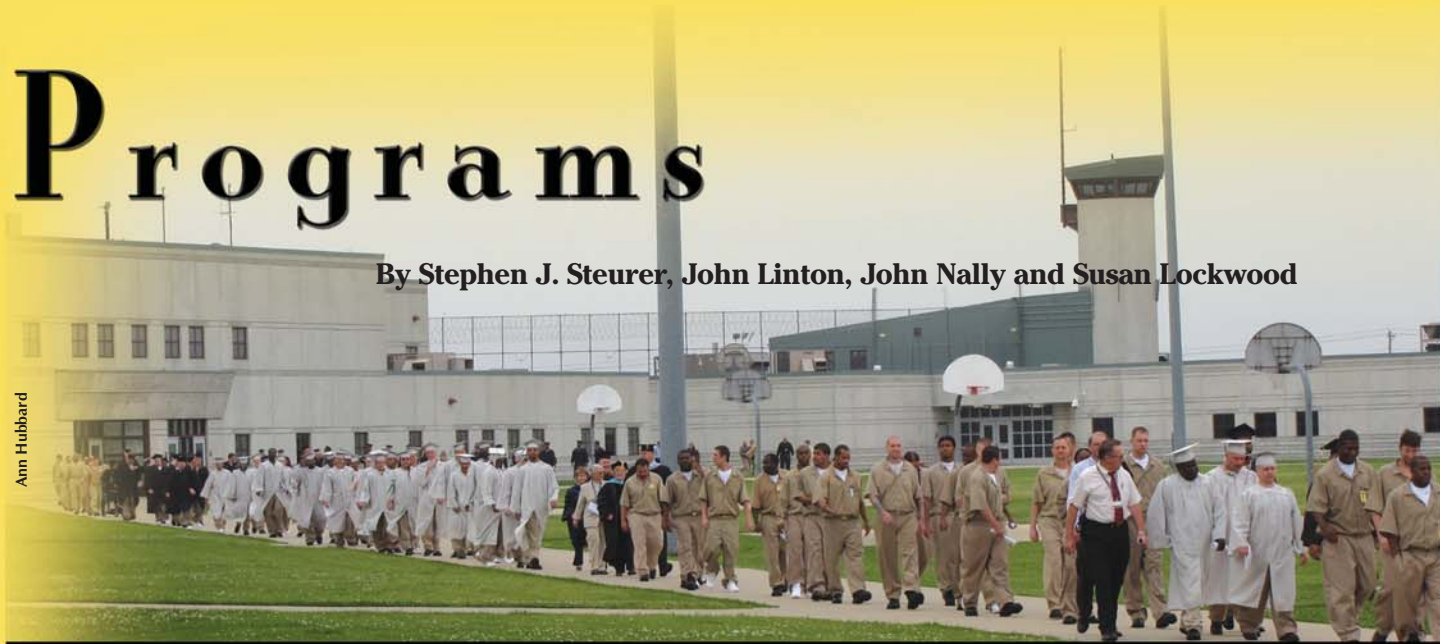


The Top-Nine Reasons To Increase Correctional Education Programs

By Stephen J. Steurer, John Linton, John Nally and Susan Lockwood

Ann Hubbard



Graduates at Indiana's Miami Correctional Facility prepare to be recognized.

Authors' Note: The authors' points of view conveyed in this article do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of their organizations or agencies.

It is difficult to come up with an appropriate title for an article that summarizes the importance of correctional education programs in the nation's prisons. Education supports security, public safety and rehabilitation — in sum, the entire range of correctional services. There have always been good reasons to provide education to inmates, but the list seems to have grown during the past 10 years because states experiencing growth in incarceration have been examining best practices for reducing prison populations while maintaining public safety. The following nine reasons are cited in research as the most important and criminal justice decision-makers should consider them when planning correctional programs and budgets in these tight economic times. Since everyone has a different correctional priority, the following are not necessarily in order of importance.

Education is an excellent reentry tool. While many criminologists have long understood the value of education in the judicial and correctional system, it has taken on a new importance. Correctional education is “one of the most productive and important reentry services,” said Gerry Gaes,¹ noted criminologist and former research director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The federal Second Chance Act is now funding new efforts to prepare inmates for reentry before release. Two of the key elements mentioned in the law are education and employment training, which correctional educators have been providing for years.

