

Column: College Community Connection

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Let's Get REAL about Education for Inmates

By Dr. Al Roberts

I believe in the transformative power of education.

Earlier generations considered high school completion the key to success. Many viewed postsecondary education an extravagance because folks with high school diplomas could secure good-paying jobs. Today, that is no longer the case. Finding a job with family-sustaining wages often requires education beyond high school, whether it be the completion of a certificate program, the attainment of industry-recognized credentials, or earning an Associate's or higher academic degree.

When it comes to recognizing the benefits of education, incarcerated people are often overlooked. This lapse may be counterproductive. A study completed earlier this year by the Vera Institute of Justice and the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality revealed that inmates who received college-level education were much more able to reenter communities successfully upon release. The report concluded, "Expanding access to postsecondary education in prison is likely to reduce recidivism rates, resulting in a decrease in incarceration costs across states of \$365.8 million per year."

Lisa Hudson, Coordinator of SVCC's Campus Within Walls program, has seen compelling evidence regarding the value of education for inmates. "Our prison college program not only benefits Virginia and makes fiscal sense, it also positively impacts our students. We believe that human beings have value and are capable of making positive life changes. We know that 95% of people in prison will eventually be released. In Virginia, the 13,000 people released annually from prison represent an opportunity. Through college classes, we prepare incarcerated Virginians to reenter our communities as educated, employable, and taxpaying neighbors."

Accessing postsecondary education in prison can pose a challenge, however. Individuals with substantial financial need often receive Pell Grant assistance, but in 1994, federal lawmakers instituted a ban on Pell Grants for inmates. Without funds for tuition, the number of education programs available to people behind bars plummeted. A recent trial program, the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative, lifted the ban on Pell Grant eligibility among incarcerated populations at 67 sites across the nation. Data indicate that when inmates access higher education in prison, they are 43 percent less likely to reoffend after release when compared with inmates lacking a similar opportunity.

The 116th Congress is preparing to consider the legislation "Restoring Education And Learning (REAL) Act of 2019" to reinstate Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated individuals. Because education is one of the best and most cost-effective means of helping former inmates avoid a subsequent term behind bars, its potential is as REAL as its name.

Education remains key in efforts to transform lives, families, communities, and the local economy. SVCC remains committed to the belief that all people should have educational opportunities, and that includes the incarcerated people in our service region.

Dr. Al Roberts is president of Southside Virginia Community College, an institution of higher learning that provides a wide variety of education opportunities to a diverse student population within a service area that spans ten counties and the city of Emporia. He can be reached via email at al.roberts@southside.edu.