

Pell Grants and Prisoners

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The states are looking for ways to reduce their prison costs. According to the National Association of State Budget Officers, the states spent over \$52 billion on prisons in fiscal year 2012. Correctional education and vocational training programs have been shown to save money over the long term by reducing recidivism. Controversially, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 specifically made prisoners ineligible to receive Pell Grants meant to make college more affordable to students from low-income families. The act effectively ended federally subsidized college-level education for inmates. However, the U.S. Department of Education recently began allowing postsecondary institutions to receive Pell Grants for distance learning students in federal or state prisons through an experimental program allowed under the law. But this experimental program may be costly and less successful than traditional vocational training programs.



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What Are Pell Grants? Pell Grants provide federally funded monetary awards to undergraduate students based on financial need. The awards are allocated directly to participating postsecondary institutions and then given to students who apply and qualify. Postsecondary institutions can now apply to receive these Grants for prisoners participating in Postsecondary Correctional Education, and more than 200 colleges have already done so. The student must eventually be eligible for release from the correctional facility in their lifetime, meet the financial requirements of the Pell Grant and meet any requirements demanded by the prison and postsecondary institution.

In the 2010-2011 academic year, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) reports, 9.3 million students received \$35.7 billion in Pell Grants. However, the CBO has recommended tightening eligibility. Now that inmates are also eligible to apply for this award for correctional education, the amount of applicants will increase, possibly increasing spending.

Prison Education Programs. According to the RAND Corporation, the average overall cost to house an inmate was \$31,286 per year, and the average annual cost of correctional education per inmate participant was \$1,400- \$1,744. Correctional education programs appear to be well worth the expense. According to a 2013 RAND study:

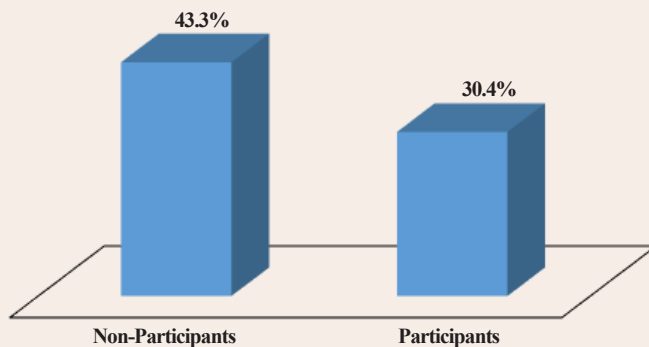
- Inmates who participated in correctional education programs were 43 percent less likely to reoffend than inmates who did not receive this education.
- The average recidivism rate was 30.4 percent for program participants, compared to 43.4 percent for nonparticipants [see Figure I].
- A sample of 100 inmates over three years found correctional education saved \$870,000 to \$970,000 for those inmates alone, because it greatly reduced the recidivism rate.

For every dollar spent on correctional education, taxpayers saved five dollars that would otherwise have been used for reincarceration.

Correctional education is highly accessible to inmates. According to the

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Figure I
Recidivism Rates



Source: Lois M. Davis et al., "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education," Rand Corporation, 2013. Available at: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR266/RAND_RR266.pdf

2005 Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 85 percent of all reporting facilities offered some type of formal education. Many of these institutions offer general adult education classes or programs for general equivalency degrees (GEDs), and the Institute for Higher Education Policy found that 42 percent offer post-secondary education. This form of education can include college, trade and vocational courses. However, vocational training is far more effective in producing employment:

- Vocational training prepares individuals for jobs by giving them specific training relevant to that job, and often results in a certification.
- In many cases, vocational education programs continue to help individuals after release through employment identification assistance.
- According to a 2013 RAND meta-analysis, individuals who participated in vocational programs were 28 percent more likely to get a job than those who did not, whereas individuals who participated in purely academic programs were only 8 percent more likely to obtain post-release employment [see Figure II].

Prior to the 1994 law, many institutions provided vocational instruction from college professors. After this funding was lost, the number of vocational programs offered decreased, and participation fell along with it. Now that Pell Grants will soon be available, advocates hope that inmates will have more security in accessing a wide variety of vocational training programs.

Effectiveness of Inmate Vocational Training. The most effective form of vocational training places emphasis on occupations that are in high demand. This contributes to the individual's likelihood for employment even more

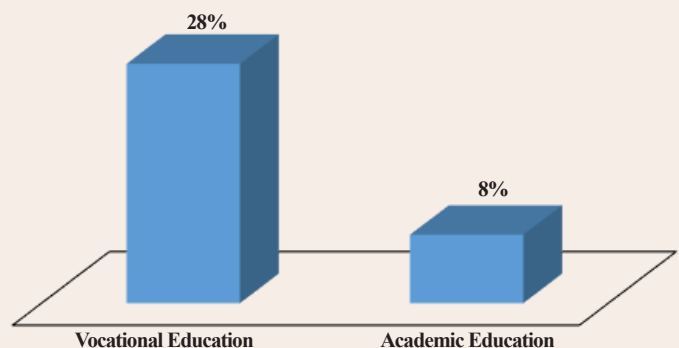
because it ensures that they will be needed in the workforce as soon as they are released. According to a case study by the Urban Institute Justice Policy Center, the state of Indiana utilizes information from the Indiana Department of Workforce in order to find occupations which are classified as "low supply and high demand." The Department of Corrections focuses on providing training for these jobs so that the inmates can become employed quickly after release. While this form of training is effective in ensuring employment, the majority of inmates do not participate in it. In the latest survey from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, only 27 percent of state prison inmates and 31 percent of federal prison inmates indicated that they participated in vocational or job training programs.

Because vocational training is so effective in reducing recidivism and ensuring employment, institutions should create incentives for inmates to participate, such as reducing their sentence for every program completed.

Conclusion. Vocational education has been shown to be extremely effective in ensuring post-release employment. Though academic education also reduces recidivism, vocational students have a higher success rate. Because inmates already have access to some form of academic training or vocational training, Pell Grants are an unnecessary added cost to taxpayers. Instead, inmates should receive funds for targeted vocational training in order to use tax dollars in the most effective and efficient way.

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Figure II
Odds of Gaining Postrelease Employment



Source: Lois M. Davis et al., "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education," Rand Corporation, 2013. Available at: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR266/RAND_RR266.pdf