

## A More Complete Story of Education and Recidivism

By Donald Young

There are those who would argue that a failure to attain gainful employment immediately upon release from prison is the major cause of recidivism. I would argue that failure to gain employment is an indication that the ex-offender never developed what sociologist Robert Johnson called “niches.” Offenders find these niches by participating in programs that encourage their development. In order for inmates to excel in these programs, they must develop the ability to “maturely cope” with what Gresham Sykes (1958) identifies as the five pains of imprisonment: isolation from the larger community, lack of material possessions, blocked access to heterosexual relationships, reduced personal autonomy, and reduced personal security (Harer 1). Inmates must also use mature coping to avoid imported criminogenic norms, where by “the inmates bring to prison a commitment to criminal subcultures and criminal norms” (Harer 1). “Inmates who learn ‘mature coping’ in prison will also cope more maturely with life in the community after release and, therefore, will be less likely to recidivate” (Harer 2).

It has been the belief of philosophers and scholars as far back as Aristotle, that education creates moral people. “These scholars view the educated person as having both the knowledge and reasoning ability synonymous with the truly free and moral human being. Uneducated un-socialized contra-socialized persons, incapable of informed moral reflections, are the truly imprisoned” (Harer 3). Modern research supports these long held beliefs and the prison environment provides the perfect analog of before and after data to prove it. Even when offenders receive as little as .5 courses per six months of incarceration, recidivism drops by 15.7%. When

a college degree is achieved, that number falls from approximately “44.6% to 26.4%, that’s down 59.2%” (Vacca 298).

All of the previously mentioned information leads me to make this proposal. Why not offer two-year degrees to any offender willing and able to achieve said goal? This may sound like pie in the sky dreaming, but there is a way to fund such an endeavor and to entice offenders into participation. Tell any willing and able offender that if he earns a two-year degree, he’ll have one year knocked off of his sentence. This not only serves as the proverbial carrot, but it also pays for the education. At an average of \$24,000 (Virginia) per year to house an inmate, the one year off would serve to both pay for the approximately \$12,000 degree and save \$12,000 average per year inmate. If 500 inmates were to receive college degrees, that would represent a savings of \$2,184,000 per year over many years. This translates to millions upon millions saved.

There’s also another positive to this idea: the breaking of numerous intergenerational cycles of incarceration and recidivism. This further frees up tax dollars and makes for much safer streets. I realize that there are those that will ask the question, “Why should those convicted felons get a free education?” To them I would argue that there’s nothing free about it, neither for the inmate, or them. I would further argue that if they truly want revolving door prisons to be a thing of the past (and yes they still exist; the doors just spin slower), then they need to put aside their outdated media-and- politically influenced notions of what prisons are. They need to stop being the uneducated so that they can make a truly informed moral reflection.

### **Works Cited**

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