average recidivism rates for inmates who participated in college

3. CHRISTIAN HENRICHSON & RUTH DELANEY, *THE PRICE OF PRISONS: WHAT INCARCERATION COSTS TAXPAYERS* 10 (2012).

4. Lucas Bond, *Do You Think Missouri Has a Problem with Recidivism?* CONNECTMID MISSOURI.COM, <http://www.connectmidmissouri.com/news/story.aspx?id=605551#.UvgrBymbIU> (last updated May 22, 2014).

programs are reported to be between 0 percent and 16 percent,⁵ compared to the national average of greater than 40 percent for all released prisoners.⁶

Figure 1: Annual Savings per 100 Releases⁷

\$22,350	(annual incarceration cost)
x 40	(national recidivism rate)
\$894,000	(direct recidivism cost per 100 general population annually)
\$22,350	(annual incarceration cost)
x 15	(college participation recidivism rate per 100 releases)
\$335,250	(direct recidivism cost per 100 college program group annually)
\$894,000	
-\$335,250	
\$558,250	(annual saving to the taxpayers created by college programming effect)

The \$558,250 amount in Figure 1 reflects incarceration savings only. Estimates for *total* yearly cost of a typical criminal range from approximately \$430,000 to \$46,000.⁸ Applying even the lowest figure, \$80,700 in 2007 dollars,⁹ the difference between the 40 percent and 15 percent recidivism rate will yield an annual savings of \$2,017,500 per 100 releases.

Figure 2: Total Savings per 100 Releases¹⁰

\$80,700	(total annual cost of typical criminal)
x 40	(average general recidivism rate)
\$3,228,000	(total recidivism cost per 100 general population annually)
\$80,700	(total annual cost of typical criminal)
x 15	(college participation recidivism rate)
\$1,210,500	(total recidivism cost per 100 college program group annually)
\$3,228,000	
-\$1,210,500	
\$2,017,500	(annual saving created by college programming effect)

5. See Jon M. Taylor, *Post-Secondary Correctional Education: An Evaluation of Effectiveness and Efficiency*, 43 J. CORR. EDUC. 132, 132–33 (1992) (analyzing several studies on rates of recidivism for graduates of higher education prison programs).

6. *Id.* at 133.

7. See, e.g., *id.* at 136 fig.1.

8. *Id.* at 137.

9. $46,000(.846)/.482 = 80,738$. U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES 463 (2009).

10. Taylor, *supra* note 5, at 136 fig.1.

These figures support the effectiveness of higher education in prison. The data used in computation were drawn from verifiable studies and the results are reasonably accurate. As is often the case with statistics, however, accurate does not equal meaningful. Prisoners who self-select to participate in rehabilitation programs already have a greater likelihood of success upon release.¹¹ Chief Probation Officer Douglas W. Burris and job and family specialist Clark Porter of the U.S. Probation Offices, Eastern District of Missouri, say they can “often predict who will be able to find a stable job. They are those who took advantage of vocational training and other classes available in prison.”¹² According to the Missouri Department of Corrections, “54 percent of people without full-time work return to prison, while only 14 percent with a full-time job do so.”¹³ The 14 percent figure is almost identical to the college programming recidivism rate.¹⁴

Every inmate who enrolls in college classes not only self-selects, he or she usually puts in considerable effort to make it happen. The reduced number of universities offering correspondence courses means limited degree choices and requires careful research to make sure credits earned are transferable. Competition for openings in the few on-site college-in-prison programs favors the most motivated and best prepared.¹⁵

Rather than concentrating on dollars spent or saved, it makes more sense to take a look at the mindset of prisoners who are not proactive in their own rehabilitation, what causes that apathy, and what has worked to change the mindset of inmates in the past.

QUALITATIVE COSTS OF INCARCERATION

One of the most significant non-quantifiable costs to the inmate is deterioration of mental health. Prison culture is an assault on the emotional well-being of inmates. This section will address three contributing factors— isolation, loss of power, and hopelessness—and the impediments they pose to successful recovery and rehabilitation.

11. See Elia Powers, *Out of Prison—Now What? Reentry Programs Help Those Returning to Community Life*, ST. LOUIS BEACON (Mar. 28, 2010), https://www.stlbeacon.org/#!/content/19233/out_of_prison_now_what_reentry_programs_help_those_returning_to_community_life.

