

NCHPEP Panel, November 9, 2018
Beyond Pells—Building a Sustainable Movement
Without Government Funding

CREATING A NATIONWIDE SYSTEM OF PRISON HIGHER EDUCATION
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As described in the conference schedule, we are here to brainstorm ways to build a sustainable prison college movement that

- (1) exists in most of the nation's 2,000 prisons,
- (2) is free and open access for incarcerated students,
- (3) is accredited at least through the associate degree, and
- (4) is not reliant on Pell grants or their equivalent, nor on large competitive grants that, in effect, pit programs against each other.

I think most of the people in this room would agree on Goal 1 and at least the first half of Goal 2. Many of you agree on, or at least don't oppose, Goal 3. For the sake of this specific discussion, I'll ask you to buy into those first three: That we want prison higher education programs nationwide that are free, open access and accredited.

But I don't ask you to buy into the fourth proposition. At least not yet.

Erin Castro's excellent speech last night demonstrated the rich variety and rapidly increasing number of higher ed programs in prisons. For someone like me who has been in this field for half a century, these are the glory days. But those same 50 years have taught me how very fragile these advances are. We've had hundreds of prison college programs before in the US, only to see them wiped out by a single piece of legislation. Indiana somehow survived the 1994 tsunami. Indeed, by 2011 every prison in this state had a college program; 10% of all incarcerated adults--3,000 students--were enrolled full time.... And then the legislature abruptly and without debate withdrew the funding. Every single one of those programs died, virtually overnight.

I think it was George Soros who started the modern day philanthropic interest in prison college programs. His 2011 bequest to Bard College has been followed by many bequests to other programs. But there is no guarantee that prison higher education will remain a hot topic in the philanthropic world. Even if it does, there is only so much money in that pot and it disproportionately goes in large sums to elite schools on the east and west coasts.

We need to develop long-term strategies for higher education in the majority of our 2,000 prisons that are both financially and politically sustainable. And we need to do it *now* while interest is high.

On this panel, I will outline what I see as the three dominant models of prison higher education today, with their strengths and weakness. I will then briefly propose two models that meet the four criteria.

Jill Knapp will talk about the Princeton program she co-founded, which comes closest of the programs I know to meeting these goals, though it is embedded within another model.

Mark McCoy is going to talk about a proposed variation of the Princeton model-- what I think of as the DePauw model-- whereby

- a single uniform state community college system like the one here in Indiana—known as Ivy Tech—
- partners at each prison in the state with one or more host colleges or universities,
- with Ivy Tech providing a uniform curriculum, accrediting courses, and granting degrees
- and the partner colleges providing volunteer faculty drawn from retired faculty, grad students, alums, and other qualified members of the community

Okay, let me outline what I see as the three dominant models today along with their strengths and weaknesses.

1) Pell Grant Model

The Pell Grant model, whereby federal or state funding is provided for incarcerated students at the same level as it is to students outside, is the best of the three models at maximizing the number of students enrolled, but is least sustainable and may have the lowest academic quality.

Pell Grants generate approximately \$5,000 per student per year, which is enough financial incentive to ensure that colleges and universities will compete to provide programs in most of the nation's 2,000 state and federal prisons. If 10% of the 1.6 million men and women currently in state or federal prisons were to enroll (a percentage based on the number of men and women enrolled in prison higher education in Indiana before state funding was eliminated in 2011), we could potentially have 160,000 students in prison college programs nationwide. Because a high percent of those 160,000 students would be people of color, Pell Grants for incarcerated students may offer the most cost-effective way of rapidly increasing the number of college graduates among historically marginalized groups in the US.

Disadvantages of federal or state funding for prison education are equally stark. Pell Grants to 160,000 incarcerated students would cost taxpayers nearly one billion dollars a year. Though this is far less than the cost of incarcerating people, spending tax dollars to provide college education for prisoners will always be

politically unpopular and subject to cancellation at any time—as we have witnessed repeatedly in the past.

