

**We Are the Products of Our Experiences:
The Role Higher Education Plays in Prison**
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INTRODUCTION

As of 2012, an estimated 2.2 million people were incarcerated in jails and prisons in the United States¹. Prisoners are disproportionately likely to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, to be members of racial/ethnic minority groups, to have held a low-skill, low-paying job (if any at all) at the time of arrest, and to be less educated than their counterparts in the general population (Harlow, 2003). The problem is the most accessible trade available to the poor is crime. Once crime has been committed and the victims are served, criminals are put into very negative living situations leaving everyone with a question: does prison really change people? Of course it does because prison is an experience unparalleled to any other. Throughout the United States, the majority of people released from prison re-offend. People in prison are isolated from society, technology, and the experiences that are needed to change their lives. “There is a direct correlation between attainment and recidivism. Data suggest that better educated prisoners are less likely to relapse into criminal behavior after release from prison” (Erisman and Contardo, 2005, p. 5). If a person has an educational experience inside of prison, they are more likely to succeed in not coming back. Education leads to jobs and trades which help people step away from crime. Education in Ohio prisons is lacking because it is very limited. It is also restricted to only a select few. If something is good or proven to be effective, why limit it to only a few?

This paper reflects on life and prison experiences for Diesel and B (as well as other prisoners) that led to shifts in perceptions of the role of higher education in prison. The *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* has dedicated special issues to the perils, pitfalls and benefits of higher education in prisons (see volumes 4(1), 13 and 17(1)). This article draws on the importance of higher education in prisons, but also adds a new dimension by drawing on the benefits of Inside-Out college courses in prison that include university students, requires the same course work, and provides college credit for both sets of students. Specifically, the article supports what Carter (2008) discusses as the importance of voluntary education in prisons as a conduit for liberating the mind and what Collins (2008) discusses as the importance

of connecting education to marketable skills, rather than coerced fruitless education designed as another mechanism of control. Additionally, Beck, Richards and Elrod (2008) discuss the benefits of prison visitation for academics as a means of learning about the realities of prison life, but inside-out courses provide both academics and future criminal justice workers (outside students) weekly on-going exposure in numerous forms (e.g., formal meetings with prison officials to go over the rules of the institution, entering the prison weekly through differing security measures, observing staff/prisoner interactions, and class discussions with prisoners). Further, the Inside-out pedagogy dismantles much of what Collins (2008) and Huckelbury (2009) discuss as the tools prisons use to successfully separate, categorize and stigmatize the criminalized (see Garfinkel, 1956). The importance of linguistics is an ongoing discussion in inside-out courses in order to deconstruct what Huckelbury (2009, p. 27) finds as a primary function of prison, a “linguistic laboratory that identifies and perpetuates a specific social order”.

This article seeks to demonstrate that experience and education are the most effective tools for change. If we leave penal policy as it stands, we will see no change for the overwhelming majority of men and women who are eventually returning to our communities. If we change our prison and education policies, we will see prisoners change. In this article, we address how our experiences shaped our understanding of the “fast life”, our prison and educational experiences, as well as those of former and current prisoners, the glaring connections between education and recidivism, and possible solutions for penal education policies. Along with prisoners’ views and experiences on each topic, we will demonstrate the possibilities for society and individuals by policies that have the capacity to turn a negative environment (prison) into a positive experience.

IS THE FAST LIFE LEARNED?

For many, the fast life is an attainable fairy tale. Everybody wants economic success and for the most disadvantaged in society this can lead people down a path of prison, addiction, and/or death. When you run as fast as you can, are you able to turn a sharp angle without first slowing down? Living without thinking about the turns can be very detrimental. To quote Jada Kiss’ song: “The penitentiary chances that I take can get me the mansion

by the lake”. We are inundated with glorified versions of how we want to live through music and movies. The fast life is addictive on all levels: fast cars, money, women, drugs and so on. Jackboys (robbers) get addicted to the adrenaline. They tend to blow their money fast leaving them the choice to stop or rob again. Yet, they get addicted to the money and feeling of being on top of the world. They get their power through fear and money. We asked a few fellow prisoners their definitions of the fast life:

Something that you get into where you’re not responsible and not being a parent. Its dangerous and you never think of the consequences until it’s too late. It takes over your conscience. It’s living a dream that’s not even real.

And,

Something that you get into where you don’t want true responsibility nor even care of its consequences. It takes over your conscience of thinking.

American capitalist culture teaches our young that success is judged by who has more, not by who they are. We see music videos showing the fast life of money, jewelry and beautiful women – the adult version of a fairy tale. Many people try to find shortcuts to success, leading to a path of destruction and mayhem. Today, living beyond one’s means is the new epidemic. When one does not have the life they wanted, they become bitter so they begin concentrating on the jump and not the walk. We also asked fellow prisoners whether the fast life was worth it:

No! I was not being a good father, son, brother. I distanced myself from my family. I became too busy for others acting like I cared for everyone but never showing it.

And,

No! I felt like I was not being a good father to my kids, son to my parents and brother to my sisters and brothers. I became distant to my family.

