ACADEMIA | Letters

Redesigning Correctional Education to Meet 21st Century Learning Modalities

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Among developed countries, the United States is the world leader in incarceration (Beckett et al., 2018; Blumstein, 2020; Dignam, 2016; Jouet, 2019; Wiseman, 2018). In his recent book, Franklin Zimring portentously described the United States as "the homeland of mass incarceration" (2020, p. x). More than two million people are incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails (Looney & Turner, 2018; Sawyer & Wagner, 2020; Seabrook, 2019; Todd, 2019). Many of these incarcerated persons enter prison without a substantive education, financial stability, or the resources required for successful participation in their communities (Gorgol & Sponsler, 2011; Rabuy & Kopf, 2015). Similarly, countless formerly incarcerated persons leave prison without the skills and resources necessary for effective reintegration into mainstream society (Gould et al., 2015; Morenoff & Harding, 2014). Indeed, a large proportion of former prison inmates will recidivate at some point after their release from prison (Alper et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2013; Rhodes et al., 2014; Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). One way to look at this issue is that recidivism by the formerly incarcerated results in the victimization of law-abiding citizens. Another way to view recidivism is that imprisonment and the legal process is extremely costly. In either case, American citizens pay a dire price for the criminal behavior of repeat offenders. From this perspective, it is clear, reducing recidivism has a net positive impact on society. Furthermore, there is a proven way to reduce recidivism.

Correctional Education Reduces Recidivism

Studies have shown that recidivism rates dramatically decrease among formerly incarcerated persons who attain an education while in prison (Davis et al., 2013; Dignam, 2016; Inderb-

itzin, 2015; Simpson, 2019). Those who participate in a college program during incarceration are even less likely to re-offend when compared to formerly incarcerated individuals with less education. Yet, despite the reformative benefit of educating incarcerated persons, acquiring a college education while in prison is not widely available (Gould et al., 2015). For prison inmates who participate in a college program during confinement, their education is often hindered by institutional barriers that prevent them from acquiring an education equal to that of traditional campus-based students.

Correctional Education from the Perspective of College Educators

In 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, eight college educators were interviewed by the author of this article for the purposes of learning the educational obstacles encountered by prison teachers. The professors who participated in this survey are employed by a community college that provides undergraduate-level courses for incarcerated persons in Northern California. The unfortunate consensus among these educators was that incarcerated college students do not attain an education commensurate with traditional campus-based students. Moreover, the participants were highly concerned that institutional restrictions inhibiting educational processes would likely decrease the prospects of effective reentry into society once formerly incarcerated students are released from prison.

The participants of this qualitative study expressed several common barriers they experienced while engaged in teaching college courses to incarcerated students. These educational impediments included such things as:

- Lack of basic learning resources like pens, pencils, and paper.

- Limited or no access to computers, educational technologies, and eLearning platforms.

- Inability to attain research materials and no student access to scholarly databases.

- Poor to nonexistent communication channels between students and teachers outside of the classroom.

- Institutional limitations on course materials, textbooks and teaching aids.

- Inadequate access to student resources, including counseling, student services, learning centers, and libraries.

Correctional faculty who teach face-to-face courses are also limited from using technology in the classroom. As one participant described, "There's no internet access. I can't just

click on a link and show [incarcerated students] something like I do in the traditional class-room." A similar sentiment was reiterated by a professor who said, "If you were to take my class on campus and take my class at the prison, I guarantee [students] would get more out of the campus course because we would have guest speakers, videos, and more time for discussion." Neither incarcerated students nor their teachers have access to the learning resources considered fundamental for a college education in the 21st century.

Overcoming Barriers in Correctional Education via eLearning Platforms

Teaching college courses in correctional facilities is understandably challenging. Safety concerns are paramount, and restricting incarcerated students from unconstrained access to the internet is reasonable. Nonetheless, many of the educational barriers experienced by incarcerated students and their instructors are not insurmountable obstacles. Modern technology is such that secure intranet eLearning platforms are now available for correctional education.

The need for eLearning alternatives for incarcerated students was exposed during the COVID-19 crisis. During this pandemic, the only viable option for providing college courses at many correctional facilities was to revert to antiquated correspondence models of instruction. However, this mode of course delivery is rife with problems. Perhaps most notably, the ability of students and teachers to interact in a timely and constructive manner that is most conducive to learning is all but nonexistent via the correspondence model.

A Clear Need for Reform in Correctional Education

The archaic approach to correctional education in many prisons throughout the United States is in great need of reform. Maximizing the benefit of educating incarcerated students requires a redesign of existing learning models in such a way that fully incorporates modern technologies and learning resources. The use of innovative eLearning platforms is an essential tool for educating incarcerated students in the 21st century. By employing the use of a secure learning management system (LMS), most of the learning barriers expressed in this article will be remedied.

The data is clear. Providing education to incarcerated persons reduces recidivism and victimization (Davis et al., 2013; Dignam, 2016; Inderbitzin, 2015; Simpson, 2019). Yet, incarcerated students are an educationally underserved population and may not obtain an education equivalent to non-incarcerated college students. This lack of academic parity has

negative social and fiscal implications. When incarcerated persons are released from prison, they must have the tools necessary to succeed in the 21st century. However, in the absence of adequate educational resources while in prison, like access to digital eLearning technologies, formerly incarcerated students may not have the ability to negotiate a highly digitalized economy or have the information and skills necessary to fully and productively participate in their communities. Redesigning the correctional education system to reflect the demands of a predominantly service sector economy is a social and fiscal necessity. The result of improved higher learning opportunities for incarcerated persons is less recidivism and safer communities (Larson, 2015; Simpkins, 2015). The ominous alternative is the continuance of mass incarceration and victimization.

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