A subtler risk can be the mass-market nature of the resulting programs. If experience in Indiana before 2012 is a guide, colleges may be tempted to make money from prison programs funded by Pell-type grants by hiring poorly paid, overworked adjuncts who cannot devote sufficient time to students. Erin highlighted this problem last night.

2) Bard Model

Bard is the Harvard of prison college programs: highly selective, well-funded, outstanding faculty, brilliant students, very successful outcomes. With the support of tens of millions of dollars from various foundations, Bard is slowly spreading its program to colleges and prisons in other states.

Of the three models, it produces the highest academic quality. It is very selective—admitting no more than 10% of applicants—with faculty drawn from nationally ranked liberal arts colleges who are paid at a rate commensurate with pay on their home campuses. Students have unusually good access to books, computers, research materials, and have consistently produced excellent work.

But it is also a model that by definition can serve only a small percentage of people in prison—and then only if they happen to be in a prison near one of a handful of colleges in the nation that are both wealthy enough to sustain such a program and willing to give credit to prisoners. Indeed, the high cost of the program and dependence on outside funding mean that it is unlikely to ever reach more than a small fraction of prisoners in the US. Ironically, the high media profile of this model means that it is also absorbing much of the money that foundations are willing to invest in prison college programs of any sort.

3) San Quentin Model

The highly regarded, long-established Prison University Project at San Quentin relies entirely on volunteer faculty, many drawn from UC-Berkeley and other outstanding universities in the Bay area. Because paying faculty is the greatest expense of running a prison college program, the San Quentin model is the least financially vulnerable of the three models. Moreover, the program has an open-admissions policy for its Associate of Arts degree, thus making it theoretically accessible to a far higher percent of people in prison than the Bard model.

The major weakness of the San Quentin model is difficulty finding a partner university that will give credit to incarcerated students and award degrees. The open-admissions policy makes this model unappealing to nationally- or regionally-ranked liberal arts schools, while lower-ranked colleges are unwilling to partner with a program that will generate no funding for the college (as Pell

Grants do) even if the associated costs are very low. Thus, despite its excellent academic reputation, the Prison University Project at San Quentin has had to make do over the years with financially and academically precarious academic partners.

Indeed, San Quentin's problems with accreditation are leading it to consider a mind-blowing fourth model—becoming its own university! I don't want to spend much time talking about it—it's in early stages of development and is not a model that lends itself easily to replication. But I think it is incredibly important because of the way it forces us to think about prisons and universities, and epistemic power and epistemic privilege.

None of these models give us the desired result of higher ed programs in most prisons in the nation, that are free, open access, accredited, quality controlled, and financially and politically sustainable.

Philanthropies, preferably in collaboration with one another, should stop thinking about funding individual programs for a few years, and start thinking about how to build programs in dozens or hundreds of prisons that are sustainable over the long term

So what should we do? Jill and Mark are in the process of creating one solution, so I'll let them talk about that. *[In brief, colleges and universities throughout Indiana would partner with Ivy Tech, the statewide community college system with >40 branches throughout the state, to provide a uniform Associate of Arts program at nearly all of the state's 20+ prisons. The universities would provide volunteer faculty (mostly retired faculty and grad students), while Ivy Tech would provide the curriculum, grant credit and award degrees. Based on the state's enrollment figures from 2011, approximately 3,000 students would be enrolled full time at a cost of ~\$2,000,000 a year or ~\$750 per student per year.]*

Allow me to briefly mention another solution: philanthropies acting alone or in consort, could endow a fund at a college or university that would provide oversight of *and accredit* higher ed programs in prisons throughout a multi-state region or even nationally. The endowed fund would pay the salary of one director at each prison, plus books and supplies, and of course pay administrative costs at the accrediting college. All faculty would be volunteers. Based on my experience running the program at IWP, each prison program would cost on average \$100,000 per year.

I hope you are all thinking about other strategies. Meanwhile lets turn to Jill and Mark.