We need to reexamine America’s values. The United States makes up 5 percent of the world’s population, yet houses 25 percent of the world’s

prisoners, spending an estimated \$68 billion a year on corrections (Senator Jim Webb, 2009). It is no surprise why many chose to live the fast life given the lies we are told and the fairy tales we are taught are reality. We are taught accomplishments are won not earned. We look at the beginning and end of the story, not what happens in between. We walk around desensitized to the world around us causing and experiencing depression, another plague sweeping America. So, we ask as former drivers in the fast lane: Can we learn something else?

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE FOR B

When I first got locked up, my father came to visit me in the county jail. He told me to do something with my time and to get into college. He knew that being labelled a felon, from experience, can really alter the opportunities a person can have in life. I already felt my freedoms being restricted and stripped away from me every day in every way, from using the bathroom to using the telephone. After my sentencing, I finally felt the nervousness of what might happen to me go away. I had to do five years in Southeastern Correctional Complex (SCC), a medium/minimum prison camp.

I told myself I was going to use this time as a self-training camp, to get myself right physically, mentally, and make a plan to have a successful life once released. The plan of course was a legal plan. However, I had to find my way into college. Like everyone else, I had to deal with prison life. Nevertheless, there were requirements to get into college and stay in college. One of the main rules was not to miss more than one class a quarter, which ultimately meant I needed to stay out of 'the hole' (segregation). Also, you cannot have more than two Rule Infraction Board (R.I.B.) tickets. If those two rules were broken, I would be kicked out of college for a year. I already qualified for college because I had a high-school diploma.

My biggest problem was the selection of what was offered in college. I really wanted to learn more technical training with computers, but that option was not available. However, I knew that to survive and be successful once released, I would have to have an edge or advantage on the educational level. College has given me that edge. That opportunity should be offered to everyone, at least in some form. Not everyone wants to be in Landscaping

or Business Management. A few of my friends told me that is why they did not join. Once I got in and started taking classes, I started to see how what I learned ties into the business world.

Prison life is very hard to deal with while being in school. You sometimes have to face the fact that you have to protect yourself and your possessions. That runs the risk of getting kicked out of college for a year. With a little luck, I managed to stay in college. Having a five-year sentence, in my fourth year I faced another problem; I was running out of classes to take because there are not that many courses offered. However, the college I have experienced has changed my life completely. The confidence you get from learning can be the difference in staying out or coming back.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE FOR DIESEL

While sitting in the confines of one of the loneliest places man has ever known, I write. I write of experiences I had in prison and the perceptions that have changed during my ten plus years of incarceration. I, in turn, have seen this whole prison’s mentality change. I have seen C.O.s get beat up and I have been victim of their beatings. I have been stabbed and have been in more fights than I can count. I have seen prisoners set up the C.O.s to lose their jobs and/or catch a case. On the other end of the spectrum, I have seen C.O.s set prisoners up from petty things to planting drugs on them so the prisoner gets more time. I have seen C.O.s bring stuff in and bring stuff out. I have been in the middle of riots and been an independent fighter hired to fight others. I have hustled with running a store and football tickets. I have seen and/or experienced a lot in the joint.

I started my bit like most do, in the County Jail. I knew then I was losing my identity. The deputies only called me by my last name and the prisoners called me young blood or youngster. They told me horror stories of prison and being an impressionable nineteen year old, I believed the words of my elders. They said you got to fight boy, fight. If you want to live and not be raped you can never lose. Strike fear into the convicts’ hearts in order to survive. You must fight the biggest bad ass guy there and win. The judge struck his gavel and said thirteen years. I knew then I must push my humanity aside and send home the only thread that keeps anyone from being animals themselves – my conscience. I knew I must become an animal to survive in a concrete jungle full of animals. A place where the only way to come

out whole is to eat or be eaten, attack or be attacked. I was sent to C.R.C., a reception center. C.R.C. is the place where you send home the clothes you wore on your last day free – your last reminder of who you used to be and will never be again. The new prisoners are stripped in front of everyone. No more dignity, no more humanity, just left in the chilly air as you stand there. I was 168 pounds and was told to bend over and spread them at intake. I resisted and fought the C.O. only to have many men in grey come to his aid and beat me down. I was thrown in a cell where the lights were always on, left alone to my torturous thoughts.

I was classed a level four security and sent to a closed, maximum security camp where they dropped me instantly to a level three in security. This place was called Ross Correctional Institute (R.C.I.), one of four maximum security prisons in Ohio where the hardest, toughest prisoners went. My thirteen-year sentence was considered short compared to the average sentence for “lifers”. Before my cell door was open, I saw a monster of a man named “Big Franks”. I fought him and won. There were many other fights and victories before everyone on the yard knew who I was. I was called “Diesel” at 168 pounds because of my intensity in everything I did. All the gang heads wanted to recruit me, but I told myself I was stronger than that and I would get through this as a lone wolf. I never lied in prison, nor did I go out my way to disrespect anyone. I only handled what turned up on my plate. For that, I gained the respect of lifers and the majority of prisoners. A former friend of mine lost a fight and was raped. He was moved over with me. I felt some humanity again by feeling bad for him. He walked as a hollow shell of the man he once was, in another world barely speaking anymore.

