

# Book Notes

## LIBERATING MINDS: THE CASE FOR COLLEGE IN PRISON

by Ellen Condliffe Lagemann

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In *Liberating Minds: The Case for College in Prison*, author Ellen Condliffe Lagemann introduces readers to Anthony Cardenales, or Tone, a young man born into a poor family in the South Bronx. Tone's father was addicted to drugs and his mother couldn't maintain steady employment, circumstances that made growing up difficult. Tone dropped out of school in the seventh grade, began dealing drugs and committing armed robbery, and was eventually imprisoned on murder charges. It wasn't until his eight-year-old daughter started getting into fights just as he had that he decided to make a change and "embarked on a decade-long journey toward his bachelor's degree" (p. 33). He enrolled in a college-in-prison program through Bard College and eventually graduated and gained employment. Tone's is one of many stories that give texture to Lagemann's discussion of college in prison, forming a compelling economic and civic argument for the benefits of higher education in carceral spaces.

Lagemann's insightful book draws on several sources of data. The first is her own deep experience serving as a teacher and adviser in the New York State prisons, where Bard operates college programs. In addition to the biographical data she includes about students she has known, grounding her analysis in "firsthand reports and observations" (p. 9), Lagemann also draws on extant research related to college in prison, highlighting studies that show decreases in recidivism rates, economic benefits, and the positive spillover effects of these programs for families and communities on the outside. The first five chapters enumerate the many benefits of college in prison, and the last three chapters discuss concrete examples of diverse prison education programs as well as the successes and persistent challenges that define these programs. Through her detailed review of existing research, the final chapters reveal the relative scarcity of both higher education programs in prisons and rigorous research about them and the persistent importance of expanding both.

In chapter 1 Lagemann highlights the personal and academic benefits of college for incarcerated people. Quoting the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education (2007), Lagemann notes that the traditional arguments in favor of higher education, such as "expanding horizons, building understanding of the wider world, honing analytical and communication skills, and fos-

tering responsibilities beyond self” (p. 3), are particularly important for people who are incarcerated. She explains that prisoners have often had limited, negative experiences with education prior to their incarceration and thus few opportunities to develop the skills or outlook that college can foster. In this opening chapter, she paints a compelling portrait of the importance of higher education for all students and the particularly significant benefits for incarcerated individuals.

The focus shifts in chapter 2 as Lagemann documents the myriad economic benefits of college in prison. As Lagemann highlights, prisoners with college degrees are much more likely to find employment than those without, and the benefits of this employment are accrued not only to the formerly incarcerated but to society more broadly. Furthermore, higher education in prison has been shown to drastically reduce rates of recidivism, as individuals who have attended college while incarcerated are able to “land good jobs and otherwise reintegrate successfully into their families and communities” (p. 38). The incredible cost of mass incarceration, most of which falls to states rather than to the federal government, means that any strategy to reduce the number of people who return to prison, and thus decrease the prison population, would save taxpayer dollars. Throughout this chapter Lagemann integrates extensive data about the cost of mass incarceration, states’ relative spending on education, and the savings that states would accrue through decreased prison populations. She convincingly argues that increased college access in prison is a “smart economic investment” (p. 52), as it decreases recidivism, and thus the prison population, and prepares the formerly incarcerated to enter the workforce after release and contribute to the tax base.

Pivoting from the economic benefits of college in prison to the ways that these programs affect carceral spaces themselves, chapter 3 takes readers inside a women’s prison in California, where we meet Normal Stafford, an incarcerated woman who is grappling with the loneliness and worthlessness that the prison environment imbues. Lagemann explains that while the violence inside prisons has been well documented, “what is less commonly understood is how stultifying time in prison is, how it saps people of a sense of purpose and undermines their sense of agency over their lives” (p. 54). In contrast, educational opportunities in prison provide the incarcerated with a sense of purpose; help them build positive, supportive relationships; and decrease both the isolation and the violence. Furthermore, the presence of college in prison changes the prison broadly, as relationships between inmates generally become less violent and more collaborative and as students in the college program share materials and information with those not enrolled. As one student explains, while “one hundred students go to college . . . one thousand people are involved in education” (p. 70). College-in-prison programs contribute to safer and more rehabilitative prison environments.