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

14. Taylor, *supra* note 5, at 133.

15. When it was announced in 2007 that Saint Louis University was offering an on-site classes to fifteen inmates at Bonne Terre prison, over 300 inmates requested applications. Jesse Bogan, *St. Louis University Program in Mo. Prison Helps Set Minds Free: Inmates at Bonne Terre Earn College Credit in Prison Education Program Sponsored by SLU*, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, Dec. 28, 2011, available at http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/st-louis-university-program-in-mo-prison-helps-set-minds/article_a06b052a-064f-5ef4-bce9-d60036f1ac59.html.

Society, after centuries of experimentation on how to deal with criminals, has accepted isolation as a form of punishment.¹⁶ The 1994 Omnibus Crime Bill added an exclamation point when it allocated \$8 billion for prison construction.¹⁷ This encouraged states to enact “truth-in-sentencing” laws that not only lengthened sentences for many crimes but also limited parole eligibility.¹⁸ Missouri, for example, passed laws demanding that those convicted of violent crimes complete 85 percent of already enhanced sentences before being eligible for parole.¹⁹ The state applied for and received a portion of those \$8 billion, constructed six new maximum-security men’s prisons between 1995 and 2003, and promptly filled them.²⁰ A high percentage of the men who enter these facilities will leave someday, but only after an extended stay in an “isolated, oppressive, and heavily regulated” system that creates a “volatile” and often violent culture.²¹

The seeds of apathy are planted early in the prison experience. If there is any message the Department of Corrections wants to get across to a new inmate, it is that the staff is in control. All personal property is stripped away, and the most basic decision-making is taken out of the recent arrival’s hands. The staff dictates what, when, and where the inmate eats. They assign where he lives and with whom he lives. The staff issues what the inmate will wear. The prisoner is subject to be drafted for work assignment, again, where and when staff decides. This strictly regimented control may last from four to ten months, but it establishes the basis of the inmate-staff relationship and hammers home the limited control the prisoner now has over his own life. A prison’s culture “is shaped by the individual characteristics of the inmates, the guard’s treatment of the inmates, and the management philosophy of the administration.”²²

Relations among inmates are affected by how staff interacts with inmates. A 1992 study by Sarah Ben-David identified five types of staff-inmate

16. MICHEL FOUCAULT, *DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH: THE BIRTH OF THE PRISON* 8–9 (Alan Sheridan trans., Vintage Books 2d ed. 1995) (1977).

17. *HR 3355 – Omnibus Crime Bill – Key Vote*, PROJECT VOTE SMART, http://votesmart.org/bill/2666/omnibus-crime-bill#.UvfMJHddW_I (last visited May 22, 2014).

18. ELSA CHEN, *IMPACTS OF THREE STRIKES AND TRUTH IN SENTENCING ON THE VOLUME AND COMPOSITION OF CORRECTIONAL POPULATIONS* 35 (2000), available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/187109.pdf>.

19. *Missouri Sentencing Laws*, MO. SENT’G ADVISORY COMM’N, <http://www.mosac.mo.gov/page.jsp?id=45441> (last visited May 22, 2014).

20. Prisons were constructed in Bonne Terre, Bowling Green, Cameron, Charleston, Jefferson City, and Licking, Missouri. *Facilities Locator*, MO. DEP’T OF CORR., <http://doc.mo.gov/Facilities.php> (last visited May 22, 2014).

21. Justin Brooks, *How Can We Sleep While the Beds Are Burning? The Tumultuous Prison Culture of Attica Flourishes in American Prisons Twenty-Five Years Later*, 47 SYRACUSE L. REV. 159, 163 (1996).