Eleven years to go in the midst of all the confusion prison brings, I saw a light of hope. I went to another’s cell to see him doing college work. “What?”, I said to myself, “the prison has college?!” I was filled with so much happiness and hope for my future. No longer would this be my life. Scarred up knuckles and bloody memories were a thing of the past. Then, I was told the criteria. I would have to wait until I had only five years left and eight years incarcerated. I argued, “don’t they understand I could be out in eight years?” Once I served my three-year gun specification and five of my ten years left, I would be eligible for early release. I did some programs – some helped some did not. One day, three and a half years in, they dropped my security to a level two and

sent me to Southeastern Correctional Complex (SCC). The prisoners called it gladiator school because at SCC, you fight for something to do, not to make it out alive. Fighting in SCC is entertainment to the general population because the average sentence is two years. My sentence was considered long at SCC. In my first fight at SCC I beat a man with the same intensity as I would have done at Ross. They almost gave me a new charge of assault until they realized what prison I came from. I realized then I had to lighten up and get some of my humanity back (conscience). I put that intensity into working out becoming big as a result. It took me another three years (six years into my sentence) to be able to talk to people, like people and not animals. I lost many family members, but in my seventh year I lost my close grandmother. I felt so much pain and loss that it made me human again. Comforted that I felt again, I took every opportunity I could only to be told there was a waiting list but I signed up for welding. Even though I did not have to wait until I was within five years of my release, it was worse because whoever is on the list and is closest to their release date gets accepted. In a prison where two years is the average sentence, guys like me may never get vocational training. We get out earlier with more time than the average ever does on a sentence. Ten years in and never accepted into welding because three years left on my sentence was still more than most at SCC.

Eight years into my sentence, I was excited to be accepted into college. Eight years of waiting for this moment and I was told of how limited it is. The college offered at SCC is freshman business courses and landscape courses, but I still enrolled to brighten my future. It may not have been what I pursue upon release, but it did broaden my horizons. It gave me the confidence that I can be anything I want to be in life through hard work and persistence. Continuing through failures, college showed me new directions in life. Earning all A's and making Deans list every quarter gave me confidence and hope of a better future. When we become enlightened what education can do, why are we limited to freshman levels in only one or two fields? I hungered as a scholar, but I had limited food a scholar needs to get its fill, education. In hindsight I now have the confidence to accomplish anything in life and know that because of college education I am hopeful that anything is attainable through hard work and direction.

LIMITED EDUCATION AND ITS STIPULATIONS

The college programs available in some of Ohio prisons are required by law to focus on advanced job training and no prisoner can obtain a degree. The highest course at SCC is freshman level. Communication classes are taken out of the curriculum to stop us from obtaining an associate's degree. SCC has small Business management, H.V.A.C. (Heating, Ventilation, Air Conditioning) and Landscape management courses. They used to have Hospitality courses too, but due to budget crunches it was removed. Each program is great. However, with roughly 1600 prisoners, not everyone wants to study in these fields, nor are they directly aligned with job opportunities in our communities. The few who are accepted into the limited seats available are only brought so far before they have no more to study.

To get into college in Ohio prisons you have to have less than five years left on your sentence, you cannot have more than two R.I.B. tickets, and you cannot have certain convictions (e.g. the majority of people with sex crime convictions are excluded from any type of college education). You must have a G.E.D. or high school diploma, you cannot have a college degree, and to stay enrolled, you cannot miss more than one class. G.E.D. programs are much more easily attainable in Ohio prisons because there are little criteria and almost no restrictions on who can be accepted.

Vocational programs and other programs like Substance Abuse and Anger management have a waiting list. The short timers get moved on the list before other prisoners with longer sentences are accepted. Some of these lists are majorly flawed because of how people are accepted according to one's maximum release date. Most people are sent to prison with plea agreements –agreements to get us to plead to guilty to the charges brought against us. If someone is sentenced to three years and promised early release after one year, that person will probably never be accepted into a vocational program because they are not close to their maximum sentence date, yet they will likely get out early. Vocational programming at SCC includes Drafting, Welding, Carpentry and Plumbing. Yet, on average, only 10 of 100 people can complete one of these programs – very limited seating for the countless incarcerated.

RECIDIVISM, EDUCATION AND THE CONNECTIONS

We have seen people come and go, in and out of these walls with new numbers or their old ones. We have collectively (not literally) seen 250,000 prison numbers pass through in our sentence time. Close to 95 percent of people who go to state prisons eventually get out². College is a direction but why limit it? Few people take college at SCC because of its limited options of the courses offered and / or the criteria to get into it, and it is never enough to complete a full degree. Yet, a college degree would show employers upon release that you are worth the chance because you take interest in your own future. It was just a few years before we got locked up that Pell grants were repealed for prisoners, which meant they took out the bachelor’s degrees and associates degrees in a variety of higher education areas. Our prison population in Ohio went from 31,862 in 1990 to 51,060 in 2009³.

Being locked up, we have had conversations with other prisoners that we consider friends. We asked them why they did what they did. Most said crime was what they were taught or all they knew. Logically thinking, we need to be taught something else. Education enlightens us to better ways of life and teaches us how to financially support ourselves. A former prisoner states: “While incarcerated and attending college I learned a tremendous amount of things. One being organized and to take care of my responsibilities. When solving a problem, not to look at one way of solving, but several ways of doing so”. He also stated: “Life isn’t the same. I plan ahead now instead of rolling with the punches”. He is currently enrolled in college and majoring in psychology.

