

BOP Officers Higher 'Degrees'

Randall Morris

FCI-Seagoville is a low security federal facility located fifteen miles southeast of downtown Dallas, Texas with a prisoner population of 1,800. I arrived here in early 2023 to serve a 19.5-year sentence, five of which had already been served in county jail awaiting my sentence and transfer to the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP).

The 2020 outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent closures of the courts and prisons in response to the pandemic were the reasons for my unusually long duration in what most consider to be county jail "hard time" due to the relative discomforts and lack of amenities in what was designed to be a short-term holding facility. After this experience, it was natural that I had looked forward to finally transferring to the BOP where the living conditions and education opportunities were rumored to be vastly better than in pre-trial county jails, and even better than in most state prisons.

The expectation that a federal prisoner can further his education in the BOP is also supported through the wording of the 2018 First Step Act (an act designed to reduce the federal prisoner population and recidivism through education programs that were to be offered by the BOP), and the reinstatement of the federal Pell Grant for Inmates (government-provided tuition assistance). All of this sounded like redemption while locked down in a small county jail cell for 23 hours per day - every day - for over five years. with no access to books or newspapers. If only I could get to the promised land, I had thought, I would fill my days and evenings with study in preparation for my eventual release back into an unforgiving society where I will need all of the rehabilitative evidence I can gather in order to have a chance at overcoming the stigma of my felony "scarlet letter". The US does not have protective public privacy laws as many other countries have.

It should not be too difficult, then, to imagine how it felt to discover that FCI-Seagoville, like most other US federal prisons, does not offer college courses despite its large prisoner population, despite its close proximity to a major city with universities and community colleges, despite the five year old 2018 First Step Act, despite the Pell Grant for Inmates, and despite the formidable size of the so-called FCI-Seagoville "Education Center" building, with its perpetually empty first and second floor classrooms that depressingly echo the building's architectural intent and idle potential when you enter and call out, "Hello, is anybody here?"

*Cue the tumbleweeds and crickets...

For imprisoned people who independently seek them out, there are some alternatives through distance learning courses from schools across the country. However, costs per credit hour range from \$160 to \$500, making them unaffordable for most incarcerated people considering that the typical job for a federal prisoner pays only 20¢ to 40¢ per hour, which is surprisingly legal under the “Slavery Exception” clause of the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution that otherwise abolished slavery for all except felons. Worse yet, the majority of prisoners remain unemployed due to the lack of these jobs.

Currently, the only education offered at FCI-Seagoville are GED (high school equivalency diploma studies and testing) and sporadic, non-accredited, self-betterment classes that do not require textbooks or controlled testing. These token classes are taught by other prisoners and have no transfer or market value. This barren educational wasteland exists solely because the prisons are only rewarded with federal funds for the GED diplomas they can produce from their respective prisoner populations, and nothing more. Those who already have high school or GED diplomas are out of luck, with no options but to idle away lengthy prison sentences just to be released in worse shape than before incarceration.

So, what about the 2023 reinstatement of the Pell Grant for Inmates? Can’t it be applied to fill in this void by allowing imprisoned people to import and pay for qualified college correspondence courses? In response to letters sent to several universities asking this question, the replies have been unanimous in stating that regardless of whether a school has a physical presence within a prison or whether a school merely sends correspondence course work to a single prisoner within that prison, the school must register the prison as a PEP with the Department of Education. And, this was before the current Trump administration began its systematic dismantlement of the DOE in January 2025.

Predictably, when prison staff are asked what they are doing to expedite the registration of this prison as a PEP for any one of the local or distance learning schools so that we can begin applying for Pell Grants, the responses are dismissive, and, in one memorable case, triggered a prolonged blank stare accompanied by a continuous chorus of cricket chirps that became so awkward, I felt compelled to disengage and to refrain from any further inquiry.

It is now clear that, until there is a federal monetary incentive for these prisons to promote education beyond the GED, the Pell Grant will remain

impotent and out of reach for those it purports to serve. At the very least, Congress should revise the registration process of the Pell Grant to allow prisoners to directly apply for it regardless of where they are imprisoned as long as the school and curriculum have been qualified by DOE, if DOE still exists. This is important because, in our society, a GED + a felony record = an unpromising and difficult future considering that the US does not automatically seal felony criminal records from public view after prison release and demonstrative good behavior as many smarter countries do. (Higher incomes = higher income tax yields for the government, and less expenditure on welfare - duh.) As such, an undergraduate education is the only possible way a prisoner might mitigate this reality.

Having said all of this, I must now confess that it is not entirely true that this prison does not offer a degree program of sorts, for, immediately upon my arrival, I was immersed into an intensive degree program when I was involuntarily placed into a housing unit of 180 men, with only five functioning showers, and no air conditioning (A/C) during an exceptionally brutal summer. To get a sense of just how intense this degree program is, consider “Historical Texas Summer Temperatures”. When asked, many seasoned prisoners become apocalyptic, with their faces expressing fear, as they describe the long summers they have endured – summers akin to perpetual Swedish saunas stoked to maximum with only a semblance of relief provided by a tiny plastic fan blowing hot air, but only for imprisoned people fortunate enough to afford them from the prison commissary at \$30 each, and this is before the tariffs on China take full effect.

On 4/6/2023, the Dallas Morning News (Vol. 174/ No. 188) published an article by Lauren McGaughy titled “Danger by Degrees”, which could have been appropriately titled “Murder by Degrees”, as it reported that seven in ten Texas state-run prisons lack A/C, which contributed to the deaths of at least 23 prisoners between 1998 and 2012. Because Texas is one of the 13 states that does not require A/C inside state jails and prisons despite its proximity to the equator and rising global temperatures, Texas has been repeatedly sued over these conditions and is currently [as of 2023] fighting twenty lawsuits related to extreme heat in its prisons.

The article further reported that, “In 2017, [Texas] was ordered by a state judge to install air conditioning in the Wallace Pack Unit where elderly and sick prisoners are housed. Installing it cost \$4 million. Fighting the lawsuit cost \$7 million”. As this article reported nothing about the lack of A/C in

the federal prisons within Texas, I felt compelled to write this essay using “degrees” as the theme in order to allow me to include our deprivation of meaningful education.

As a disabled military veteran, it is sad for me to admit that sometimes when I watch the big US flag wave in the hot Texas wind at the entrance to this punitive wasteland of human warehousing, I find myself envious of the Swedes, with their emphasis on rehabilitation, promotion of prisoner education, campus-like prisons, and their merciful automatic sealing of felony records after demonstrative good behavior post-prison release.

Sweden is also renowned for its saunas. The difference there is that Sweden does not warehouse its citizens in them.

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