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R STREET SHORTS NO. 65
January 2019

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN MICHIGAN PRISONS

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INTRODUCTION

Approximately 39,000 individuals are held in Michigan prisons,¹ and the overwhelming majority of these will return to society after their sentence is completed.² For this reason, Michigan residents and policymakers must be concerned with their ability to be productive, contributing members of society upon their return. However, research suggests that a lack of education may increasingly limit the employment options of formerly incarcerated individuals and may promote their return to crime.³ Accordingly, the present brief provides a short history of postsecondary education within prisons and then explains why it is an important part of the solution to this problem, as well as a benefit to society as a whole.

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION IN MICHIGAN PRISONS TODAY

When Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, most incarcerated individuals lost their chance to pursue a postsecondary education behind bars. This is because the legislation made prisoners ineligible for Pell grant funding.⁴ Indeed, while Michigan's Jackson

College, for example, had previously offered classes to prisoners as early as the late 1960s, these classes were suspended in 2012.⁵ However, even when classes were offered without Pell funding, only prisoners with the financial means could afford such classes. Receiving education while behind bars was therefore not the norm for justice-involved individuals.

However, in 2013, the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) received a grant from the Vera Institute of Justice to allow more students to enroll in postsecondary courses while incarcerated.⁶ And, in 2016, the U.S. Department of Education selected Michigan as one of the states for its Second Chance Pell Pilot Program, which allotted selected colleges almost 1,500 Pell grant slots to cover incarcerated individuals' educational costs.⁷ Of these, Mott Community College was originally awarded grants for over 150 incarcerated individuals, Delta College received grant slots for 15 and Jackson College was granted over 1,300 Pell grant slots to help these students pay their tuition.⁸ As a result, incarcerated individuals in several facilities now have the opportunity to take postsecondary courses inside their prisons or through the mail.⁹

While these limited opportunities to receive a Pell Grant now exist, some incarcerated individuals still face obstacles to obtaining an education while in prison. For example, the Jackson College program has roughly 575 students, which is only about half of their allotment.¹⁰ This number is not from lack of desire; sundry problems plague incarcerated individuals from seeking financial assistance to continue their education. For example, in most cases, males must have registered with the Selective Service in order to receive federal student aid.¹¹ However, this can only be done between the ages of 18 and 25, which leaves many older, unregistered, incarcerated males ineligible for Pell Grants simply because—for a variety of reasons—they did not register for the Selective Service during the appropriate window.¹² Appealing their current ineligibility is possible but the process can be lengthy and burdensome.¹³ Other registration problems include lack of social security cards or previously acquired student debt.¹⁴

As of September 2018, approximately 750 individuals are enrolled in postsecondary courses within seven Michigan prisons.¹⁵ According to Bobby Beauchamp, the director of Jackson College's Prison Education Initiative, Jackson alone now teaches students through an estimated 120 courses each semester.¹⁶ Roughly 75 of those incarcerated students pay their educational costs through personal means and the rest utilize Pell grant funding.¹⁷ This academic year, Pell grants can provide up to \$6,095 to cover educational costs.¹⁸ But incarcerated students may also apply for summer Pell grants, which may award up to \$3,000 for their summer studies.¹⁹ If an incarcerated individual is a full-time student at Jackson or another community college, Pell grants could cover the roughly \$5,000 required in tuition for the academic year, as well as books.²⁰ In 2019, Jackson College expects to enroll

more than 1,100 incarcerated individuals in their courses.²¹ However, no state dollars currently go to support these programs, which leaves prisoners and selected colleges largely dependent upon the renewal of slotted Pell grants to fund these opportunities for postsecondary education and limits program availability. State policymakers should change this.

WHY SHOULD PRISONERS RECEIVE A POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION?

It's smart for public safety and taxpayers' pocketbooks

Michigan's recent focus on reentry has led to the lowest recorded recidivism rate in its history but the correctional system still fails to rehabilitate individuals almost a third of the time.²² Indeed, roughly 28 percent of prisoners are expected to return to prison within the first three years following their release.²³ In fiscal year 2017, Michigan spent roughly \$38,000 per prisoner via prison operations and healthcare costs.²⁴ Research suggests that those who participate in postsecondary education programming while incarcerated are less likely to recidivate, with a 2014 study suggesting that earning a postsecondary degree while incarcerated reduces the chance of reincarceration due to a new offense by 24 percent.²⁵ Scholars have also estimated that when measured in reduced three-year incarceration costs, savings translate up to a \$5 return for every \$1 invested into a prisoner education program.²⁶

It encourages a positive, safer community behind bars

Postsecondary education also promotes a positive, safer community behind bars, benefiting both those incarcerated and those who work in state corrections. Research suggests that individuals who receive postsecondary education while incarcerated are less likely to participate in violence or misconduct.²⁷ In part, this may be due to the fact that educational programs can build prisoners' feelings of self-efficacy and give individuals something to work toward.²⁸ In the absence of educational programming, physical inactivity and social disconnection can lead to depression²⁹ and a person's tendency to seek out new sensations and sources of stimulation can sometimes lead to anti-social activities.³⁰ Postsecondary education within prison provides a productive space for inmates and therefore can aid correctional officers in maintaining safety.

It can increase economic opportunity and earnings

According to the latest estimate, over 27 percent of formerly incarcerated individuals are unemployed nationwide.³¹ And while roughly 90 percent of Michigan residents ages 25 or

older hold at least a high school degree and 27 percent hold a bachelor's degree or higher, recent nationwide results found that 64 percent of incarcerated individuals simply hold a high school credential and 30 percent report even lower levels of education.³² This suggests that a postsecondary education is becoming increasingly important to securing employment in the modern-day market. In light of this, to offer incarcerated individuals such an opportunity may increase employment or total earnings while bridging this education gap.³³ Moreover, when formerly incarcerated individuals remain unemployed, paying restitution, legal fees, fines and child support is made all the more difficult, which brings additional negative economic repercussions for victims and families.

It creates healthier, stronger communities

Among the wider public, higher levels of education are associated with more positive health outcomes and reduced mortality.³⁴ Moreover, when a parent has a postsecondary education, a child is more likely to attend college as well, which passes additional positive health and education impacts to the next generation.³⁵ Providing prisoners a postsecondary education may offer these positive spillover effects, leading to a healthier, stronger Michigan community.

CONCLUSION

Promoting postsecondary education for Michigan prisoners is not just smart for public safety. It also has the potential to encourage a positive, safer community behind bars; to increase incarcerated individual's economic potential; and to create healthier, stronger communities. Accordingly, Michigan residents and policymakers should support and work to expand these existing programs for the benefit of all.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ENDNOTES

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26. Researchers broadly define prisoner education programs to include vocational programming and academic programs targeted to those who have yet to complete high school. See, e.g., Lois Davis et al., "How Effective is Correctional Education and Where Do We Go from Here? The Results from a Comprehensive Evaluation," RAND Corporation, 2014, p. 81. <https://perma.cc/Q4RQ-DMZW>.

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