22. *Id.* at 164.

relationships “based upon the actions and attitude of staff members.”²³ One is the Punitive Type, which is characterized by staff that “avoids communication with inmates, demands submission and obedience, and punishes even slight misbehavior.”²⁴ In my nineteen years in Missouri’s maximum-security prisons, I have witnessed this type of management with slight mitigation of the communication factor.²⁵ Barry C. Feld reported in a 1981 study that under this management style, “inmates become alienated and the ‘inmates isolation hindered them from cooperating with one another in the institutional adjustment or in resisting exploitation, while predatory violence reinforced inmates’ negative view of one another.”²⁶

The isolation spoken of here is in addition to the prisoner’s separation from society. Within the prison itself, housing units and wings within housing units are compartmentalized through controlled movement, separate recreation periods, and staggered meal times. An inmate may meet like-minded and supportive peers at a religious service or a job site, but he must return to his living quarters where a predatory subculture may hold sway. Imagine an eighteen-year-old man convicted of a crime in 2013 and that received a thirty-year sentence. Under the 85 percent law he will have to serve *twenty-five years* before becoming eligible for parole. That is seven years longer than he has lived, almost a lifetime and a half. He enters a culture where he faces hostility from his keepers and the threat of violence from his housemates. He has no hope that any rehabilitative effort or progress on his part will be given consideration until the year 2038.

At this point, the inmate definitely has a decision to make concerning his physical well-being. What are the best relationships to establish with other inmates that will keep him safe? If an inmate has a gang affiliation, he may simply land under its protection, along with picking up the duties its leaders demand he do to keep in good standing. An unaffiliated inmate will often attempt to ingratiate himself with others or become indebted to a subculture within the established order. In either case, immediate physical danger may be averted, but by its very nature, obligation limits the sense that the inmate has control over his destiny, especially since the interests of the group leaders will always come before his own. The place the inmate finds in the prison culture will define his identity among his fellow prisoners. This in itself is another layer of isolation.

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.* at 165–66.

25. Anyone wishing to get a feel for the punitive type of administration can view the movie, *The Last Castle*, starring Robert Redford. Focus on the warden, played by James Gandolfini. This character is institutional thought personified, which prevails despite the efforts of well-intentioned staff. See *THE LAST CASTLE* (DreamWorks Pictures 2001).

26. Brooks, *supra* note 21, at 165 n.43.

Under these circumstances, one of the most important factors in securing a sense of emotional well-being is the level of connection an individual maintains with people on the outside. The evidence I use to support this claim is primarily experiential and anecdotal. During the early years of my incarceration, it was not unusual to visit another prisoner's cell and be greeted by a virtual shrine to his family and friends. On the wall or at the end of the bunk would be a construction of cardboard cluttered with photographs of his loved ones. One man, (Z.), at the old Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City, had one-third of his wall covered with greeting cards and letters he had received. When asked about the display, Z. did not speak of sentimental value, but of the sense of security it provided. If the staff saw that he had this many people on the outside, they would be less likely to mess with him. More strictly enforced fire and safety regulations now preclude such displays—but ask which items an inmate would retrieve first from a burning cell, and photo albums and address books would top the list.

As much as the prisoner needs to know that “somebody loves me” to feel emotionally healthy, there are very practical reasons for maintaining connections outside the prison. Ninety-seven percent of all inmates will be released from prison at some time. Most of these will need full-time jobs if they are going to be successful. Finding full-time employment that pays a living wage is a challenge. Aside from having to explain a felony conviction, “offenders usually come to prison with few work skills, which is a huge disadvantage in this economy. The service jobs that most people out of prison are doing are harder to get now because of the tough job market.”²⁷ Hope for success upon release is very much tied to the hope that a family member or friend has a connection that leads to employment. This factor hits minorities particularly hard. Research indicates that “minorities are still more likely to go to prison for a longer time,” and, “that’s huge in terms of relationships and employment, being away from the community for longer.”²⁸

Time passes, hope fades, control is surrendered, and apathy sets in.

THE IMPACT OF ON-SITE COLLEGE PROGRAMS IN PRISON

Though the idleness imposed on inmates by prison was listed as a significant problem in several studies, it will receive only a mention here. Morris and Hawkins write that “we recognize that we must somehow escape the crippling idleness, lack of training, inhumanity and futility of the mega-

27. Powers, *supra* note 11 (quoting Beth Huebner, associate professor and director of the graduate programs in the department of criminology and criminal justice at University of Missouri-St. Louis).

28. *Id.*

prison which still characterized most state systems.”²⁹ My observation indicates that most inmates *are* active. They find things to keep themselves busy. It is just that most of the activity is an exercise in futility. It does nothing to change the prison culture that oppresses them and little to prepare them for success after release.

