THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

GOVERNMENT

Can a College Education Solve the Nation's Prison Crisis?

By Kelly Field | DECEMBER 19, 2017

✔ PREMIUM

Nabil K. Mark for The Chronicle

Eric Miller, an assistant professor of communications at Bloomsburg U. of Pennsylvania, has found that "the classroom conversations are way better" in his prison classes than on campus. "These guys always want to talk."

At the center of the SCI Muncy campus, there's a stately stone building with a white bell tower and an American flag. Residence halls dot the grassy quad, and young women wander tree-lined paths between buildings. Inside a classroom, five students are vigorously debating the merits of civil commitment for opioid addiction.

Look past the razor wire that loops under the roof of the education building and the tall fence that encircles the grounds, and this could almost be a women's college.

But SCI Muncy, in Central Pennsylvania, isn't an educational institution. It's a state correctional institution. The students in this classroom wear rust-colored uniforms, not college sweatshirts, and they have to pass through a metal detector to use the bathroom.

The women's prison is part of a federal experiment to test whether providing a free college education to inmates can improve their behavior inside the prison, increase their odds of finding work when they're out, and ultimately reduce recidivism. More than 60 colleges and 7,000 inmates are participating in the pilot, which has opened up the Pell Grant program to state and federal prisoners for the first time in more than 20 years.

For some of the women in this critical-thinking class in late October, opioid addiction is not just an academic subject but a highly personal one. So when Wendy L. Lee, a professor of philosophy at the nearby Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, asks them if states should be allowed to lock up addicts against their will for as long as 90 days, the women are conflicted.

"Ninety days isn't enough," says Autumn, 35, who has been in prison for three years for robbery and aggravated assault. (Prisoners' last names have been withheld at the request of the State Department of Corrections.) "It took me three years of being away from opioids to want to stop."

"Still," she wonders aloud, "is it OK to commit someone for that long?"

Ms. Lee, who affectionately calls her students "the ladies," hopes her class will "equip them with the critical-thinking skills that they can use to make better calls" outside the prison walls. She also has a broader goal: If the pilot is successful, it could persuade Congress to permanently lift a two-decades-old ban on Pell Grants for prisoners.

Is it worth it for the nation to subsidize higher education for the prison population? That's the question this experiment is supposed to answer. The professor and other advocates of restoring Pell Grants to prisoners say it is both the moral and the fiscally responsible thing to do. They point to a 2014 study by the RAND Corporation, which found that every dollar spent on correctional education saves five dollars that would be spent on incarcerating repeat offenders.

But the "Second Chance Pell" program, now in its third semester, has gotten off to a shaky start. Early enrollment numbers have been disappointing. Professors have had to learn (or re-learn) how to teach without technology, relying only on a whiteboard and markers. Colleges have had to adjust to a culture in which "safety trumps every other consideration, including academic ones," as James S. Brown, the dean of Bloomsburg's college of liberal arts, puts it.

Meanwhile, the political climate is threatening. Any plan to extend Pell would face opposition from some Republican lawmakers, who say taxpayers shouldn't be forced to subsidize college for criminals. The Trump administration has already killed four other federal experiments, leaving some supporters reluctant to speak about this one.

Even if it avoids the ax, the Second Chance Pell experiment is set to end in three to five years. Some longtime providers of prison education question the wisdom of creating a host of new programs that could soon disappear.

For Second Chance Pell to work, colleges have to bet on a program — and an educational mission — with an uncertain future. Will we be offering Pell Grants to prisoners in five years? Should we?

Ms. Lee and other professors participating in the pilot say the experience of teaching in jail has been among the most rewarding of their careers. They say the students in their prison classes are more motivated and engaged than freshmen on their home campuses, eager to learn and appreciative of the opportunity they've been given.

Autumn, who already has an associate degree in human services, says returning to college in prison has "helped me remember what life was like on the outside, and that I can do it again."

"And that," she says, tearing up, "means the world."

