

Oregon's Anti-education "Corrections" Policy: A Surprise?

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Over the last nine years since I have been incarcerated, few things surprise me anymore. I have been through court proceedings that defy both reason and common sense. I have seen violence akin to a war zone. I have seen maladaptive behaviours of every sort. I have also experienced some of the most megalomaniac and tyrannical personalities that I have ever bore witness to in my entire life, most of which are personified as "correctional officers". But I never thought I would see the day when "correctional officers" would work in concert to suppress a prisoner's education, especially one which the prisoner is paying for through his own means.

I came to prison in 1999 with only a General Equivalency Diploma and no other formal education. In 2002, I sought and obtained a private grant, enrolling in correspondence courses through Ohio University. This grant was given to me by a very generous private corporation.

For the first year, things went considerably well. I decided to pursue a degree in psychology and was making fairly good progress. Then came a train of fickle changes in the approach taken by the State of Oregon Department of Corrections toward prisoner education. With those changes came a battery of "you can't do this / that's". The new procedures made it next to impossible to receive textbooks without first filing a hurricane of paperwork and grovelling before "counsellors" who were given full discretion to proctor exams. If the good "counsellor" did not feel like proctoring exams, they did not happen. The chance of finding a "counsellor" willing to assist with test proctoring was essentially 50/50. The anxiety of being unable to meet deadlines and various other course requirements was certainly due to all the discretion invested in these "correctional officers".

In 2004, I got into a fight and was sentenced to 17 months in solitary confinement. Naturally, these "correctional officers" articulated my placement in the hole as a forfeiture of my college education. Consequently, on a "correctional" whim, my college education along with my \$25,000 grant went sailing down the toilet. They told me that my "choices" were the reason why I was going to flunk out of college, as if 17 months in solitary confinement was not sufficient punishment. My college education, something the "Department of Corrections" neither supplied nor supported, had to go.

After filing a barrage of grievances and complaints, including one to the Governor of the State of Oregon, I was granted an exception so I

could finish my existing courses and avoid flunking out of college. I was told that my education would then “be put on hold” until I was released from solitary, at which time I could order new courses through the mail.

Upon my discharge from a lengthy stay in solitary confinement, I was moved to a maximum security penitentiary where I ordered a new set of courses. Once they arrived in the mail, however, the materials were immediately confiscated by “correctional officers” as a new policy was implemented barring anyone with a sentence of eight years or more from taking college courses, even if they paid for them with their own money! Since I am serving a life sentence, this new policy ruled me out. I filed additional grievances and after my courses were held in limbo for nearly five months, an exception was made and I was allowed to finish my new courses. Afterwards, I would be permanently barred from taking additional courses because I am a lifer.

Not two months after I was given my courses, the penitentiary erupted with unusual violence. Back to the hole I went. This time, however, I was sentenced to about 20 months as I got busted with a knife. In solitary, I requested my courses so I could finish them and avoid flunking out of college. My appeal fell on callous ears. Instead of the usual “you’ve got nothing coming” rhetoric, I was given a much more sanitized excuse: “we have insufficient staff and resources”. This catch-all excuse is as golden and as accepted without question as “for security reasons”. All of my subsequent grievances and complaints were to no avail.

Faced with these barriers, I requested an out-of-state transfer to either the Federal Bureau of Prisons or the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). The vehicle for such transfers is the Interstate Corrections Compact, which allows prisoners to be transferred to and from other states to maximize program resources. Unlike Oregon, the Federal prison system and CDCR support and encourage prisoners to enrol in college courses, even in supermax prisons like Pelican Bay. My request for a transfer was denied without reason. Only after pressing the matter further was I told that a “new policy” – always a new policy – prohibited transfers to the Feds or hardship transfers to anywhere else. This arcane “policy” is nowhere to be found in the laws governing the Compact, so for all practical purposes, it appears the whim of “correctional officers” trumps statutory law.

I seriously doubt I will ever be given my courses again. As a prisoner, I can order books through the mail, but once deemed to be college textbooks these are instantly confiscated. Not everyone incarcerated in Oregon has the same difficulties that I do, only if you are serving a life sentence or you sometimes disrupt the warden’s “ideal prison environment” should

you count on being unreasonably restricted. In fact, there is little logic in using a self-improvement program as an incentive carrot, especially when it is not even accessible. But logic has no place here.

I try to explain my plight to my grant provider, but they think I am crazy. "Why would correctional officers do that?," they ask me. How does one answer such a question without sounding crazy? They almost pulled my funding in the past because they thought I was not taking my education seriously. Without access to my course material, I am doomed to fail out of college by time default. Once I fail, my \$25,000 grant goes down the toilet as well. On the streets, not even the President of the United States has the authority to force someone to flunk out of college, yet in prison, "correctional officers" can do it on a whim.

Few things surprise me, but experiencing an organized and systematic effort to force a prisoner confined in a "correctional institution" to flunk out of college surprises me to no end. I tell "correctional officers" they need not worry that I would do anything foolish like get an education, be granted parole, succeed, and not come back to prison, thus threaten their job security. I tell them I will be here forever, so they will always have a job. They smile and tell me "it's not about that".

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Steffler grew up in the State of Washington and worked as a farmer/mechanic until his arrest at age 21. He is a first-time felon and since August of 1999, Scott has been serving a sentence of life without the possibility of parole. During his incarceration, Scott has educated himself on a wide range of subjects including psychology, history, science and foreign languages. He has also written a novel that is in the process of being published and is currently working on a second book. His primary goal is to prevail on his appeals and ultimately be released to raise a family. You can write Scott at the following address:

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