

## Higher Education in Prison: The Palo Verde Model *Eugene Alexander Dey*

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For decades, in an example of social responsibility, college and prison administrators worked closely together towards a common goal – higher education. When Congress established Pell Grants in 1965 as part of a national movement to increase civil liberties, prisoners directly benefited from the funding mechanism (Taylor, 1992). By the early 1980s, roughly 350 colleges and universities used Pell grants to fund a myriad of post-secondary correctional education programs (PSCE) (ibid).

Research compiled over 20 years showed recidivism rates dropped from 70 percent to 20 percent for those who received at least an Associates degree (Taylor, 2004). The results were greater for those who earned a Bachelors degree and even more impressive for prisoners who received a Graduate degree (Taylor, 1992).

However, in the tough on crime 1990s, the ideology of extreme punishment, mind bending warehousing and untreated addiction would replace common sense so to win the war on drugs and the war on crime, and dispose of those unable to cure themselves. Under this heavy-handed model, the Congress in 1994 excluded prisoners from the Pell Grant program (Dey, 1994, p. 18). Without this financial lifeline, by the end of the '90s only a handful of PSCE programs survived (Dey, 2005a), returning us to the penological Dark Ages of the pre-Civil Rights era.

Due to America's fixation on crime and punishment, the national prison population swelled to 2.3 million prisoners by the mid-2000s and beyond (The Sacramento Bee, 2008, E6). Above the influx of state dollars pouring into the local economies, prisons built in rural locations created some unforeseen opportunities for prison-dependent communities (Dey, 2005a). Colleges in remote outposts of the prison-industrial complex are frequently in jeopardy of losing their accreditation and funding because of problems maintaining full-time enrolments (FTE) (ibid). This correctional-educational manifestation is common in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), the largest prison system in the country with 33 institutions and roughly 170,000 prisoners (Beyer, 2008, p. 1).

Seeing an opportunity where no other existed, Palo Verde Community College, located in the sparsely populated desert region of southern California, became determined to take advantage of the untapped resources at Ironwood State Prison (ISP) (Dey, 2005b, p. 9). Beginning in 2000, with courses offered entirely through correspondence, Palo Verde

graduated 30 ISP student-prisoners in 2003 with Associates degrees (ibid). With hundreds enrolled, ISP now has a class regularly graduating from Palo Verde College (ibid).

Educators at Lassen Community College (LCC) took notice and decided to follow Palo Verde's lead. Nestled in the mountains of northern California, Lassen County is the home of two state prisons, the California Correctional Center (CCC) and High Desert State Prison (HDSP), plus a brand new federal prison in nearby Herlong. With three prisons, Lassen County is one of the largest penal colonies in the world, dubbed *Prison Town, USA* (Galloway and Kutchins, 2007) in a documentary. This is the perfect location for a community college to begin teaching in a correctional environment (Dey, 2005a).

Lassen College, on the brink of failure as an institution of higher learning, decided to apply the Palo Verde Model of PSCE administered through correspondence. Beginning with 60 prisoners in CCC and HDSP in the spring 2005 semester (Dey, 2005a), the fall 2006 semester would realize LCC's first class of graduates who would receive Associates degrees in Liberal Arts.

Like Palo Verde's, LCC's program has thrived. At the beginning of the summer 2006 semester almost 200 students were in CCC and HDSP, plus around 50 in Herlong. This is a win-win for all involved. Lassen College receives much needed FTEs and the prisoners, primarily from impoverished backgrounds, receive an education free of charge.

The CDCR now has a growing number of fully funded Associates degree programs. Above the Palo Verde Model of correspondence, Patton University in Oakland has been teaching at San Quentin in Marin County since 1996 in a privately funded program that also offers Associates degrees (Dey, 2005). This is a far cry from the 350 Associates and Bachelors programs prior to 1994, but PSCE is beginning to make a comeback on a much smaller scale.

### **POWERFUL TESTIMONY**

How higher education transforms a convict into a scholar occurs in increments. As the college curriculum soaks in over a number of semesters, the prisoner morphs. A lifetime of using their cognitive skills primarily to promote another agenda, providing higher education to them while in prison gives them a chance to use their intellect in a legitimate manner.