Inmates understand the importance of education for their own success in life. One of the first reports from the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative evaluation documented that an astonishing 94 percent of state and federal inmates interviewed prior to release consistently identified education as a personal reentry need.² In fact, more of them identified this need than identified financial assistance, housing, employment, drug treatment or any other listed reentry need.

Education has deep roots in America prison history. According to *Criminal Justice*,³ as early as 1876 one facility, the Elmira Reformatory, placed great emphasis on educational and vocational training. Through the years, education programs have expanded in scope to the point that there are few prisons that do not provide a formal education program. Today most states provide adult basic education, GED and vocational education programs in the majority of their institutions.⁴

However, the value of correctional education has been debated. Despite the evidence for the benefits of education, there are those who argue that prisons are for punishment and that federal or state dollars should not be spent on educating inmates. In the mid-1990s, federal law was amended to eliminate federal and state inmate eligibility for Pell college tuition grants.⁵ Additionally, limitations were placed on the amount of federal adult education and vocational education funds available to correctional education programs.⁶

In the 1980s, the BOP initiated a then-controversial program of mandatory education. Many states have since followed this example, creating a mandatory incentive system that requires inmates to attend school for a minimum number of months if they do not have a specified reading level or have not received a high school diploma or GED. Additionally, some systems provide benefits for participation. For example, the BOP allows inmates to participate in certain programs only if they have a high school diploma or GED. Other states provide “good time” for participation and other incentives.⁷

As has always been the case, the prison population over-represents the undereducated, minorities and the most recent immigrant populations in society. According to *Criminal Justice*, the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that inmates have considerably less education than the general public. Approximately 19 percent of the general public has not completed high school compared with 40 percent of state prison inmates, 27 percent of local jail inmates and 31 percent of probationers. As for college-level or post-secondary vocational classes, they are taken by approximately 48 percent of the general public compared with 11 percent of state prison inmates, 24 percent of federal inmates, 14 percent of jail inmates and 24 percent of probationers.

Academic education and vocational education reduce recidivism and support employability after release. During the past 20 years, evidence of the significance of education in reducing recidivism and public safety has been mounting. In 2001, the federally funded *Three State Study*⁸ was released by the Correctional Education Association and provided the strongest evidence to date that education reduces recidivism and improves the likelihood of employment after release. Since the publication of the study, education has been researched more frequently and with better research designs.

Education is much more effective in reducing future crime than building prisons. During the past two decades, there has been an unprecedented growth in the number of prisons across the U.S. As a follow-up to the *Three State Study*, two graduate students at the UCLA School of Public Policy and Social Research examined the costs of building more cells and delivering education programs. They re-examined the evidence of the CEA study from an economic viewpoint and concluded that education is twice as effective as prison building in reducing future crime.⁹

From a humanistic viewpoint, education is the right thing to do. The U.N. has declared that education for inmates is important for human development: “Education should be aimed at the full development of the whole person requiring prisoner access to formal and informal education, literacy programs, basic education, vocational training, creative, religious and cultural activities, physical education and sport, social education, higher education and library facilities.” It was further recommended that correctional education programs be integrated with the public system so as to allow for continuation of education upon release.¹⁰



Indiana's correctional education graduates generated more than 1 million credit days in 2008-2009.

Although the idea of a right to a public education from birth to death may seem to be utopian by American standards, one state made that commitment more than 150 years ago. The overarching purposes of Indiana's original constitution were twofold: It provided for the public safety as well as the education of its citizens. Indiana maintains the bright hope of "a general system of education, ascending in regular gradation, from township schools to a state university, wherein tuition shall be gratis, and equally open to all."¹¹

Education is the foundation for the success in other important program areas. In "The Impact of Prison Education on Post Release Outcomes,"¹² Gaes undertakes a comprehensive review of the research literature, documenting the recidivism impact of correctional education programming. He observes that virtually all offenders potentially benefit from prison-based education — not just those with a particularly lower level of educational attainment — and that education emerges as perhaps the No. 1 weapon against recidivism in the correctional treatment arsenal. A recidivism benefit can be harvested with higher functioning and low-functioning offenders. As Gaes notes, "Even college graduates may benefit from further education and specialized certification." This is somewhat in contrast with a common historical belief that prison education is important mostly for the low-literate or nondiploma-holding offender.

