

# **Prison Postsecondary Education: Bridging Learning from Incarceration to the Community**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Inmates reentering society face a wide range of challenges, from securing employment and housing to treating substance abuse and mental and physical illnesses to reconnecting with their families and communities (Urban Institute: Justice Policy Center, 2006, p. 2). With nearly 700,000 inmates released from prisons in the United States each year and many more from jails, a growing number of states are working hard to identify effective methods for helping inmates meet the challenges of reentry and successfully reintegrate into society.<sup>1</sup> These approaches can include prison education programs (adult basic education and academic and vocational postsecondary education), life-skills and job-readiness training, job placement assistance, mentoring services, and pre- and post-release case management (Solomon, Waul, VanNess, & Travis, 2004).

This paper focuses on prison postsecondary education programming, which attempts to address factors that contribute to incarceration and assist with reintegration into society by providing credit and non-credit college-level courses to inmates before their release from prison. Specifically, we describe several postsecondary correctional education programs primarily offered by community colleges, including programs in California, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas, Virginia, and Washington, and identify both challenges and solutions in providing these services to inmates. We also highlight program features that may improve reentry outcomes. The paper concludes with a discussion of research areas warranting further attention from researchers and policy makers.

## **THE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT GAP**

Although there is a societal tendency to want to lock up offenders and “throw away the key,” the reality is that 95 percent of prison inmates, who tend to be poor, ethnic or racial minorities, male, and young, will eventually be released to rejoin society and either return to their criminal lifestyles or adopt new, socially responsible patterns of behavior (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Freeman, 1996; Harlow, 2003; Harrison & Beck, 2006; Petersilia, 2003). On average, these inmates are less educated than the general population. Approximately 40 percent of inmates in state and federal prisons and jails do not have a high school diploma or a General Educational Development (GED) diploma, compared to 18 percent of the general population.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Reentry Policy Council (<http://reentrypolicy.org/>) was established in 2001 by the Council of State Governments Justice Center to help states develop, coordinate, and promote state and local strategies for addressing the challenges of reentry. The Council is currently developing an online assessment tool to measure the risks and needs of inmates to inform state supervision, treatment, and program plans. Other examples of states receiving assistance with their prisoner reentry strategies include the National Governors Association’s Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy ([www.nga.org/center/reentry/](http://www.nga.org/center/reentry/)), the President’s Prisoner Reentry Initiative ([www.reentry.gov](http://www.reentry.gov)), and the federally funded Serious Violent Offender Reentry Initiative (SVORI), which provided over \$110 million to state and local agencies “to develop new or existing programs offering integrated supervision and reentry services to adults or juveniles leaving correctional facilities” (Lattimore et al., 2004, p. 2).

The gap is even greater at higher education levels. While more than half of the general population has some college education, less than one-fourth of all state and federal inmates have any postsecondary education (Harlow, 2003).

Obtaining a college education, however, is becoming increasingly important in today's knowledge-based, global economy, as described by Irwin Braun, co-author of *America's Perfect Storm*:

The economy itself is experiencing seismic changes, resulting in new sources of wealth, new patterns of international trade, and a shift in the balance of capital over labor. These changes are causing a profound restructuring of the U.S. workplace, with a larger proportion of job growth occurring in higher-level occupations that require a college education, such as management, professional, technical, and executive-level sales. The wage gap is widening between the most- and least-skilled workers; men with bachelor's degrees can expect to earn almost twice as much over their lifetimes as those without (Education Testing Service, 2007).

Moreover, researchers argue that spending time in prison actually decreases one's ability to cope in the community and maintain employment, as the values needed to succeed in prison often directly conflict with societal norms (Bloom, 2006; Walters, 2003). Simply having a prison record also decreases a former inmate's ability to find employment that pays a livable wage (Bushway, 1998; Western, Kling, & Weiman, 2001). As a result, many former convicts return to their criminal behavior because they lack the educational and social skills necessary to function successfully in society (Kachnowski, 2005; Tyler & Kling, 2004; Visher, Winterfield, & Weiman, 2004).

Despite these obstacles, inmates on the whole want to secure employment upon release and, if they do, they are less likely to recidivate (Harer, 1994; Sampson & Laub, 1997; Uggen, 2000). A four-state longitudinal survey of inmates after their release from prison found that 26 percent said that they would have liked job training while incarcerated (Visher, LaVigne, & Travis, 2004). A study conducted by the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control to determine the usefulness of prison literacy and vocational programming found that inmates were more likely to participate in programs if they believed their participation could help them obtain a job after release. The study also found that inmates who enrolled in these programs while incarcerated were more likely to maintain employment and earn slightly higher wages than inmates who did not enroll (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1993).