Getting a suspect to answer questions are the tools of law enforcement. As a matter of protocol, if not survival, prisoners are disinclined to cooperate with inquisitors. But a prisoner participating in PSCE at CCC is

different. They tend to be enthusiastic in their willingness to talk openly and honestly about the transforming power of PSCE, especially when a fellow prisoner is asking the questions.<sup>1</sup>

For African Americans, who make up 45 percent of the nation's prison population (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000), PSCE provides a chance for members of a severely disadvantaged minority group to remove themselves from the downward spiral of crime and incarceration. B.C., currently serving a sentence at CCC, completely understands why African Americans are more likely to go to prison than college. At the time of the interview, B.C. was scheduled to graduate in fall 2006. He found the justice system and the media culpable for the internment inflicted on generations of African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

The judicial system is at fault for unevenly meting out justice to African Americans. The media is at fault for promoting the idea of, among other things... vilifying blackness. These media tactics serve to keep many African American men delusional and prone to crime. Also, they cause blacks to be seen as [deserving] of prison in the eyes of the rest of society.<sup>3</sup>

B.C. has a 15-year sentence for a second degree robbery<sup>4</sup> and a criminal record going back to the 1980s. However, the college program offers him a chance to try to salvage a life lost to crime and deviance.<sup>5</sup>

What college has done to my outlook on life, [is] improve it. That is, I've always had a view of life that was more positive than negative. So college has me visualize greater things for myself when I'm released than I could see when no college was offered at all.<sup>6</sup>

At a greater disadvantage than any other demographic group under the system by which justice is administered, B.C. is one of the few incarcerated African American males enrolled in a program that will potentially break the cycle of incarceration. The college curriculum has given him the chance to establish tangible goals that transcend the hopelessness and despair generously offered under the punitive model of warehousing and isolation.

I am intensely set on acquiring, at a minimum, a master's degree in psychology before I parole. And though there is no BA – let alone master's – program offered, I know that the squeaky wheel gets the oil. So I will convince some university to sponsor me.<sup>7</sup>

Although B.C. has an opportunity to parole and put his education to use, others in the program are serving life sentences and see things differently. For them, with the likelihood of spending the rest of their lives in prison and only the slim possibility of being released after decades of exemplary behaviours, higher education offers an opportunity to seek knowledge for the sake of learning.

W.E., also incarcerated at CCC, is a 38 year old former Marine from Reno, Nevada. Arrested in 1989 and given a life sentence for two counts of murder, W.E. never had a chance to complete any life goals, let alone his first tour of duty. Since his reception in the CDCR, college programs, prisoner rights and nearly every privilege have been eliminated as the punitive model's thesis of punishment unfolded (Dey, 2006). When LCC began teaching in 2005, W.E. was "excited about finally being able to take college courses after 16 years in prison".<sup>8</sup>

Well-read, self-educated and at the time of the interview set to graduate in fall 2006 with the highest honours, W.E. was relieved to have something positive to report to his family.

This program has meant a lot to my family. It helps them immeasurably to know that I'm working toward getting some sort of degree and not simply languishing as most others in here do.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of the negative stigma murder convictions carry, W.E. has a family who loves him dearly (Dey, 2006). Like PSCE, maintaining close family ties fosters lower rates of recidivism, both of which place him in an ideal position to succeed if given the chance (Legislative Analyst's Office, 2008). A model prisoner who endeavours to earn a parole date once eligible in 2013, W.E. was impressed how PSCE works on fellow prisoners.

An education broadens people's horizons, and shows them, often for the first time in their lives, that they can succeed through hard work and dedication. I've seen some of my classmates who were, frankly, knuckleheads, completely turn lives around because of this program.<sup>10</sup>

Having witnessed the destruction of PSCE in the 1990s, W.E. believes the Lassen College program holds promise. Since the PSCE pilot program is administered through correspondence, rather than with classrooms and lectures, the Palo Verde Model can overcome traditional impediments like lockdown and ineffectiveness. "These in-cell courses are infinitely better than any CDC[R]-run education programs because,

if nothing else, they teach people how to learn and work toward a goal”, said W.E., who has been a student and tutor in vocational cabinetry for the last nine years.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, CDC[R] vocations teach, at best, rudimentary skills – when they’re running at all – and are designed to generate meaningless certificates for skill sets that are useless in the real world. If anyone succeeds in learning anything it’s in spite of the system, not because of it.<sup>12</sup>

Since so many are long-term and life prisoners, the primary goal for many CCC students is to continue beyond an Associates degree if such an opportunity presents itself. However, soon to be released PSCE prisoners stand to reward society as someone less inclined to re-offend. In a state with a rate of recidivism holding fast at 70 percent, the worst in the country (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2008), PSCE gives the state a chance to fight crime by giving criminals the tools to change. Not everyone agrees, however. Many “tough on crime proponents” – primarily the victim’s rights movement – are of the opinion rehabilitating felons is the wrong approach if it involves early releases (Gottschalk, 2008, p. 1). In essence, “tough on crime” zealots accept the high price of long-term incarceration as the cost to protect the public (Furillo, 2008, A3).