Second Chances

In the early '90s, higher education had a strong presence in prisons. Nearly 800 college-in-prison programs operated in almost 1,300 correctional facilities. During the 1993-94 academic year, the government awarded Pell Grants to 23,000 inmates, at a cost of $35 million — less than one percent of the $6 billion it spent on the grants that year.

Then, in 1994, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act — a sweeping bill that aimed to be "tough on crime" at a time of concern about violent offenses. The bill's headline items were its "three strikes" policy on repeat offenders and its billions of dollars in funding for jails. But it also cut off state and federal prisoners' access to Pell Grants.

By 2010, there were only 47 higher-education programs in the nation's prisons, and nearly half the states had none at all, according to an inventory by Harvard University's Prison Studies Project. Most of the surviving programs depended largely on private funding. (Some programs, mostly vocationally oriented ones, received modest state and federal support.)

Colleges and prison reformers have long sought to overturn the 1994 ban, arguing that inmates ought to be prepared for productive lives after they are released. In 2015, they won a partial victory: The Obama administration announced it would restore Pell Grants to a subset of inmates through a pilot program that created "experimental sites."

The White House framed the move as part of its broader effort to reduce the costs and consequences of mass incarceration. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with 2.2 million people behind bars. Forty percent of them will return to prison within three years of their release.

"America is a nation of second chances," said the secretary of education, Arne Duncan, in a news release. "Giving people who have made mistakes in their lives a chance to get back on track and become contributing members of society is fundamental to who we are."

The release cited the RAND study's findings that inmates who participate in prison education are 43 percent less likely to commit new crimes than those who do not, and 13 percent more likely to find a job after their release.

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Professor Eric Miller teaches at the State Correctional Institution at Mahanoy, in Frackville, Pa.

Republican leaders were quick to condemn the plan, saying the president had overstepped his authority. But the experiment went ahead. More than 200 colleges applied, and 68 were chosen, including 40 community colleges, 13 private institutions, and 15 public four-year colleges.

Then the hiccups began. The pilot was set to start in the fall of 2016, but only half the institutions were ready by then. The remainder started enrolling students only last spring, held up by waits for accreditor approvals or the need to build new infrastructure. Four dropped out before the experiment even began.

The slow start probably contributed to the lower-than-expected numbers in the pilot's first year. The Education Department had anticipated that 12,000 inmates would received grants in the 2016-17 academic year; instead only 7,885 prisoners did so. Bloomsburg, which offers courses at Muncy and at a men's prison an hour away, had hoped to enroll 30 students. It ended up with 25.

But a bigger factor seems to have been the program's eligibility criteria. Not all prisoners are eligible for Pell; in fact the list of requirements is long. Male applicants must have registered for the Selective Service. They cannot have defaulted on a previous federal loan. They must meet college admissions standards and state eligibility rules. (In Pennsylvania, for example, inmates seeking Pell Grants must score above a cutoff on the Test of Adult Basic Education. They cannot have been convicted of a sex offense, and they cannot have any misconducts on the record in the past year.)

And some applicants have been turned down because they are too far out from their release dates. The Education Department, eager to research recidivism, has encouraged colleges to focus on inmates who are within five years of release — a suggestion some states initially took as a requirement.

The enrollment challenges have been particularly acute in Pennsylvania, one of two states conducting a randomized control trial of its programs. That's because half of its eligible students must be assigned to the study's control group. Those students can't take classes.

To date, 350 inmates have applied for a grant, but only 94 have been approved.

The low numbers have created financial difficulties for institutions that rely on Pell revenue to cover the program's costs. Bloomsburg, facing a $33,000 annual shortfall, decided it couldn't afford to enroll new students this fall. It's seeking outside funds to bridge the gap.

Like many of the participating colleges, Bloomsburg would like to see the Education Department waive some of its eligibility requirements, particularly the Selective Service rule. But Mr. Brown says the college isn't willing to lower its own admissions standards to increase its numbers.