The topic is introduced because when Saint Louis University announced its offer of college classes at Bonne Terre Prison in the fall of 2007, I applied because it was a new activity. To be sure, it was the best activity that had come along in thirteen years, but it was simply viewed as something different and challenging to break years of monotony.

At that point in my prison “career,” I had spent eight and one half years at a facility in Jefferson City, all within a 300-yard radius of my cell. The move to Bonne Terre not only reduced that distance to 250 yards, but the outside view was reduced to a ring of repeating, cookie-cutter housing units like my own. At the time of the SLU announcement, I had been a tutor in the prison GED program for about four years, and I was looking for a break in the routine. College was a promising new stimulus. The SLU theology certificate program turned out to be a life-changing experience.

The initial impact came through something very simple. Almost every week the professor required the class to write a reflection paper or essay about the assigned reading. The course material and writing were stimulating and challenging, but what made the most impact were the comments the professor wrote in the margins and under each conclusion. It is too embarrassing to reveal how many times returned homework was removed from its folder so the comments could be re-read, but the reason must be shared.

Earlier, it was stated that once an inmate finds his or her place in the prison subculture, he or she has established an identity. While some subcultures are harder to escape than others, these associations do shift over time. Prison is not devoid of good role models or inmates with good intentions willing to assist someone seeking to break away from the criminal lifestyle. Neither is the prison system devoid of programs aimed at changing thinking and behavior patterns. Inmates who take the classes seriously can and do turn their lives around and become better citizens in the prison community. What does not change is how the inmate is viewed and treated by the staff as a whole.³⁰ A term avoided to this point in the essay is “offender.” The word is printed in

29. Norval Morris & Gordon M. Hawkins, *Attica Revisited: The Prospect for Prison Reform*, 14 ARIZ. L. REV. 747, 757 (1972).

30. See, e.g., THE LAST CASTLE, *supra* note 25 (James Gandolfini’s character, Colonel Winters, embodies the idea that inmates cannot reform. “See, I too share the burden of command. You may not think that I’ve ever set foot on a battlefield, but that’s because you’ve never sat behind this desk. This desk. My men and I are vastly outnumbered. We spend every day behind enemy lines. Because, make no mistake about it, Mr. Irwin, they are the enemy.”).

large red capital letters at the top of the plastic identification card each inmate is required to have clipped to the upper left quadrant of the outermost garment being worn. OFFENDER dwarfs even the inmate number so critical to administrative transactions. A prisoner can be thirty years removed from his crime and twelve years removed from his last conduct violation within the prison, but as long as the inmate is assigned to a bunk in a Missouri facility, the inmate is labeled a lying, manipulative criminal. One graphic example of this attitude was demonstrated after a violent confrontation at the Pontiac Prison in Illinois. “A bitter complaint of the guard force as it came off duty from a riot . . . was that the wicked prisoners were removing their shirts!”³¹ Shirts displayed numbers; faces were useless. Individuality and progress are not acknowledged, only “offendership.” Inmate apathy often results from the futility of improvement.

The comments the professor wrote on the returned assignments had a profound impact because the judgment was based on current effort and merit, not past crime. The initial effect was more emotional than academic. To write something and have the words be taken seriously by someone in authority was affirming and liberating. Just as the inmate needs to know “somebody out there loves me,” as time passes there is an increasing need to know “somebody sees me.” That is what the homework commentary provided, and it had a healing effect.

During the first few months of college classes, emotional need absorbed much of the oxygen in the classroom. The work was challenging, however, and the critical thinking element began to kick in, especially as it was framed in theological thought. Reading Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Schweitzer, Viktor Frankl, and William James opened fresh views and demanded a reasoned reassessment of one’s own values and beliefs. Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living.³² Martha C. Nussbaum writes,

Three capacities, above all, are essential to the cultivation of humanity in today’s world. First is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions—for living what, following Socrates, we may call ‘the examined life.’ This means a life that accepts no belief as authoritative simply because it has been handed down by tradition or become familiar through habit, a life that questions all beliefs and accepts only those that survive reason’s demand for consistency and for justification. Training this capacity requires developing the capacity to reason logically, to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, correctness of fact, and accuracy of judgment. Testing of this sort frequently produces challenges to tradition.³³

31. Morris & Hawkins, *supra* note 29, at 750.

32. PLATO, *APOLOGY OF SOCRATES* 85, 87 (Michael C. Stokes ed., trans., 1997).

33. MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM, *CULTIVATING HUMANITY: A CLASSICAL DEFENSE OF REFORM IN LIBERAL EDUCATION* 9–10 (1997).