California Correctional Center’s H.A. comes from one of the most violent ethnic groups housed within the CDCR. At 30-years-old, H.A., from Norwalk in southern California, has been in and out of trouble for fighting and gang-related activity since his early teens. Incarcerated in 2000 for assault on peace officers while in possession of a deadly weapon, H.A. continued his penchant for crime while in prison. Found in possession of a knife, he had his 2004 release date extended to December 2006.<sup>13</sup>

For CDCR prisoners like H.A.,<sup>14</sup> they are caught in the middle of a north-south California Hispanic gang war going back decades. However, close to fulfilling the requirements for an Associates degree at the time of the interview, H.A. considered what education meant to him – not gang-banging.

I now think and feel more positive about myself and my potential future. I have once again begun to give myself a chance. [I am] just relieved that I am thriving instead of just living.<sup>15</sup>

Life for a prisoner of Hispanic descent in a California prison is dominated by gang activities, referred to as politicking by some. In a

corrections department rife with gang and racial violence – a segregated system that fosters intolerance – meaningful incentives to encourage rehabilitation do not exist (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2008). Now given a viable alternative, H.A., a tutor in the education department, sets a solid example by concentrating on college education while paying as little attention as possible to the gang politics of prisondom.

A major part of rehabilitation is changing the mindset of the inmate... then behaviours change. Some programs like show repair... are useless. Education, especially higher education, gives an inmate like myself a completely separate focus in life. Instead of being concerned about what’s going on within the yard, college student/prisoners are worried about being prepared for tests and homework.<sup>16</sup>

H.A. expects to have 55 units when he paroles, just shy of fulfilling the 60 units for an Associates degree. An honour student, H.A. plans to obtain a Bachelors degree in Marine Technology at Cal Polytechnic in Wilmington, California. While researching his post-release options, a resource-deficient area that exacerbates one’s propensity to recidivate, H.A. discovered he “will be able to apply for financial aid”<sup>17</sup> – and perhaps succeed where so many have failed.

### **MAKING A COMEBACK**

Participants in the Lassen College program are an anomaly. With rehabilitative programs a thing of the past, CDCR prisoners are allowed to exist and little more (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2008). Serving staggering amounts of time under draconian sentencing mandates like three strikes and mandatory minimums, the college programs are literally the only positives in an ocean of negativity (Petersilla and Weisberg, 2006).

However, for prisoners whose families can afford the costs, Coastline College in southern California’s Fountain Valley has developed a correspondence program tailored for the incarcerated. The state reimburses the college for the cost of tuition, but prisoners have to pay for books and other materials. With the Palo Verde Model doing well and Coastline offering an Associates degree for a fraction of the cost charged by distance learning institutions, PSCE is making a small comeback in the CDCR.<sup>18</sup>

It is time this state abandon the lock ‘em up and let ‘em fester approach to public safety and corrections. “Insane amounts of tax dollars have been invested in California’s prison system with no positive results”, said B.C., who then served as chairman of the inmate council.<sup>19</sup>

Prisoners suffer from a myriad of problems above a lack of education, like co-existing chemical dependency and mental health problems – making prisoners one of the hardest demographics to treat (Dey, 2008). When educational and vocational training is coupled with treatment for addictive and mental health issues – known as the multi-systemic treatment model – this approach holds the most potential (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2008).

Ex-felons are returning to the streets worse off than when they entered... No corrections are being made by the corrections department. It’s time to get back to education and rehabilitation.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the small numbers of prisoners who are receiving a college education, the vast majority have no faith in the CDCR. The agency is considered a national disgrace and in a state of crisis. Under threat of being taken over by the federal courts due to dangerous overcrowding and a murderous medical department, the state has been unable to deliver on long overdue reforms (Beyer, 2008, p. 1).

