

RESPONSE

On Prison Education and Hope

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I am especially pleased to take this opportunity to respond to an issue of the *Journal* focusing on prison education. While serving a term which otherwise nearly robbed me of the 1980s I became directly involved with prison university programs in several penitentiaries in the Prairies' Region. I began studying by correspondence through Athabasca University (Alberta, Canada), in 1983, and completed my Bachelor of Arts in history from that facility in 1988. I am currently on parole pursuing graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Alberta. Unfortunately, despite achieving, at least, a modest academic success, my overall experience with prison university programs, or what passes for them in the Prairies' Region, prompts me to conclude that my accomplishments were realized in spite of, rather than because of, the various 'curricula.'

For example, I was refused admission to the university program in Edmonton Institution because I could not 'demonstrate an adequate academic background.' Accordingly, I was forced to manufacture one by borrowing the money to purchase a course from Athabasca University which I completed on my own time during the evenings and on the weekends. When I was finally allowed to pursue studies on a recognized basis, my cell became my designated work area, and my grade of employment remained at the lowest possible level for over two years. Moreover, my experience with the university programs at Drumheller and Stony Mountain was, if not literally similar, then at least similarly frustrating. Each of these facilities approached the problems associated with providing post-secondary education to the prisoners in a uniquely different manner; yet, in each case, the problems precluded establishment of more than a rudimentary program.

But these problems, as Ray Jones explains in 'A Coincidence of Interests: Prisoner Higher Education in Massachusetts,' *can* be overcome to the extent necessary to permit prisoners to benefit from them. However, while acknowledging that university programs 'are flourishing in the prisons of Massachusetts,' Jones perceptively observes that prison authorities may well have conceded to such a situation for reasons decidedly opposed to the reformative aims of the educators. Indeed, in a short review of prison history, he points out that the relationship between educators and correctional authorities has always been contentious. Hence, he is noticeably (and rightfully) alarmed to discover 'that higher learning was embraced by the prison system at precisely the same time that the reformation of prisoners ceased to be

a popular aim of incarceration.' Of course, such intelligence indicates that prison authorities may simply view the prison university program in the traditional context of punishment and security, for example, as a form of behavioral modification or as a mechanism of control.

In 'Post-Secondary Education for the Prisoner's Cognitive and Moral Education or Social Control,' Brian MacLean discusses not only the manner in which prison administrators view the university programs, but some problems associated with evaluating the nature and effects of higher learning in prison. He presents compelling evidence that a properly constructed program can result in both sufficient and observable cognitive and moral development, although MacLean is quick to concede that such changes do not *necessarily* translate into behavioral changes. Nevertheless, his description of the prison university program in the British Columbia Region leads to the conclusion that exposure to a Liberal Arts education *did* significantly affect the attitudes of numerous prisoners and *did* significantly reduce recidivism.

On several occasions MacLean raises the issue of 'cultural bias,' noting that 'in the prison, the student has little authority to dictate the content of his/her education.' Juan Rivera, in 'The Direct Relationship: A Non-Traditional Approach to a Curriculum for Prisoners in New York,' elaborates on this theme, explaining that because Blacks and Latinos comprise 82 percent of New York State's prison population, 'a properly structured' prison university program must account for Afrocentric and Latino perspectives. Rivera emphasizes that the 'differences between cultures must be considered and understood in all curriculum initiatives.' Furthermore, he points out that since the traditional Eurocentric approach towards education so often results in arousing feelings of alienation among minority groups, prison educators must adopt a non-traditional approach that would recognize the specific ethnicity and attitudes of prisoners, while instilling in them a sense of social responsibility and community. This type of approach requires that prison educational programs reflect the particular needs of various ethnic groups; thus, the curricula would fluctuate geographically according to the ethnic composition of the population.

In 'On Prison Education and Women in Prison,' Theresa Ann Glaremin responds to questions concerning the particular educational needs of Canadian female prisoners, most of whom are Indian or Métis. Her interview with Gay Bell depicts the somewhat amazing lack of insight characterizing those responsible for orchestrating academic matters in Kingston, Canada's only federal prison for women. Echoing Rivera, Glaremin points out the futility of making the traditional types of educational programming available to female prisoners and, in many cases, forcing prisoners to participate. Moreover, like Jones and MacLean, Glaremin shows that the more advanced programs, such as

prison higher education, have been discouraged by prison authorities and were initiated only after the prison administration recognized their usefulness in terms of security. In any case, the prison university program, undoubtedly, becomes even more complicated within a penitentiary for women.

In 'A Chance to Learn,' Cheryl Bonfanti illustrates that, given the proper organization and administration, a beneficial outcome *can* result. The state of Virginia's prison system, like the Canadian, is distinguished by a single facility for women and many for men. In opposition to Kingston, however, the Virginia Correctional Center for Women offers prisoners a variety of vocational and academic programs which were designed (and continue to be administered) according to the particular educational needs of the women. If the prison is realizing an advantage in terms of security by allowing this type of a program to function behind its walls, then Bonfanti's evidence clearly indicates that it is possible to maintain academic programs that can successfully accommodate the concerns of the prison administrators and the needs of prisoners. And she feels that Virginia's prison college program for women is especially successful 'because it gives so many women hope.'

Education can do that, as Tiyo Attallah Salah-EL illustrates so well with his accounts of the influence prison education has had on his and other's lives in 'Attaining Education in Prison Equals Prisoner Power.' And in the context of the prison experience, perhaps 'hope' provides a true measure of evaluation. In any case, as this issue of the *Journal* suggests, prisoners finally seem to be gaining a small measure of input into the academic programs at their disposal, perhaps enabling them to open doors previously closed.