Not all correctional institutions, however, are able to offer these programs to eligible and/or interested inmates. Although most prisons offer academic and vocational programs, many have waiting lists. In fact, according to the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy, more inmates reported being on waiting lists for vocational education programs than were enrolled (Greenberg, Dunleavy, & Kutner, 2007).

## **POSTSECONDARY CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

Given that education, specifically college education, is necessary to get ahead in today's labor market (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2005), more attention has been focused on postsecondary correctional education (PSCE) in recent years. In fact, the U.S. Congress is

considering changes to the Higher Education Act that would increase inmate access to postsecondary education.<sup>2</sup>

PSCE refers to any education, vocational or academic, taken for college credit, that occurs after an inmate has received a GED or high school diploma. Some states include non-credit courses and certification in their definition of PSCE, because these continuing education services, which cover a wide range of occupations, also give inmates the opportunity to increase their job marketability. Such education, whether credit or non-credit, can represent the difference between returning to criminal activities and possessing the skills and credentials necessary to find suitable employment upon release (Case & Fassenfest, 2004). Though a number of studies have indicated that participation in PSCE both improves behavior during incarceration and decreases recidivism rates (Chappell, 2004; Flinchum, Jones, Hevener, Ketzenelson, & Moore-Gurrera, 2006; MTC Institute, 2003; Steurer, Smith, & Tracy, 2001), few states offer postsecondary correctional education to prisoners in significant numbers (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). According to a 50-state analysis of postsecondary correctional education policy conducted by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) in 2005, less than 5 percent of prisoners are enrolled in PSCE across the United States. The IHEP study, however, found that the number of inmates enrolled in PSCE had returned to the levels found before the elimination of Pell grant eligibility for the incarcerated in 1994.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, given today's larger prison population, the actual number of inmates enrolled in PSCE during 2003-04 was significantly higher than before the removal of Pell grant eligibility (Erisman & Contardo, 2005).

The IHEP study also found that 68 percent of all postsecondary correctional education is provided by public community colleges. This finding was surprising in light of the media attention given to prison education programs provided by four-year institutions, such as the Bard Prison Initiative, the Boston University Prison Education Program, and the Prison University Project at San Quentin in California.

## **THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

With a century-old tradition of expanding educational access to everyone, particularly historically underrepresented groups and non-traditional students, community colleges are a natural partner for states that offer PSCE. This is evident in the demographic makeup of today's community college student population; most of the 11.6 million students (46 percent of all postsecondary education students in the U.S) are older, more likely to be racial and ethnic minorities, and often attend classes part time as they juggle other responsibilities (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.).

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<sup>2</sup> The U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 4137, the College Opportunity and Affordability Act, on February 7, 2008. It includes provisions that would make all age groups eligible for the Incarcerated Youth Offender grant—a formula grant to states that funds literacy, life, job skills, and postsecondary education programs—and expand the spending cap from \$1,800 per year to \$3,300. The bill now goes to conference committee to reconcile differences with the Senate version passed in July 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Several federal grant/funding programs that supported components of correctional education suffered during the “get tough on crime” movement in the 1990s, including the Pell grant, which funds the postsecondary education of low-income students. Before the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, inmates were eligible for Pell grants, but the 1994 law made inmates ineligible for Pell grants and other forms of financial assistance. Subsequent changes to the law have also prohibited anyone with a prior conviction for certain drug offenses from receiving Pell grants. Changes to the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act and the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act also restricted state spending on correctional education.

Community colleges also tend to cost less, with average tuition rates of \$2,272 annually in 2007, compared to \$5,836 at public four-year colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.). This low cost makes community colleges particularly attractive to prisons, since state and federal funding for correctional education has not kept pace with the growing prison population. Further, when Pell grant eligibility was eliminated for inmates in 1994, many PSCE programs lost their primary source of funding and needed to find more cost-effective education providers.