For W.E., who has witnessed the elimination of every program of consequence in his 17 years of incarceration, always prepares himself for the worst because “they’ve killed every other beneficial program they’ve ever had, why not this one?”<sup>21</sup>

A plethora of programs need adequate funding and support, plus they must converge in a multi-systemic approach. Even though opposition to the Palo Verde Model of PSCE has yet to form, like W.E. says, programs are subject to be cancelled at any time. While college through correspondence hardly compares to on-site and lecture classes, correspondence is better than nothing.

As the CDCR continues to spiral downward, the pilot college program and incarcerated students for whom it works are doing the best they can. Justifiably, W.E. is hardly a pillar of optimism.

I haven’t graduated yet, so there’s plenty of time left for the CDC[R] to kill the program. Seventeen years in prison has shown me that there’s no program so helpful to people that the CDC[R] won’t take it away.<sup>22</sup>

### AFTERTHOUGHT

Since drafting this piece in fall 2006, another local college, Feather River Community College (FRCC), worked their way into the equation in spring 2007. While the Palo Verde Model holds a lot of potential in the delivery of post-secondary education from a distance, FRCC has gone slightly further by offering an occasional lecture. Coastline provides lectures over the institution's video channel. With LCC, FRCC and Coastline simultaneously teaching at CCC, *Prison Town* is becoming a prison college community.

As of fall 2008, dozens of prisoners have graduated from LCC and FRCC is set to graduate a small class in summer 2009. Some prisons, like the California Training Facility in Soledad, have hundreds of Coastline students. Most take a few classes at a time and prisoners regularly share materials to defer the costs.

Like most things involving the CDCR, success stories are in short supply. While B.C. and W.E. graduated with the highest of honours, H.A. returned to prison. Many other prisoners have dropped out, flunked out or subsequently been taken out. Prison is a tough place. With a generation of negative programming beating on the fragile psyche of the California prisoner, a few semesters of correspondence is not enough to meet all the needs of some prisoners. Many are unable to take full advantage of a rare opportunity, indicative of how difficult it is to foster change in a correctional setting, as evidenced by H.A.'s return to prison. College alone is not enough, but it should be one of the penological pillars on top of which rehabilitation is founded.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Prisoners are actually quite cooperative when they trust the interviewer. The author is a jailhouse lawyer and activist with a proven track record who is trusted by most, but some simply do not trust anyone.
- <sup>2</sup> In a face-to-face interview with B.C. in fall 2006 conducted at the California Correctional Center.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> While going to college full-time, B.C. also successfully litigated his case on appeal in pro per and had his sentence reduced from 15 to 9 years.
- <sup>5</sup> Supra, Note 2.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> With a 2009 release date, B.C. now plans to continue his education once released.



- <sup>8</sup> In a face-to-face interview with W.E. in fall 2006 conducted at the California Correctional Center.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> In a face-to-face interview with H.A. in fall 2006 conducted at the California Correctional Center.
- <sup>14</sup> Tough on crime proponents would rather spend scarce tax dollars to punish prisoners like H.A. than rehabilitate them. To them, gang members are truly the worse of the worst (Furillo, 2008). This heavy-handed attitude is amplified when gang members break rules while in prison, especially when it comes to violence and weapons, even though much of their behaviour is reinforced by the current policies (Dey, 2008).
- <sup>15</sup> Supra, Note 13.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> “Although the Department does not allocate funding for college programs, CDCR reports about 4,000 prisoners participate largely on their own in college course work, typically through correspondence courses” (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2008). In a system of 170,000, 4,000 students is merely a start.
- <sup>19</sup> Supra, Note 2. The inmate council rarely gets too involved in educational affairs in that their constituents, the general population, keep them very busy with a never-ending stream of complaints and grievances about prison conditions.
- <sup>20</sup> Supra, Note 2.
- <sup>21</sup> Supra, Note 8.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.

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*Eugene Alexander Dey* is a prisoner at California Correctional Center serving a life sentence for a non-violent drug offence. A freelance writer, successful jailhouse lawyer and dedicated activist, Dey has won three writing awards from PEN America Center. He also has numerous pieces in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* and regularly contributes to other publications. In a college career spanning twenty years and hundreds of semester units, Dey has an application for a Bachelors degree in sociology pending at Sacramento State University. With four Associates degrees, including two from Lassen Community College and Coastline, Dey has been asked to take a lead role in writing a proposal for Feather River Community College to codify post-secondary college education across the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. To see more of his work, please go to [www.myspace.com/eugenedey](http://www.myspace.com/eugenedey). You can write Eugene at the following address:

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