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From Prison Uniforms to Graduation Robes



Karl Rabe

Students graduate in 2008 at New York's Woodbourne Correctional Facility.

By Peter Monaghan | FEBRUARY 19, 2017

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Since 2001, about 400 men and women in six New York prisons have obtained liberal-arts degrees from Bard College. Through the Bard Prison Initiative, they have taken the same demanding courses as Bard's on-

campus students.

Two new, complementary books celebrate those results. In *Liberating Minds: The Case for College in Prison* (The New Press, 2017), Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, a distinguished fellow in the initiative, notes that while nationally more than 50 percent of released prisoners end up back in prison within three years, only 2 percent of the graduates of the Bard initiative do. Taking college courses reduces recidivism far more than does completing prison high-school and vocational programs. Also well above average is the 75 percent of the project's alumni who find gainful employment within a month of release.

Projects like Bard's not only save prison systems many millions of dollars, Ms. Lagemann writes, they also allow graduates, and their families, to become more financially stable. Children of graduates become more likely to go to college, too, and, like many of Bard's prison alumni, to complete graduate degrees, including ones at well-regarded institutions.

Access to higher education should be extended from privately financed programs like Bard's to as many imprisoned Americans as possible, contends Ms. Lagemann, a former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Candidates for such programs are hardly lacking. Thanks to a decades-long incarceration boom, in 2014 some 2.3 million Americans were locked up. But college opportunities are very few. In 1994, then-President Bill Clinton signed tough crime legislation that ended prisoners' eligibility for Pell Grants. That shut down virtually all 772 college-in-prison programs operating in 1,287 U.S. correctional facilities.

Daniel Karpowitz, one of Ms. Lagemann's colleagues at the initiative and the author of the other new book about it, said in an interview that the effort can teach colleges a lesson about "inclusive excellence." It demonstrates that a population barely on admissions officers' radar — "highly capable students in the correctional facility 45 minutes away" — can pursue through the liberal arts what campus-dwelling students can: "the deeper purposes of fulfilling oneself intellectually; preparing oneself to be an informed, critical, or skeptical citizen; finding purpose in life." Mr. Karpowitz is the initiative's director of policy and academics.

In *College in Prison: Reading in an Age of Mass Incarceration* (Rutgers University Press, 2017), he suggests that a privately financed effort like Bard's can provide a blueprint for college-in-prison programs.

Extending a college to prisoners then becomes "less about how people in prison might change," he writes, "and more about how we, as a society increasingly defined by the scope and quality of our prisons, might change ourselves."

Advocates of such programs must start, he says, by facing squarely such realities as the presence of many violent offenders in programs like Bard's. To dodge that, he says, would be to dishonor a sincere objection to prison education: that it implies that "individuals are not rightly held culpable for their own actions," even that "there is something morally or politically wrong with punishment."

One response to that, says Mr. Karpowitz, who is also a lecturer in law and the humanities at Bard, comes from the initiative's graduates' greatly increased ability to acknowledge and understand their responsibility. Prison faculty members like him, he says, must make the case that when American incarceration so undeniably reveals "strong class and racial inequality," the methods Americans use to hold people accountable for actions that affront "our avowed love of freedom ... should strengthen both agency and dignity."

"Otherwise," he writes, "they become a mockery."

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