The following quotes are some examples of current prisoner’s views on education:

Education has given me hope for a better start when I get released from prison; it gives me confidence to be able to do what needs to be done when I’m released. I will be able to support my family. That’s why I feel it’s going to help me in life.

And,

Education for me has helped me grow and take more responsibilities in life. I found that I can believe in myself and become a success.

And,

Educational training has changed my outlook on life by giving hope and possibly a new lease on life. My training can help me only if I pursue avenues in which my newly acquired knowledge and skills are relevant. This experience has helped me to exercise a better and more disciplined work ethic.

And,

I was sentenced to ten years in prison. Part of my plea agreement was to get Judicial Release after five years (early release) for good behavior. The major thing about this is that if your out date is over five years then you are put on a waiting list. By the time I become eligible for the programs, it will be too late because you can be up for judicial release and you may not have any programs completed. That may stop you from being released. These are depressing concerns I have.

These men's statements show us we can to effectively reduce crime, the prison population and various other problems in our society by funding more educational programs. After all, most people who get locked up get out.

We have asked many prisoners who came back, why? They all in their own ways or words said the same thing – "I know nothing else". Yet, education in prison and the participants' statistics show success: re-arrest rates are 50%; re-conviction 26% and reincarceration 24% compared to those who did not receive or participate in educational programming whose re-arrests are 58%, re-conviction 33%, and reincarceration 31% (Steurer *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, recent research in the state of Ohio disentangles the effects of college, high school, G.E.D., vocational training, and no education on the likelihood of returning to prison, for any reason up to 13.5 years past release and finds that college has the strongest impact on reducing recidivism rates (Batiuk *et al.*, 2005).

THE INSIDE-OUT PRISON EXCHANGE PROGRAM

Though we postulate a sense of justice as a foundation of social life, there is much evidence to indicate that the public, lacking understanding

and interests in the causes of crime, still clings to the idea of individual responsibility (Clemmer, 1958, p. 318).

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program is an international initiative directed at transforming ways of thinking about crime and justice⁴. The idea for the program came from Paul Perry, a man serving a natural life sentence in Pennsylvania, and was established by Lori Pompa in 1997 to bring college students and incarcerated individuals together as peers in a classroom setting that emphasizes dialogue and critical thinking. In the hopes of expanding this innovative partnership between institutions of higher learning and prison systems nationally, Pompa organized the Inside-Out National Instructor Training Institute in 2004, with the assistance of the Philadelphia Prison System, Temple University and the Soros Foundation. To date, over 310 instructors from more than 150 colleges and universities in 37 states, two Canadian provinces and abroad have taken part in the Training Institute, returning to their universities and offering upwards of 300 classes across a range of disciplines⁵. As a result, Inside-Out has been able to bring over 10,000 “inside” (incarcerated) and “outside” (university) students together in classrooms behind prison walls.

The first two authors participated in the Inside-Out course that the third author offered at SCC in Autumn 2010. A few critical elements of the inside-out pedagogy are: the use of first names only; the ongoing conversations about the use of labeling language (e.g. use of obvious negative terms like “inmate”, but also more subtle linguistic terms such as “us” or “them”); circles for all class discussions (alternating inside and outside students); students are required to actively participate each week; each participant’s voice is equal, including the instructor whose role is as facilitator rather than expert lecturer; and, each class culminates with a group project designed to utilize empirical research to guide specific criminal justice policy recommendations, which is formally presented at a public closing ceremony⁶. Furthermore, it is made clear to the inside students that they are not only not expected to talk about what they are in for (e.g. convictions). The outside participants are not there to study those on the inside. We do not know what they are convicted of, as it is not our business and it is not relevant to what we are studying or the Inside-Out Prison experience. The goal of the course is to study issues, not people.

Our particular course content includes a series of critical readings and discussions focused upon such topics as the origins and development of the American criminal justice system, the historical and contemporary use of punishment and rehabilitation, the re-emergence of restorative justice, and the broader relationship between criminal and social justice. The course structure includes weekly three-hour sessions at the prison site. Enrollment includes 10-15 undergraduate university students and 10-15 incarcerated students. All course participants write a minimum of six reflection papers. The papers require that the students observe, reflect, analyze, and integrate the information in the readings with the prior week's discussion. In lieu of a final exam, a final paper of approximately ten pages in length is also required. The final paper is an opportunity for students to pull together the entire experience of the quarter, reflect on their own process (and that of the group), and further analyze the issues that were addressed.