"We don't want to admit inmates who aren't going to be successful," he said. "These folks have had enough of failure."

Why Prison?

Exporting an academic program into prison involves reputational risk. If the inmates succeed, the college may be suspected of lowering its standards; if they fail, the institution will be accused of wasting scarce resources.

The Pell pilot carries additional risks. No one knows if it will continue beyond the three years the department has promised, and many doubt Congress will permanently repeal the ban.

So when the experiment was announced, in the summer of 2015, Pennsylvania's secretary of corrections, John Wetzel, and his counterpart in the state Department of Education, Pedro A. Rivera, met with college presidents to make the "hard sell," Mr. Wetzel says.

Bloomsburg, he recalls, didn't take too much convincing. (Mr. Wetzel is both an alumnus and a trustee.) Five other colleges followed suit, and three were accepted into the program — Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Lehigh Carbon Community College, and Villanova University, which has had a prison program for more than four decades.

Why take the leap of faith? Each of them invoked an institutional mission: to transform lives through liberal education; to serve underrepresented and marginalized students; to practice Augustinian principles of redemption and forgiveness.

A couple of the colleges also noted the enrollment boost that could come if inmates continue their education after their release. In Pennsylvania, as in much of the northeastern United States, the traditional high-school population is declining. Institutions have to look elsewhere for growth.

"Anything we can do to find more people who are not on a college trajectory helps," says Mr. Brown. "Not only is it making safer communities, it's actually helping our business model."

But even colleges in growing states have a stake in reducing recidivism. That's because rising incarceration costs are siphoning money away from higher education.

Over the past two decades, state and local spending on higher education has been largely flat, while spending on corrections has increased nearly 90 percent, according to a 2016 report by the Education Department.

In Pennsylvania, where the recidivism rate is 60 percent, it costs an average of $43,000 to lock up an inmate for a year — far more than it would cost to educate that person.

Faculty who volunteer to teach in prison have their own reasons for doing so. Many of them, like Ms. Lee, say they're driven by a belief that education can change lives. Ms. Lee, who made it through college with the help of food stamps and welfare, identifies with the young women she is teaching. As a single mother of four, she nearly turned to prostitution to cover tuition and feed her kids.

"I'm an atheist, but there's this feeling of 'there but for the grace of God go I,'" she says. "College was salvation for me."

Others imagine teaching in prison to be a kind of missionary work, or a way to challenge an unjust system, says Jody Lewen, executive director of the longstanding Prison University Project at San Quentin State Prison.

Those narratives are well-intentioned, she says, but they can shift the focus from student to teacher and reduce students to stereotypes. In training sessions, Ms. Lewen urges faculty to examine their own motivations and reflect on how they picture their future students.

She also teaches faculty how they're sometimes seen by prison staff: not as benevolent pedagogues, but as out-of-touch elitists, political radicals, or security risks. She reminds them that they are guests of the prison and will "make it hell for everyone" if they treat corrections officers with disrespect.

"You almost have to deprogram some academics to work in this environment," she says. "They need to understand that what matters is the safety of their students, and not their freedom to speak truth to power."

For professors and colleges, the negotiation between security and freedom plays out every day. Some prisons lack computer labs, and most withhold internet access altogether. Professors must submit to security clearances, and seek corrections officials' approval of any materials they want to bring into the classroom.

"Academe is a very open environment. Corrections, by nature and need, is not," says Randy L. Martin, dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Research at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, which is offering online courses in two prisons. "Reconciling those environments can be a challenge."

In his college's case, that meant negotiating a system through which inmates could get access to the course site but no other web pages, and chat with classmates at their own prison only. It also meant pushing back against the prison's request to monitor chat-room conversations, Mr. Martin says.

Professors conducting in-person classes say they've had to go "back to basics" — eschewing familiar technology for whiteboards, paper workbooks, and handwritten or printed drafts. Students conduct research in the prison library, not online, and professors mark up their essays by hand.