Inmates inured to prison culture, with its violence, hopelessness, futility, oppression, and apathy, can be likened to the people Socrates saw as “living passive lives, lives in which, in the most important things, their actions and choices were dictated by conventional beliefs. These beliefs inhabited and shaped them, but they had never made them truly their own.”³⁴ The college program broke into the prison culture and changed the student-inmate’s view of his place within that culture.

The words of Raymond Scott, valedictory speaker at the graduation ceremony for SLU’s theology certificate program describes well the transformative nature of the experience.

In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, verse 35, there is a passage that highlights my experience [of the program]. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink” Personally, I was hungry for achievement, and thirsty for knowledge. Matthew 25 goes on to say, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me.” Before [this program] I was a stranger to myself, to my spiritual self—but not anymore. The professors helped me find my dignity again. I am no longer naked. Indeed they helped clothe me—not only in dignity, but with the sense of self-worth that we all hunger and thirst for The last passage from Matthew 25 reads, “I was in prison and you came to visit me.” What you have done here for us, we who have long considered ourselves “the least of these,”—has had an incredible impact on us.³⁵

The theology curriculum forced the student-inmates to question their beliefs and motives for their actions. The same critical thinking was applied to assessing the belief system and tradition of the prison culture in which they lived. If self-examination led to a reassessment of the self, one final exam paper that was assigned, “My Theology for Christian Action in the World,” demanded that the student-inmate assess his responsibilities in the prison community.

Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist who endured the horrors of the Nazi death camps. He used his time there to observe the behavior of inmates, in particular what attitude was needed to be one of the one in twenty-six who survived the camps. Prisoners who gave up often said, “I have nothing to expect from life anymore.”³⁶ Frankl found that “what was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that *it did not really matter what we*

34. *Id.* at 21.

35. Kenneth Parker, *Finding Christ in Prison*, U. NEWS ST. LOUIS U., Mar. 1, 2012, <http://unewsonline.com/2012/03/01/finding-christ-in-prison/>.

36. VIKTOR E. FRANKL, *MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING: AN INTRODUCTION TO LOGOTHERAPY* 85 (4th ed. 1992).

expected from life, but rather what life expected from us . . . Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly set for each individual.”³⁷ Applying this to the toxic prison culture, student-inmates are charged with and motivated to help others overcome the apathy that shackles them.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Hearst Foundation and the continuing support of other benefactors, Saint Louis University was able to follow the theology certificate program with an Associate of Arts degree program. A key course in the curriculum was a small group communication class which tasked the nineteen students with conceiving and developing a project that would impact the prison community. As individuals, each student-inmate benefited, but “the good community finds a productive balance between individuality and group obligation.”³⁸ A student-inmate organization was formed which now sponsors three projects in the prison: a supplemental GED class held in the education building, tutoring-by-appointment sessions in the library, and a literary journal. These projects are in their infancy but are reaching increasing numbers of men in the general population.

There is other evidence that the benefits of the college in prison reach beyond the classroom. One example is Angola Prison in Louisiana, “historically know as one of the most dangerous prisons in the country.”³⁹ Under a moral rehabilitation program initiated by Warden Burl Cain, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary began to offer “budget-friendly educational programs” featuring Bible classes as well as non-religions courses.⁴⁰ Inmates can earn either an Associate’s or Bachelor’s degree in Christian ministry. In 2011, 111 were enrolled in the program, while 145 had graduated. There has been a positive effect. “Inmate-on-inmate assaults dropped from almost 500 in 1991, before Cain began the moral rehabilitation program, to 60 in 2006,” a decrease of over 85 percent.⁴¹ This demonstrates that even a limited number of participants can have a significant impact on prison culture.

ENGAGE OR ISOLATE?

Central to the punitive penitentiary model is the “notion that prisoners are sent to prison *for* punishment, as opposed to *as* punishment.”⁴² This philosophy, of which the 1994 Omnibus Crime Bill is a part, “undermines any

37. *Id.*

38. RUSHWORTH M. KIDDER, HOW GOOD PEOPLE MAKE TOUGH CHOICES 130 (1995).

39. Roy L. Bergeron, Jr., *Faith on the Farm: An Analysis of Angola Prison’s Moral Rehabilitation Program Under the Establishment Clause*, 71 LA. L. REV. 1221, 1237–38 (2011).