Similar to previous research on the impact of higher education on prisoners (Torre and Fine 2005), Diesel and B describe perceptual shifts amongst inside student participants from seeing themselves as passive objects into seeing themselves as active subjects. They develop a sense of critical, personal agency, and an active, collective responsibility. To date, there are two specific published evaluations of Inside-Out courses that also support our perspectives of Inside-Out (see Davis and Roswell, 2013). Allred (2009) conducted a survey and an analysis of her Inside-Out students' reflection papers focused on one particular week's topic (what are prisons for) in order to determine how students ranked the importance of the structure of the class (icebreakers, large group brainstorming activities, and small group activities), the content of those class discussions, and the readings for that week. She found that students learned most from the course structure (followed by content and readings) because it created the interactions for students to shift their ideas about the topic and one another (2009). Second, Allred and colleagues (2013) conducted a pre/post General Self-efficacy Scale (Schwarzer and Jerusalem, 1995) survey across three different Inside-out courses. Not surprisingly, given the lower levels of educational attainment amongst prisoners, on the pre-course scale, outside students had significantly higher levels of general self-efficacy than inside students (Allred *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, at post-course administration of the survey, only the inside students experienced a significant increase in self-efficacy (*ibid*). The study lends support to the

importance of the Inside-Out pedagogy in that this study was implemented with different course content, at different prisons and with three different trained instructors, yet finds similar results.

It is important to note that when developing this course, the third author had university colleagues question the benefit of teaching a corrections class with prisoners. The assumption that was explicitly stated was that people in prison have obviously been directly impacted by corrections and therefore likely have the knowledge base. Of course, this is an erroneous assumption given that prisoners have had their individual subjective experiences in the system, but that does not equate to them necessarily having a full picture of the historical and contemporary issues prominent in corrections literature. In fact, often throughout the course, inside students commented about how little they knew about why things happened the way they did in their particular cases and many described moments of clarity after reading course material and discussing it in class in terms of understanding the context of the decisions that were made (see Mishne *et al.*, 2012). For most inside students, this course is likely the first prison educational experience where they had a voice, that their informed opinions mattered, and that they could have educational conversations with outside people who were not either family, nor worked in the system. It is likely the context of holding class inside the prison walls, the pedagogy of equal voices, and the interactions with each other as classmates shift participants’ perceptions of themselves, others and the criminal justice system. Of particular relevance, the theme of recognizing every person’s value as a human being is found in all five courses the third author has taught, as well as the realization that the prison system’s method of depersonalization (e.g. the identification of prisoners by either their prison number or last name) allows most members of society to forget this basic fact. The pedagogy and context of Inside-Out courses serves as a mechanism to erode structural barriers – physical and emotional – between “us” and “them”.

It is tragic that Pell Grants have yet to be reinstated for incarcerated men and women, as well as disappointing that many Inside-Out incarcerated students across the country do not earn college credits for their participation. SCC students are offered college credit for the course. According to the Ohio State University – Newark Dean MacDonald (Summer, 2011, National Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program newsletter, p. 4):

In a short time frame, Angela obtained internal and external grant funds to ensure the program's initial success and achieve permanent course-offering status. At the same time, she worked to ensure that both 'inside' and 'outside' participants who successfully completed her rigorous course achieved the same result: college credit. For her second course, she took interested 'inside' students through the university's admissions process and inspired our campus to utilize non-state-subsidized funds to support tuition costs for 'inside' students. But, she didn't stop there. Over the last year, she navigated multiple university offices and campuses to gain support from numerous decision-makers to make college credit and tuition for 'inside' students an enduring reality. The foundation of our rationale for doing so is that, without the incarcerated students' participation in the course, we would not be able to offer this unique experiential learning opportunity.

And, according to Warden Duffey at SCC (*ibid*):

Though cautious of such a different approach to learning for a correctional environment, this was an offer that appealed to me. Not only did the 'inside' students have a chance to participate in a course from a respected university, but they would be interacting with 'outside' students in a true learning environment...the excitement from the 'inside' students is easily seen. Word travels fast within the confines of the fence and the 'inside' students have heard they will be challenged each week. When they finish this course, they will have pride for completing such a demanding criminal justice class, and they will have a college credit. The 'inside' students were willing to participate in this course for the educational experience. They were not expecting to be able to obtain a college credit. This bonus adds to the positive reentry for 'inside' students to one day become 'outside' students. I have been pleasantly surprised to see the ownership taken by the offenders. They strive to comply with prison rules and maintain a positive attitude. Their self-confidence grows week to week as they feel like 'real' students. It has become the norm for the 'inside' students to speak about furthering their education upon their release. The Inside-Out program is more than a college class; it has become a vital step in the rehabilitative process, changing values and trends.

OUR INSIDE-OUT EXPERIENCE: B AND DIESEL

Higher education changed our experiences from sitting in ignorance to embracing our lives, responsibilities and dreams. One of the most enlightening educational experiences we have had was the Inside-Out course we both completed in Autumn 2010. More people should have the Inside-Out experience – it is amazing to see what an inspirational professor can do. By showing through examples of perseverance and encouragement, students are pushed further. We were shown we could do more than just waste our time in prison. Programs like the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program are needed in all prisons to inspire true change.

Starting the inside-out class in 2010, we never thought we would see in writing what we had felt over the long years of our incarceration. Everyone convicted is sentenced to life in one form or the other – a lifetime of roadblocks and “invisible” punishments not stated at sentencing (Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002). No longer are we judged by who we are and what we can achieve, but rather where we have been and we are from. Our skin is stained “blue” and we are permanently segregated by where we can work and live as convicted felons. The class showed us that we have all (not just those of us incarcerated) have been hurt by others and regretfully, hurt someone else. To quote some of our inside classmates:

Inside-Out has changed the way I view my incarceration. It has shown me not to become a bitter man but a better man.