Larissa M. Verta, academic dean of Science, Engineering, and Mathematics at Pennsylvania's Lehigh Carbon Community College, says some professors were initially unsure "how to teach without the technology they were used to." Now, though, "some say they teach better without it."

Max Kenner, one of the founders of the Bard Prison Initiative, at Bard College, says he instructs professors to do as they're told until they reach the classroom. But when they close the door, "it has to be a college classroom," with the same standards, intellectual freedom, and rigor as on campus.

"You have to convince people to do things the same, not differently," he says. "The temptation to water anything down is a dangerous one."

An Uncertain Future

When Eric C. Miller, an assistant professor of communications at Bloomsburg, signed on to teach interpersonal communications, he was bracing for a roomful of "hardened men who would be intimidating."

What he found, instead, was a group of gregarious men who were much more talkative than his often-reticent regular students.

"The classroom conversations are way better," he says. "These guys always want to talk, and it almost always goes back to race, class, and justice."

The classroom demographics are different, too. On Bloomsburg's campus, 80 percent of the students are white, and only a third receive Pell Grants. In Mr. Miller's class at Mahanoy State Correctional Institute, more than half the students are black, and all of them get the grants.

Still, the debate taking place on a recent Tuesday in Mr. Miller's interpersonal-communication class sounds a lot like the one that's occurring on college campuses across the country. Asked whether speech should be regulated to guard against hateful material, the inmates discuss the "recent tendency to shut down dialogue when things are offensive." They ask whether we, as Americans, have a "moral obligation" to be decent. And they explore what happens when "people in power are preaching hate."

"The president gave people license to say what they want," says one student, named Frank. "The white-supremacist rallies on college campuses never would have happened without him."

Later, the men discuss how they've changed their nonverbal communication to adjust to life in prison.

"Here, if you touch another guy, you're a weirdo," says Shawn. "Outside, it's unconscious."

"We don't do hugs for thugs," agrees Valdeze.

He's joking, but Valdeze and the other men in this classroom are deeply serious about their studies. For many of them, the classes are not only a break from the crippling monotony of prison life, but a chance to change the trajectory of their lives.

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about how higher ed perpetuates disadvantage, and what might change that.

As the Second Chance Pell experiment reaches its likely midpoint, it's unclear how many other inmates will get that chance. If Congress doesn't make Pell for prisoners permanent, the Bloomsburg program — like many of the other new ones — won't survive.

Optimists argue that public opinion toward correctional education has shifted over the last two decades, as prison populations have swelled and correction costs have consumed ever-larger shares of state budgets. They note that some prominent conservatives, including Charles Koch, have embraced prison reform.

Pessimists point to New York State, where Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's 2014 plan to provide a mere $1 million in public funds for prison education failed miserably. (The governor later revived the plan using funds from bank settlements secured by the Manhattan district attorney.)

In Pennsylvania, officials in the Department of Corrections are seeking state support for the prison program as a supplement and a hedge — "so we're not so reliant on Pell," says Madeline McPherson, the agency's senior policy analyst.

Mr. Kenner, who created the Bard program in the aftermath of the Pell ban, says he fears a repeat of 1994, when scores of programs closed, and "everything was confiscated."

"The demise of Pell was really traumatic," he says. If the current experiment ends in dozens more closures, "it would be a moral and practical disaster."

For Mr. Miller's students, the Bloomsburg program has been a lifeline. Stan, 45, has served 10 years for aggravated assault and robbery, and will be up for parole in 2019. Now, he says, he's proud to be able to talk to his four kids about his education.

"Being in a college atmosphere, with a professor, and knowing I'm getting credits — it's surreal," he says. "Being able to say I'm in college is an awesome feeling."

When Valdeze, a four-time felon at age 52, started the program, he didn't think he'd last a semester. Now, with his release date approaching, he's making plans to continue his education at the Community College of Philadelphia.

"I've got something to go home with," he says, "so I don't have to come back to this place."