Community colleges also have a reputation for greater course flexibility and more direct contact with local community populations, especially industry (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). Often businesses requiring additional training and professional development for their employees approach their local community colleges to provide such education. According to Cohen and Brawer, community colleges “change frequently, seeking new programs and new clients... never satisfied with resting on what has been done before, they try new approaches to old problems” (p. 37). This tendency to seek out new client bases while responding to societal changes is important for PSCE; while many community college employees consider teaching prisoners to be part of their mission, many also are quick to point out that PSCE revenue helps maintain the financial stability of their institutions.

While the reasons states and prisons partner with community colleges to provide PSCE are generally consistent across the board, how these services are designed, implemented, and supported vary from state to state, and even from institution to institution. Variations can be found in structure, degrees and certificates awarded, funding, approaches to addressing inmate completion issues, and public relations tactics. These variations, described below, are significant because they may help or hinder inmates in using or continuing their education upon release.

## **Structure**

The structure supporting PSCE, whether centralized (coordinated at the state level), decentralized (coordinated on an institution-by-institution basis), or a combination of the two, can affect program content and the transferability of the credits, certificates, and degrees earned by inmates.

In general, the more decentralized a system is, the more difficulty it has with ensuring that college courses and programs articulate among state colleges and universities and are recognized by business and industry. Several states, for example, reported that the vocational programs offered by community colleges to inmates currently do not articulate with the same programs offered to non-incarcerated students. While these states have succeeded in getting employers to recognize their prison-based vocational programs, they are working hard to develop articulation agreements with the non-incarcerated college courses and among the various colleges providing inmates with these services. Moreover, since most state-supported PSCE is offered on-site rather than through distance education, the absence of a statewide articulation agreement can create transfer issues for inmates since inmates are often transferred from one facility to another and therefore may be unable to continue the course or program in which they were previously enrolled. A similar transfer issue may occur when inmates are released from prison; their hometown is generally not the same town where they were incarcerated and enrolled in college courses.

North Carolina is an example of a centralized model. Over the years, the state’s Community College System (CCS) and Department of Correction (DOC) have collaborated to provide PSCE to roughly a third of the state’s 36,000 inmates annually. This partnership was

created by legislative decree in 1987 and further refined by a 1993 General Assembly mandate assigning responsibility for the design of PSCE to the North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges (State Board), the governing authority for CCS. As a result, the State Board must approve each version of the cooperative agreement on programming between DOC and CCS. This agreement dictates everything from the management structure of the partnership to the programming parameters, such as how new prison programs are established, which agency has responsibility for which tasks, and inmate eligibility and participation regulations.

An important priority for the General Assembly, and one that is monitored by the State Board, is parity of course quality offered to inmates and non-incarcerated individuals. Local community colleges are allowed to provide prisons only with courses that are offered to local residents as well. Moreover, to ensure that correctional education programs maintain a coordinated and systematic focus, a joint course/program approval process has been adopted by CCS and DOC. Before a course may be recommended to the State Board for approval, it must be reviewed by state staff in both agencies. In making these recommendations, the agencies consider the appropriateness of the program for the offender population (e.g., licensing requirements and safety issues), statewide labor market demands, availability of funds and space, and offender average length of stay at a facility. Courses and programs also must lead to specific certificates or degrees; no stand-alone courses will be approved by the State Board. Inmate certificates and degrees, as well as college transcripts, are identical to those offered outside of prison and recognized by all state colleges. In addition, CCS has a comprehensive articulation agreement with the University of North Carolina System, comprised of 16 senior-level colleges and universities, that ensures that qualifying inmates with an associate's degree may enroll in a four-year institution upon release from prison.

### **Degrees and Certificates Awarded**

According to the IHEP 50-state analysis of postsecondary correctional education policy, PSCE programs have shifted from being primarily academic to increasingly vocational. In fact, 62 percent of inmates enrolled in college classes and 92 percent who earned a degree or certificate were enrolled in vocational programs (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Twenty-eight percent were enrolled in an associate's degree program and only 3 percent were enrolled in a bachelor's or graduate degree program. Based on these findings, the authors noted:

These numbers help to counter the perception that prisoners are being rewarded for their crimes with the opportunity to earn high-level college degrees. Rather, the postsecondary programs offered to prisoners are generally those that will aid their reentry into society by providing them with enhanced work skills (Erisman & Contardo, 2005, p. 19).