And,

The thing that affected me most in the class is how many people are victims of crime. Not only did it hurt my heart that I added to these statistics, but it opened my eyes to how I can change and help others in my situation. I guess higher education goes hand in hand with rehabilitation.

And,

Inside-out was an opportunity to see other people’s perspectives other than mine on the criminal justice system. It made me realize that I am

not the only one who saw the problems. The course was something that I learned to love and look forward to each week. The realization of us all being equal for a short period of time was the most important aspect.

We all came to realize that because of the hurt we caused, our skin is stained blue and we are cursed for it, but blessed because of it. At the heart of Inside-Out is the realization that we are all just people – people who have hurt and been hurt, people who laugh, cry, mourn, and struggle. The class let us rest easier knowing there are actually people who care, people who recognize what us “blue” are experiencing, and people who are really trying to change the system. To say Inside-Out meant a lot to us would be an understatement. It is life changing... ‘is’ because we are still growing from the experience. We took that class to be able to broaden the ‘outside’ students’ perceptions, and to learn more about criminal justice other than what we experienced. Little did we know that it would be our perceptions that were blown out of the water. We learned so many life lessons alongside the course readings. After a disagreement in class, we realized how we came across to people, even though it was not intentional. We learned it is not how you perceive what you are saying, it is how others perceive it. It taught us not to let prison conquer us into believing this is the only way of life. We learned how to shape a better future, surrounding ourselves with the right people and continuing education.⁷

ADDING AND DIVERSIFYING EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES IN PRISON

With the success of higher education on reducing recidivism, why not diversify education and make it for prisoners? If we did, fewer people would come back. Utilizing research by Steurer and colleagues (2001), if 200,000 prisoners were educated, we would only see 48,000 (24%) come back to prison. That is 152,000 staying out with their kids in their own family and/or community. That is 152,000 ex-prisoners showing kids in the community new and better ways to live. Not only does reincarceration drop dramatically by educating prisoners, but future crime will drop because misled children will be led differently and influenced to make better decisions. Diversifying education opportunities will create less crime, which means fewer victims and fewer prisons. This ultimately means less tax payer money being spent

on warehousing prisoners. It means less money spent on task forces. It means more people contributing. It is common knowledge that being locked up reduces one’s chances at job opportunities upon release. It can be hard for people without a prison number to get a job without a college education. We know that in order for us to maintain and survive in the world outside of prison, we would essentially have to know more than we did and work harder than the average person.

Offering online courses would greatly help the deficiencies prisoners face today. The internet offers countless opportunities for education, yet it is banned in most prisons. A teacher could use a computer as a monitoring device to facilitate internet-based courses in prison and ensure prisoners’ access was limited to the course only. Additionally, teachers could have the ability to copy assignments and other materials from the web and download them directly to students’ computers without allowing direct access to the internet. Indirect access to the internet would diversify the college courses offered in prison and provide the necessary educational experiences for prisoners to be successful upon release.

If incarcerated people are enrolled in educational programs, it will give them a chance to learn how to function in society better. It will teach us the skills we need to obtain a higher paying job. Most of all, it will end the excuse of “this is all I know”. Reinstating Pell grants to provide post-secondary education in prisons would change prison experiences, making prison a place of active learning, rather than a place to sit and wait until your released. We have personally experienced how educational opportunities can change an individual. Experiences and education are intertwined – one cannot exist without the other. There are great outcomes for prisoners who participate in postsecondary education, but as technology changes, curriculum should also be updated like it was in our Inside-Out course. In a few of our prison-based college courses, we use books that “Father Time” used. How are such outdated materials going to help prisoners? The longer the sentence served, the greater the disadvantages are for understanding technological developments. Punishing people for crime by banning us from society is one thing; crippling our knowledge by keeping us ignorant is another that serves no one, especially the communities we will re-join. We have learned if you have a desire to change you can, but only if you can obtain the knowledge you need to change.

TRUE CHANGE FOR DIESEL

While there were many reasons for personal change, there is no light switch that can be magically switched. Like the majority of prisoners, I did not automatically change because I was sentenced to prison. I wanted change so much that I thought I did change, but I was lacking the tools to actually change. When you are ignorant to new ways of living, you try but never accomplish much. Some great programs at SCC like Victims Awareness and Anger Management are designed to push you in a new direction, but it really is just a first step. After this first step, you wonder around mindlessly for a while you may move forward or backward or even further back than you were. The desire to change is definitely necessary and the majority of prisoners have this desire, but need much more than the first step to make change a reality. Higher education shows you the means to pursue a different life.

Almost everyone who has lost their freedom desires change, so how does throwing them in a stagnant place help? As an example, unripened fruit has not realized its potential. When it falls, it may bruise another piece of fruit on its way down to the ground. The caretakers pick up the unripened fruit and throw it in a box with the other bruised rotting fruit, where it starts to rot faster. If someone removes the piece of fruit, the rotting slows, but does not stop. It takes animals (programs) to eat the rotting flesh away and someone (education) has to take that seed and plant it. If provided the appropriate nutrients, the seed becomes a mighty tree that produces its own fruit.