College in prison does not just have positive ripple effects within prisons but in communities outside of them as well. In chapter 4 Lagemann illustrates

the various positive ramifications of prison education for those living outside. She explains how “whole communities also suffer substantial ‘collateral damage’” when their members are imprisoned:

Incarceration is highly concentrated in neighborhoods that are devastated by poverty. Those sent to prison from these neighborhoods usually return to them when they are released, and they are often unable to find good jobs. As a consequence, the communities experience rising unemployment and with it deepening poverty and more crime. (p. 76)

In contrast, people who access higher education while incarcerated are often the first in their families or communities to achieve academically, both offering a positive example and encouraging other family members to follow a similar path. This education also decreases stigma and reinforces familial bonds and can even allow families to see the incarcerated individual as a role model. This is particularly the case when education in prison leads to more stable and lucrative employment and to opportunities for the formerly incarcerated to help the communities they return to.

Chapter 5 focuses on the role college can play in increasing civic engagement among the incarcerated. Like education outside of prison, attending college in prison can “promote civic competence and support student aspirations to make a positive difference for other people” (p. 95). Courses that focus on debate and social inquiry provide incarcerated students with the frameworks to understand and ameliorate the stratification and inequality that characterize US society. Thus, given that formerly incarcerated individuals are not permitted to serve on juries or work in public service, let alone vote in many states, Lagemann argues that the sense—and skills—of civic responsibility that college in prison can foster allows for alternate routes to meaningful engagement on release.

Chapters 6 and 8 tackle oppositions to increased college access for the incarcerated and showcase both the relative dearth of programs nationwide and the differences among those that do exist. In chapter 6 Lagemann outlines a detailed history of the various types of prison education programming that existed prior to the 1974 report by Robert Martinson that claimed there were no positive outcomes of prison programming. This chapter has a clear thesis: based on numerous studies, we know that prison education *does* have positive results. The types of educational programs in prison that work are those that foster a sense of autonomy, that individuals choose to engage in, and that participants do not experience as coercive. Chapter 8 highlights both the incredible diversity of programs that do exist as well as the general dearth of higher education in prison: in 2005, “only 5 percent of the 1,401,404 men and women imprisoned . . . were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education” (p. 155). As Lagemann reveals, research about education in prison is remarkably limited, with few studies that can be used to advocate for expanded educational offerings or tweak those that do exist.

Chapter 7 explores lessons from Bard College's prison education work. Here, Lagemann reiterates the central role of choice in successful prison education programs and highlights how vital high expectations are. In Bard's model, the expectations for students in prison are just as steep as those for students on the outside, and faculty treat all students as just that—*students*. Bard also provides reentry support and has helped to seed a variety of other college-in-prison programs that together form the Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison.

Lagemann concludes the book with a defense of college in prison and a road map for how it might be achieved at scale. She notes the growing tide of support for “college-for-all” (p. 20) and praises President Obama's renewal of Pell grant eligibility for prisoners, which allows prisoners to receive federal subsidies for higher education while incarcerated. As the political tides shift, however, one can't help but wonder whether it will be possible to act on Lagemann's vision, tying a commitment to college for all to increased Pell grant eligibility and expansion of college-in-prison programs. One can only hope that the political will she cites persists, bringing us closer to the vision she so eloquently elaborates.

*Liberating Minds* is not a critical theory piece about structural and interpersonal racism, bias in sentencing, or the connection between slavery and incarceration, as other recent pieces about prisons are (Alexander, 2010; Stevenson, 2014), although it does touch on these issues. Rather, this book has a different purpose: to provide a compelling and multifaceted argument for renewed engagement with and expansion of college in prison that can motivate and guide policy makers, university administrators, and educators. It succeeds mightily in this goal, making it a book for anyone interested in prison reform, sound economic and antipoverty policies, and the ongoing fight for equity and justice in education.

CELIA REDDICK

## References

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