In Texas, for example, the majority of credentials awarded to inmates in 2005-06 were college vocational credit certificates (1,581) and college non-credit certificates (1,584). Only 374 associate's degrees and 48 bachelor's degrees were awarded. The vocational credit certificates include 23 different occupational trades and were available in 33 facilities in 2006. The non-credit vocational programs, "designed to provide a flexible and quick response to business, industry, and student needs for intensive preparatory, supplemental, or upgrade education," (Windham School District, 2006, p. 11) were available in 12 facilities. Classes leading to an associate's degree were available in 36 facilities, and only 4 facilities offered programs leading to a bachelor's degree.

**Table 1: Windham School District, Texas: Available College Credit Vocational Programs**

Air Conditioning / Refrigeration	Computer Repair	Drafting	Retail Sales & Marketing
Auto Body Repair	Construction Carpentry	Electronics	Substance Abuse Counselor
Auto Mechanics	Culinary Arts	Graphic Arts	Counselor
Auto Transmissions	Data Processing	Horticulture	Truck Driving
Cabinet Making	Desktop Publishing	Masonry	Web Authoring
Computer Networking	Diesel Mechanics	Office Administration	Welding

Data from Windham School District Annual Performance Report 2005-06

When selecting educational program offerings, Texas considers the availability of facilities (e.g., truck driving can only be taught in correctional facilities with a transportation hub) and occupations in demand within the state. Labor market data are provided annually by the Texas Workforce Commission and organized by the state’s 28 workforce investment areas. When analyzing this data, specific attention is given to large cities, since most inmates return to those areas when released.

Similar to Texas, North Carolina’s PSCE programming is predominantly vocational, with more than 6,000 vocational continuing education (non-credit) and 1,458 vocational curriculum (credit) certificates awarded in 2006, compared to less than 100 associate and bachelor’s degrees (Beck, Bennett, Boyette, & True, 2006). DOC and CCS employees in North Carolina take an extremely pragmatic approach in balancing academic and vocational PSCE and generally argue that prisoners ultimately need programming that leads to employment upon release. One current DOC employee spoke passionately on the subject, arguing:

If we want an ex-inmate to have any reasonable chance of going out and securing employment, we should be providing the type of training that will enable them to do that... there’s no magic bullet to this, this is common sense. Those fields are in the trades. They’re in the technical fields. It doesn’t mean that there aren’t thinking skills... but clearly opportunities in business in the traditional areas—certainly in human services, sales, to some extent—are severely limited.

In contrast to Texas and North Carolina, New Mexico’s PSCE courses are predominantly academic. Using money allocated through a line item in the state appropriations bill and federal dollars from the Incarcerated Youth Offender (IYO) grant, the New Mexico DOC’s Bureau of Education provides PSCE services to all state prisons and one private prison through contracts with just three state postsecondary institutions—a four-year university, a two-year university, and a community college. Because the state uses a distance-learning format via a closed-circuit Internet connection, eligible inmates can enroll in any of these three institutions to earn an associate, bachelor, or master’s degree. The most common program offered is the associate of arts in general studies. Because it is the core curriculum for a bachelor’s university studies degree, it articulates with all of New Mexico’s higher education institutions and therefore provides inmates with the credits needed to further their education upon release. While vocational programs are currently offered on-site by DOC’s Bureau of Education, the postsecondary education coordinator hopes to expand the courses available through distance learning.

## **Funding**

Funding availability affects the stability of PSCE programs, the resources available to inmates, and the willingness of community colleges and other postsecondary institutions to provide services. In their 2005 study, Erisman and Contardo found state financial support to be vital to ensuring widespread access to PSCE. In fact, 92 percent of inmates who earned a degree or certificate were incarcerated in prison systems with large inmate populations, a greater emphasis on short-term vocational degree and certificate programs, and a dependable and substantial state funding source (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). While programs such as the federal IYO grant and private donors are helpful, eligibility limitations and scarce resources often limit who may enroll.

Unlike other states, North Carolina's PSCE programs were virtually unaffected when the federal government eliminated prisoner eligibility for Pell grants, because the vast majority of PSCE never relied on that funding source. Instead, in the 1980s, the state developed several funding mechanisms to ensure inmate access to programming funded by the state, including tuition waivers, contact hour reporting, start-up funding, and education welfare funds. Taken together, these various mechanisms have combined to create a robust funding structure enabling DOC and CCS to provide PSCE to over a third of all North Carolina inmates.