Personally, prison was reason enough for me to want to change because of the hurt I caused and the place I landed. I came to realize that I lived my life in a repetitive circle – I would do good, then bad, then real good, then real bad, over and over again. Even though situations, places and people changed, the circle of my actions did not. I was a defiant person who was rebellious at heart. I lived selfishly with my own will and in turn, lost almost half of my life. My entire life I kept waiting for something to change, ignorant to actually making the change myself. When you want a car and do not have the resources to know how to get one, how do you go about getting a car? You do not unless you are educated on how to obtain the means to get a loan to purchase a car. I kept wondering why things kept happening to me, playing a victim when I was only a victim because of my own actions. I have lost many loved ones over the years and each experience made me

never want to be in prison again. It is the same process for people in the free world. If I would not have made that decision, this and that would not have happened. We all participate in the “what if and could have been” conversations with ourselves.

When I lost one of the most significant people in my life, my grandmother, I was asked to be a pallbearer, something I never expected given the harms I have caused my family. I could not fulfill this request because of being incarcerated. I started to change because of this significant loss, but also because I was now finally eligible for college education in prison. I put everything I had into the first quarter even though throughout primary education I had received poor grades. With all my efforts (something I never put into primary education), I earned all A’s and quickly learned that hard work and persistence pay off in achievements. Instructors told me that I was an above average student, an over-achiever, and a reminder of why they chose to teach to feed the hunger I had for knowledge. The more I learned, the hungrier I became for knowledge. People on the yard even started asking me what was different about me. I did not know then, but realize now it was the confidence in my walk, confidence that I am learning so much more about myself than the text.

Then, I took the Inside-Out course. It was life changing, a real eye opener. To write about all the things the course offered is another article. The class made me come to an understanding that truly challenged everything I had ever believed in and previously thought; that actions will always follow your beliefs and thoughts. It broadened my perceptions so much that I can never be the same person because of all the monumental changes I went through during the course. I changed my perceptions of everyone and they changed their perceptions of me. I realized I came off to people as very assertive (perhaps even aggressive) and I thought I was not judgmental, but quickly realized I was. One exercise we did in the class showed us that there may be “rights” and “wrongs”, but not hard facts on who was right or what wrong took place. I was voted to have the honour of giving the speech at the public closing ceremony. When people heard what I said, many audience members teared-up and prison officials even rushed over to shake my hand and tell me that I had changed their perception of “inmates” forever. The media asked me for a copy of my speech to print and I observed heart-filled moments from everyone that day. I have never been more proud of who I was until that day. Everyone in that class will never forget the three months

we learned from one another. I learned more from that class than what we ever discussed from the readings. I learned that there is no limit to one's life potential. There is no measuring tape in life that states you can only go this far. I realized that when a person sets a limit for themselves in life that is all the further they will go. I realized that if you keep putting yourself out there, eventually people notice. I have become a different man with the assistance of higher education. I now have the tools for how to live as a helping hand to society rather than a taker from society. Without education, change is impossible. You can have all the want for change in the world, but you have to learn a different way in order to walk one.

To me, change is changing the "what ifs" to "what will be" by learning how. Persistence in the right things leads to good outcomes. I learned what true ambition is and I now apply it to everything I do. Rather than waiting for something to happen and becoming stagnant, I pursue educational opportunities and become enriched. The courses I take make me more confident in life. I do not know the turns in the road ahead of me, but I do believe I can cross over any struggle because I have learned how. Knowledge makes me feel like a kid on Christmas morning waiting to unwrap more mysterious gifts that are still unknown. Enlighten the people of better turns and show them they can make the turn, and they will. My life was a turn of losses, but now I know how to achieve and have gained the ability to help others and so much more. True change is through education.

TRUE CHANGE FOR B

Change can only occur when that person wants to change. For better or worse, it is up to the individual. For me, I am trying my hardest to change for the better in order to set an example for my family. I want to show my family that even if you make a mistake (crime), you can turn your life around. Secondly, I want to prove to myself that I am not a failure and that I can control my own life. An old wise saying is that "knowledge is power" and I believe that to be true. If you cannot read or write, there is no opportunity for legal employment. In addition to reading and writing, college is a tool to obtain more power over how to live your life. The more you learn about something, the better you can become at that trade. College has provided me an environment where I can learn what I feel I need to succeed. College also provides me with a documented statement that I am

trying. I can send home certificates to my family to let them know I am not just sitting in prison. Life is what we make of it and if we do not try and learn how to change, we will not change.

When taking the Inside-Out course, I noticed that one class changed me greatly. We were able to discuss and hear how others view crime and ethics. What really hit me was a victimization survey we did in class because it revealed that the happy people sitting beside me had been through a lot in their lives. Every person was either directly victimized by crime or had a loved one victimized. This information put faces on statistics. Now, every time I read a statistic like, “this state has an average of 50% recidivism” or “1 out of every 10 households has a woman who has been sexually assaulted”, I think of those faces. I think of my sister, niece, mother, neighbours and friends and, for the first time, can put myself in their shoes. It also saddened me to know I added to those statistics. Honestly, I looked at myself differently after that class.