The true impact on recidivism may be seriously underestimated. Gaes also noted that education is "fundamental to other correctional goals" and that it "may be a prerequisite to the success of many of the other kinds of prison rehabilitation programs." Speaking, writing, reading and listening, as well as quantitative reasoning, are cognitive skills. Conversely, drug treatment, anger management, and recognizing and changing criminal thinking are critical interventions for those segments of the correctional population needing them, and they succeed best when built on a sound mental and educational foundation.

Table 1. Indiana DOC Education Incentive System

Program Type	Earned Credit Time
Basic Literacy and Life Skills	6 months
GED	6 months
Career/Technical Program	Maximum 6 months
High School Diploma	1 year
Associate Degree	1 year
Bachelor's Degree	2 years



Purdue University North Central, along with Ball State University, Oakland City University, Indiana State University, Grace College and Ivy Tech Community College provide college degree programs to Indiana's offenders.

Education is effective as a population control tool.

The Indiana Department of Correction is a good example of how policies can be created and implemented, effectively linking the crime-reducing power of prison-based education to the cost-saving potential of time-off sentence credits. Through this mechanism, the costs of the educational program are more than covered by immediate and easily quantified "bed day" reductions. Further reductions in prison populations are realized post-release as recidivism is reduced, creating a virtuous cycle of crime reduction and prison cost reductions.

Unlike some other systems, there are no mandatory requirements for enrollment in and completion of education programs in Indiana. Rather, the Legislature created an incentive system for participation and completion. Under Indiana Code 35-50-6-3.3, an offender in Credit Class I who has demonstrated a pattern consistent with rehabilitation and successfully completes requirements in several education programs may obtain credit time that is applied directly to the actual time served, as related to the individual's earliest possible release date (see Table 1).

During the 2008-2009 school year, completers of Indiana's adult correctional education programs generated nearly 1.3 million credit/bed days. The planning division of the Indiana DOC estimated that those credit days and early releases generated \$68 million in averted costs.

Indiana's overall recidivism rate hovers at 37 percent. A longitudinal study of 6,560 offenders released in 2005 to Indiana's five metropolitan counties¹³ has revealed that the recidivism rate for GED completers is 20 percent less than the general population and the recidivism rate for college degree completers is 44 percent less than the general population.

The state of Indiana believes in creating a system of incentives to improve inmate educational levels and, at the same time, it is attempting to improve public safety and reduce prison spending. Only time will tell if Indiana can succeed on both fronts. It has already been demonstrated that education reduces recidivism and crime; Indiana is taking it one step further and using education to reduce the prison population itself.

Early release of offenders based on educational achievement while incarcerated provides the promise of offenders returning to the community as socially useful citizens. It will be interesting to watch the recidivism and employment rates of ex-offenders in a state like Indiana versus those that choose to cut educational programs to save dollars in the short run.

Three decades ago, Supreme Court Justice Warren Burger underscored the rationale for correctional education best: "We must accept the reality that to confine offenders behind walls without trying to change them is an expensive folly with short-term benefits — winning battles while losing the war."¹⁴

ENDNOTES

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¹⁰ U.N. special rapporteur on the right to education of persons in detention. 2009. United Nations General Assembly, 2 April.

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¹² Gaes, G. 2008.

¹³ Nally, J.M. 2008.

¹⁴ Taylor, J.M. 1993. Pell Grants for prisoners. *The Nation*, 25 January.

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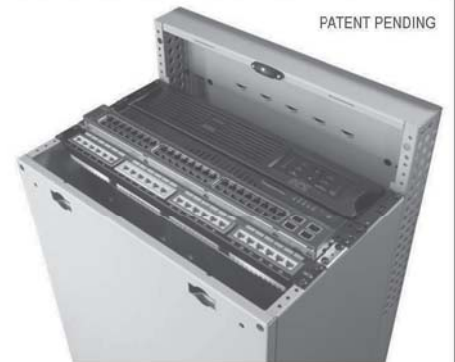
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