CCS provides tuition waivers for a number of citizens each year, including all enrolled inmates, which it can afford to do in part because it receives a relatively high appropriation from the state per full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment.<sup>4</sup> According to informants, state sponsored tuition is one of the keys to success in North Carolina. One former community college administrator pointed out, "How are they going to pay for it if you don't give them tuition? Simplest way, pay us to go ahead and do the job, that way we don't have to argue with the DOC." Moreover, state representatives believe the logistical issues involved in collecting tuition from inmates would be disruptive to the smooth functioning of the programming.

Another important component of North Carolina's PSCE funding is the appropriations process. The state does not make specific appropriations for prison education; rather, it treats inmates enrolled in college courses the same as non-incarcerated students. A 1988 agreement determined that both types of students would receive the same amount of FTE. However, because CCS receives its appropriation the year after education services are provided, CCS and DOC leaders developed a supplemental funding mechanism for new programs; when prisons are expanded or new programs authorized, the legislature provides start-up funds to DOC. In turn, DOC passes the money to CCS so that the college can pay its instruction costs for the first year, when the program is technically unfunded. Beginning in 1999, an additional source of funding for PSCE is a \$50,000 grant given annually by the General Assembly "to allow small community colleges to provide education and training for inmates that could not otherwise afford to provide services" (State Board of Community Colleges, 2005, p. 1). The chief financial officer (CFO) of CCS allocates this funding according to institutional need. There are no restrictions on how many institutions may apply, how many may receive funding, or how much funding they get. As a result, these funds are in demand, with numerous community colleges submitting funding requests annually.

A final source of funding comes from Inmate Welfare funds, which DOC collects from the prison canteens and inmate telephone calls. These funds can be used only for the direct

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<sup>4</sup> For institutions of higher education, FTE equals enrollment of full-time students, plus the full-time equivalent of part-time students as reported by institutions. In the absence of an equivalent reported by an institution, the FTE enrollment is estimated by adding one-third of part-time enrollment to full-time enrollment.

benefit of inmates, and enough funds are collected to pay the entire education budget for equipment and supplies, including books, computers, inmate desks and chairs, and writing and project materials. Inmate Welfare Funds fluctuate depending on the amount collected each year. In 2005, \$440,000 was redistributed to DOC to help defray the day-to-day costs of all types of correctional education. While nationally the collection and use of “inmate welfare funds” can be contentious, in North Carolina these funds are a vital resource, since no other funding source covers these day-to-day education costs.

In Texas, funding for PSCE comes through a line item under the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Windham School District, which then contracts with individual community colleges for services. The contract covers the colleges’ tuition and operating costs. The colleges also are reimbursed by the state for contact hours,<sup>5</sup> which helps to pay for instructor salaries and administrative costs. These funding sources, in turn, can help community colleges (particularly small, rural institutions) develop and expand their educational programming. For example, when PSCE was first offered in the state, Trinity Valley Community College began working with the Windham School District to educate inmates housed in nearby prisons because its mission was to serve all potential students in the district, including the incarcerated. While the original and core incentive for the college to partner remains unchanged, its relationship with Windham School District also has been institutionally beneficial. Trinity’s program has grown from approximately 20 inmates in 1969 to nearly 900 inmates year-round today.

Although state funding in Texas pays for the costs of tuition, fees, tests, and textbooks associated with inmates’ vocational training and one academic postsecondary education course per semester (the cost of additional courses must be paid directly to the college by the inmate at registration), inmates either must 1) repay the costs of tuition, fees, and tests (referred to as State Reimbursable Costs) after they are released from prison by developing a payment plan with their parole officer or 2) pay immediately for these costs using personal funds, scholarships, or grants.<sup>6</sup> Texas purchases the textbooks and re-uses them each semester. Only inmates 25 years of age or younger, and therefore qualified for the federal IYO grant, can enroll in PSCE programs without incurring State Reimbursable Costs.

In Virginia, inmates who do not qualify for the IYO grant must also pay for their college tuition (currently \$263 for a three-credit class), textbooks, and supplies. Some inmates, however, may be able to qualify for foundation-supported scholarships that help to fund postsecondary education for adult inmates. Kates Foundation, for example, was formed by the first female warden in Virginia, Elizabeth Kates, and provides a scholarship to cover the tuition of approximately 10-15 women each semester. The Charles Coe Scholarship was created by a doctor who was incarcerated as a youth and strongly believes education was critical to his successful reintegration into society.