Studying the effects of prison on family members was also a big eye opener for me. I know it is stressful on prisoners being locked up, but it is probably worse for our families. Trying to stay in touch with loved ones in prison can be quite expensive. My own family drives over two hours to visit me to show their support, which I must admit is a big hit to my male ego because of feeling like a child again who needs the love and support of their family. I learned how stressful it can be on a family to have the breadwinner, father/mother, husband/wife incarcerated. In part, this is why it is so natural to be on edge in prison. I started understanding how people felt and in the end, started treating people better. Taking the Inside-Out class taught me to be more empathetic to people’s views, opinions and situations. That may not have been in the course syllabus, but some of the best lessons learned can be just inside of an experience alone. I had a wonderful teacher who pushed me to do my best and I met some amazing people along the way. In fact, without that class and experience, I would not be writing this article today.

CONCLUSION

While there are good reasons to question a full restoration of rehabilitation, there are reasons to look there. One is that while modern rehabilitative correctionalism drew on many ideas from the UK and from Europe, it had strong American roots in its optimism about science and technology and

about personal transformation. Much of the same optimism has helped to fuel mass incarceration on the promise that the warehouse prison could bring down crime by incapacitating criminals (Simon, 2010, p. 269).

As it has been proven over the centuries, history repeats itself over and over again unless change is implemented. While the illusion of a crime free world is a farce, methods for evaluating reducing crime need consistently re-evaluated in order to change as the world changes. Too often we have people in positions of power who seem to build their careers on being “tough on crime”. While we are not questioning the need for punishment, it is the rehabilitation of the criminalized that the public is greatly misinformed about. Prison officials build smoke screens for the public with numbers, such as the numbers of prisoners per education class and the numbers of hours spent in the classroom. This information is presented to the public to instill a false sense of security and relinquish any feelings of societal responsibility. What the public does not know is just how behind the times correctional education is. Many people may argue that criminals do not deserve an education or any help whatsoever, but what they fail to acknowledge is the glaring fact that 95 percent of us are coming back to society, whose members need to decide whether they want ex-prisoners to be prepared to be a productive member of society or simply become another burden to society again. Higher education holds the most promise to reducing recidivism and in order to prepare people, this education must use current materials and technology. One cannot deny that utilizing course materials and technology that is over 14 years old in prison is viewed as acceptable because we are viewed as sub-par human beings. Former prisoners are already at a huge disadvantage when attempting to re-enter the workforce without adding fuel to the fire of a less than adequate education. Even worse, we are lead to believe that the education provided to us in prison is adequate for the workforce.

Statistics show that education is the key for the young not to go and the older to stay out of prison. Why do we ignore what we know for sure? It is time for us to stop focusing on the problem and start looking at the answer. Overall, knowledge leads to making the right experiences. Knowledge is the key for one to take control of their own life. With that said, we believe that diversifying the educational programs in prison will help reduce crime and give people what is most important – hope for a better life. This creates less victims and more positive influences in communities. Indirect internet-based courses can diversify course offerings in prison and allow

more fields of study people would actually want to pursue upon release. Methods of course instruction and course materials can stay current without adding additional costs to the budget, such as Inside-Out courses. While we recognize the amazing growth of the Inside-Out program over the last ten years, we believe more universities and prisons should partner to utilize this pedagogy because it is beneficial for all involved. We also believe that current Inside-Out universities should offer more series-based courses in order to allow all students, but particularly incarcerated students, to continue down the educational path.

We are all guilty of acting first without thinking because it is so easy to wash your hands of the outcomes when you believe you are not directly involved or impacted. As a society, we are all involved in the Prison Industrial Complex no matter what lies we tell ourselves to sleep better at night. It is time we take a hard honest look at the current penal system for what it is – a failure. Education is transformative and needed to change the failing correctional system. We are after all products of our experiences.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ See <<http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cfm?id=107>>.
- ² See <<http://www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/facts>>.
- ³ See <<http://www.lsc.state.oh.us/fiscal/ohiofacts/sep2010/justiceandpublicsafetysystems.pdf>>
- ⁴ For a comprehensive overview of Inside-Out see Davis and Roswell (2013).
- ⁵ For more information see <<http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>>.
- ⁶ For a discussion of some of the problems with some of the parameters and rules of Inside-Out see VanGundy, Bryant and Starks (2013).
- ⁷ See Mishne and colleagues (2012) for a further discussion of what both inside and outside students gain.

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Brandon “B” Willis was incarcerated at SCC from 2007-2012 for felonious assault. During his incarceration, he attended Hocking Community College for business management and landscape management and held a 3.8 GPA. Since his release, he has been employed as a foreman for a landscape company where he leads work crews for new home installation design in the Cincinnati, Ohio area. He also trains and competes in martial arts, as well as pursues his hip hop music. He also serves as an invited guest lecturer at Ohio universities and Inside-Out regional meetings to discuss the barriers ex-prisoners face upon release. He has co-authored a paper with Diesel and two former outside students on the Inside-Out experience (see Mishne *et al.*, 2012).

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