40. *Id.* at 1240–41.

41. *Id.* at 1238 n.129.

42. Brooks, *supra* note 21, at 184.

rehabilitative effort that might be made in prison and creates volatile prison cultures.”⁴³ One provision of the bill, designed as punishment, made state and federal prisoners ineligible to receive Pell grants for college tuition.⁴⁴ If providing construction funds for prisons lengthened the time of isolation for inmates, the elimination of grants deepened the effects of that isolation. After passage of the Omnibus Crime Bill, the number of college programs in prison dropped drastically.⁴⁵ Institutions that were bringing society’s culture into prisons—along with hope, healing, and dignity—were forced to end programs because tuition was no longer available to indigent inmates.

It is self-evident that “by allowing inmates to remain connected to the culture of society-at-large, the prison culture will be more reflective of life outside prison.”⁴⁶ However, a policy of isolation still prevails.

THE ENGAGEMENT MODEL

Saint Louis University has sought innovative ways to bridge the gap between prisoners and society. While its college program is at the core of its efforts, with student-inmates expected to act as role models and ambassadors, the university has established other means of connecting with the wider inmate population at Bonne Terre. With the cooperation of the Missouri Department of Corrections and in partnership with the Missouri Endowment for the Arts, SLU sponsors the Inside Out Speaker Series and various workshops. Speaker Series events are held in the prison visiting room and open to both staff and general population inmates. Guests have included poets, authors, musicians, theater groups, and artists. Prisoners are able to engage with culture—the arts—and the guest engages the prisoners. Workshops, conducted by SLU faculty, are limited to twenty inmates each and topics have ranged from literature and rhetoric to film interpretation and drawing. Many of the same faces appear at different events and a core of devotees outside the associate degree program is developing in the prison. The spirit of these events is making inroads into the prison community.

Returning to the opening question, why did SLU invest its limited funds in a fifty-one-year-old inmate with thirty-six years left on his sentence? I don’t know. He was among a number of long-term and life-without-parole prisoners who were selected to participate in the inaugural college program. I do know that six years later he is employed by the university as the resident teacher’s assistant for the Associate of Arts degree program at Bonne Terre, passing on

43. *Id.*

44. Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 § 20411, 20 U.S.C. § 1070a(b)(6) (2012).

45. Daniel Karpowitz, *Prison, College, and the Paradox of Punishment*, 37 *STUD. L. POL. & SOC’Y* 305, 309 (2005).

46. *See* Brooks, *supra* note 21, at 185.

what he has been given. If the goal is to change prison culture, there is precedence. The Angola Prison program in Louisiana achieved an 85 percent reduction in violence in a facility where 95 percent of the inmates will never leave.⁴⁷ There is something to be said for continuity and for having a vested interest in creating a civil society.

CONCLUSION

Amitai Etzioni writes that it is in community that “we find reinforcement for our moral inclinations and provide reinforcement to our fellow human beings,” and continues that there is “another element to community, crucial for the issues at hand: *Communities speak to us in moral voices. They lay claims on their members.* Indeed, they are the most important sustaining source of moral voices other than the inner self.”⁴⁸

College prison programs are a proven way to engage the inmate population and challenge prison culture. The biggest obstacle to implementing these programs on a scale that matches the size of the problem is the inability of prison inmates to qualify for Pell grants to pay tuition costs.

Society has a choice to make. It can support a policy of isolation that alienates prisoners, frustrates hopes, breeds apathy, and produces high recidivism rates. Or, it can choose to engage the prison population in a productive, meaningful way that fosters hope and leads inmates to *opt* for rehabilitation. One culture or the other—society’s culture or a prison culture—is going to reinforce the moral choices of the inmate. Which do you want it to be?

47. Steve Rempe, *The Saints of Angola*, PRISON FELLOWSHIP (Apr. 22, 2013), <http://www.prisonfellowship.org/2013/04/the-saints-of-angola>.

48. AMITAI ETZIONI, *THE SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY: RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND THE COMMUNITARIAN AGENDA* 31 (1993).