In California, inmates older than 25 must pay for their college tuition, but most of these inmates meet the residency and income requirements to qualify for the Board of Governors Fee Waiver, a state financial aid program that waives college enrollment fees. Qualifying inmates

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<sup>5</sup> Some states, however, report being accused of “double-dipping” when DOC provides money to the college for the postsecondary education program and the college also is reimbursed by the state for the contact hours or FTEs of enrolled inmates. Most states, however, recognize that the two funding streams cover different costs associated with offering the services. In states where colleges are unable to collect money for the contact hours, colleges are more reluctant to provide the services since they will not be fully reimbursed for their expenses.

<sup>6</sup> Eligible inmates in Texas have at least two grants available to them: the Hazelwood Grants, which provide financial assistance to Texas Veterans, and the Texas Public Education Grants, which is a needs-based grant for undergraduate students in Texas.

must still pay for their textbooks and supplies. However, according to Coastline Community College, which offers college courses to more than 3,000 inmates in approximately 57 California correctional institutions through distance education, most prisons work with inmates to share and reuse books in order to reduce those expenses. At least three California community colleges (Palo Verde College, Chaffey College, and Lassen Community College) also use funding from the state's Extended Opportunity Program and Services, which targets educational and financially disadvantaged students, to provide inmates meeting specific eligibility requirements with face-to-face college counseling services, an orientation program, education planning, and academic progress monitoring. This state program also covers the cost of textbooks.

### **Completion Issues**

For many states, one of the biggest challenges for PSCE is low completion rates resulting from inmate transfers between prisons or work assignments that force or allow them to withdraw from PSCE programming. Though postsecondary education in general has been criticized for low graduation rates, critics speak even louder about PSCE, because public funds are used for programs that carry political baggage. Further, these low completion rates have a variety of effects specific to the incarcerated population, including failure to "credential" inmates with educational certificates and degrees that would help them gain employment after release, taxpayer dollars wasted paying for incomplete certifications, poor instructor morale as inmates cycle through their classes, and a general undervaluing of PSCE within the correctional setting.

In an attempt to address low completion rates due to inmate transfers, the Virginia Department of Correctional Education has an agreement with DOC to hold inmates enrolled in education classes until they complete their coursework. On occasion, however, other factors (e.g., drug treatment) "trump" this agreement. When considering these transfers, DOC works closely with the Superintendent of the Department of Correctional Education to determine the best solution.

Virginia's Department of Correctional Education also works closely with the contracting community colleges to ensure inmates complete their coursework. Its memorandum of agreement with the community colleges requires them to have an advisor meet with each student at least once per semester to review student transcripts, develop an education plan, and determine how they can continue their coursework upon release.

North Carolina's early PSCE programming also faced completion issues, and the state General Assembly acted in the mid-1990s to address them. First, the General Assembly passed legislation to ensure that community colleges would FTE student hours on the basis of contact hours rather than student enrollment. This ensures that colleges are reimbursed only for the hours inmates attend class, rather than based on enrollment as indicated by a course roster. Furthermore, the General Assembly dictated that "No community college shall operate a multi-entry/multi-exit class or program in a prison facility, except for a literacy class or program" ("North Carolina General Statutes", Section 115D-5(c1)). As a result, the community colleges receive funding only for programs inmates completed. While on the surface this may seem punitive to the colleges, it also gives the colleges ammunition when working with DOC officials. If the college cannot receive state funding for its offerings, it will cancel that program offering, forcing the prisons to find other ways to prevent inmate idleness. In addition, the North Carolina General Assembly asked the State Board of Community Colleges to "work with the Department of Correction on offering classes and programs that match the average length of stay of an inmate in a prison facility" ("North Carolina General Statutes", 2006, GS 115D-5). The result of

this 1993 directive was the cornerstone of North Carolina PSCE today, the North Carolina correctional education matrix.

The North Carolina correctional education matrix is based on a careful formula that ensures that specific PSCE programs are offered only at prisons where inmates would be able to finish them. Specifically, a prison's matrix category is decided by the DOC based on the average length of stay of inmates at that facility:

- **Category 1 (2-month minimum length of stay):** Basic skills, employment readiness, and drug and alcohol treatment.
- **Category 2 (4-month minimum length of stay):** All programs in category 1 plus occupational extension courses and certificate programs.
- **Category 3 (12-month minimum length of stay):** All programs in category 2 plus diploma programs.
- **Category 4a (24-month minimum length of stay):** All programs in category 3 plus technical associate's degree programs.
- **Category 4b (24-month minimum length of stay):** All programs in category 4a plus college transfer and academic associate's degree programs. (From Beck, Bennett, Boyette, & True, 2007)

If the average length of stay is 120 days, only programs that can be completed within this amount of time can be offered by the local community college, ensuring that inmates participating in PSCE will receive at least college certification. As a result of this matrix, only prisons classified as a "2" or higher can provide PSCE. As indicated by Figure 1, however, most of North Carolina's 77 prisons fall within this group.

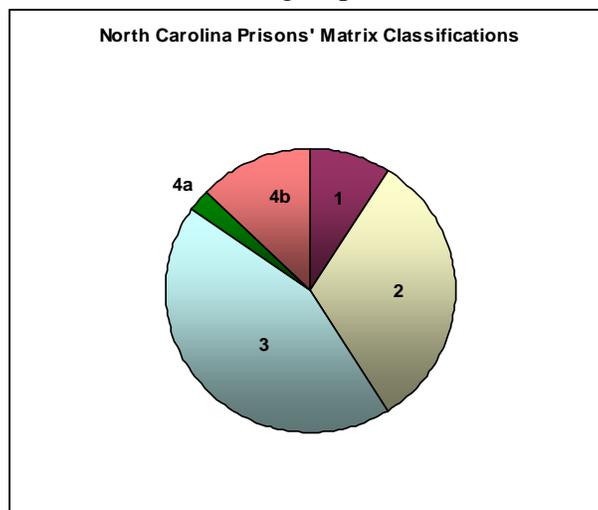


Figure 1: Prison classifications

Like North Carolina, New Mexico has developed tactics to ensure program completion. First, its distance-learning format allows inmates to pick up where they left off if they are transferred between facilities. Second, the Corrections Department has a Lump Sum Award Policy. Inmates who complete associate's degrees while incarcerated have four months taken off their sentences. If they earn a bachelor's degree, six months are taken off their sentences. "That's great encouragement," according to Jeff Wilson, the postsecondary education

coordinator. Finally, inmates are required to sign a postsecondary education agreement, classroom rule contract, and a debit memo before they enroll in the PSCE program. These documents allow the Corrections Department to garnish inmates' wages to help cover the cost of the program if they drop out before completing it.

### **Public Relations Tactics**

All states offering PSCE face public relations issues regarding the use of taxpayer dollars to fund PSCE. This controversy can negatively affect funding for PSCE if not adequately addressed using data and other evidence illustrating the benefits of these services. Even those most committed to PSCE recognize the discomfort many have with using public dollars to "reward" convicted criminals with a college education. One informant in North Carolina called the state culture regarding PSCE "schizophrenic." On the one hand, the state is known for its tough stance on crime and criminals and ensuring that convicts serve the vast majority of their sentences. On the other hand, state employees and policy makers proudly proclaim North Carolina "the education state," demonstrated by a commitment to education as a key right of all citizens, including inmates.

Both the North Carolina DOC and CCS have demonstrated a high level of commitment to PSCE programming by dedicating central office staff to work solely on PSCE, committing inmate welfare funds, and requiring each community college and prison to provide liaisons whose primary responsibility is to develop and maintain PSCE programs. Moreover, the state legislature, through its funding processes, has indicated a high level of support for PSCE. The chief financial officer for CCS reflected, "I've always taken it to mean, as an analyst and a CFO, that if the General Assembly appropriates money for something, that's intent."

Because day-to-day issues are often hashed out at the local level, North Carolina's local community leaders also become involved in how PSCE is provided. In 2003, DOC's Division of Prisons formed a state-level business and industry advisory committee to inform policy on academic and vocational education for inmates. According to informants, this partnership has been extremely useful for DOC and has helped to build buy-in from employers that may hire inmates upon release.

Though some may be uncomfortable with providing college programs to inmates, those who work to provide PSCE in North Carolina are extremely efficient when building their case for such programming. For example, while the State Board for Community Colleges has been an active participant in overseeing the provision of PSCE, it recently questioned whether PSCE was taking resources away from average citizens in North Carolina. To address this, representatives from DOC and CCS organized a "Lunch and Learn" event at a State Board meeting, with lunch provided by inmates enrolled in a culinary PSCE program. The representatives gave a joint presentation to the State Board highlighting the nuances of the relationship between DOC and CCS. This approach is particularly useful technique because CCS is the primary education provider for *all* education in the prisons, not just PSCE. The presentation included a discussion of the adult basic education, academic, and vocational aspects of PSCE in North Carolina and emphasized the joint planning and approval process, assuaging many of the concerns. Further, the presentation very deliberately incorporated research on the effectiveness of such programs as well as cost-benefit analysis demonstrating potential savings resulting from PSCE.

Washington also has used research effectively to draw the attention of policy makers to the usefulness of inmate intervention programs like PSCE. Recently, the expected growth of the state's inmate population caught the attention of the state legislature. To house these inmates,

Washington would need to build two more prisons by 2020 and possibly a third by 2030. Recognizing the high cost of prison construction (\$250 million per prison) and operation (\$450 million per year), the legislature asked the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, a research center created by the legislature in 1983, to identify evidence-based options for lowering the inmate population, thereby saving tax dollars and reducing crime rates. The Institute developed a computer model for all inmate intervention programs to show what would happen to the state budget if 1) no interventions were employed, 2) interventions were level-funded, or 3) interventions received moderate or aggressive funding increases. The Institute found that correctional education, including postsecondary education, would help to lower the prison population.

As a result of these findings, Washington’s DOC received an additional \$2.9 million for vocational programs, \$2.1 million for basic skills, and \$117,000 for parenting courses in 2007. Other contractors to the prisons also received additional money, for example, to provide resume writing services and other workforce readiness training to inmates. According to a state representative, the State Institute for Public Policy’s computer model was the “Hercules that pushed the rock.”

The Virginia Department of Correctional Education also commissioned a study of college programs offered as part of the state’s Incarcerated Youth Offender program. The study found that college participants had significantly lower recidivism rates than non-participants (see Figure 2). Participants also had 13 percent greater average post-release quarterly earnings (\$2,329) than all ex-offenders released (\$2,329). The wage increase was even higher for inmates who earned an associate’s degree; their average quarterly earnings were \$5,727. Also, eleven percent of students enrolled in academic courses and 14.8 percent of students enrolled in vocational courses were more likely to enroll in Virginia colleges post-release (compared to 3.6 percent of all ex-offenders). In addition, these inmates had a higher grade point average than non-incarcerated students enrolled in the same courses on campus (Lichtenberger & Onyewu, 2005).

**Table 2: Virginia Changes in Recidivism**

Fiscal Year	Recidivism Rate			Decrease in Recidivism	
	All Inmates	Academic Students	Vocational Students	Academic Students	Vocational Students
2001	29.3%	17.6%	24.2%	39.9%	17.4%
2002	25%	12.6%	11.1%	49.6%	55.6%

From Lichtenberger & Onyewu (2005).

The Department of Correctional Education presented the study findings to the Virginia Joint Subcommittee Studying Prisoner Reentry to Society, established by a Senate Joint Resolution in 2007. The subcommittee was directed to continue the work of the Virginia Prison Reentry Policy Academy (originally established by an initiative sponsored by the National Governors Association, but later given “official” status by an Executive Order of the Governor), evaluate existing state correctional education programs, and identify program needs and funding options. The work of the Joint Subcommittee continues, and it has issued a set of preliminary recommendations for legislative action that include allowing low-income inmates to apply for and receive state grants for higher education and providing funding for additional job training programs. To date, though, no legislation has been introduced regarding state grant eligibility for inmates enrolled in PSCE.

## CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our recent research indicates that a number of states are exploring how to use available educational resources, specifically community colleges, to prepare inmates more effectively for their transition from incarceration to life beyond prison. Because community colleges espouse educational access for everyone and provide education less expensively than their four-year counterparts, they are ideal partners in providing PSCE. Moreover, community colleges are uniquely situated within local communities and often have extensive access to potential employers and community services that could aid inmates in their post-release transition.

Although recent trends seem to indicate that states are recognizing the value of partnering with community colleges to provide PSCE, gaps in the literature remind us not to assume that these partnerships are not under threat. Specifically, it is imperative that members of the reentry community conduct serious research analyzing the merits of such programming. While some noteworthy research exists, all too often studies on PSCE are conducted with unsound methodologies. Areas for future research include:

- Comparing recidivism rates, employment rates and earnings, and other post-release outcomes for those who participate in (and complete) PSCE and those who do not, with careful attention given to control groups.
- Examining how community colleges link offenders to community services and resources following release from prison.
- Analyzing how services and support (e.g., articulation agreements, case management, career counseling, and job placement) may help inmates use or further their postsecondary education.

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