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Jeffrey Ian Ross, Richard Tewksbury & Miguel Zaldívar

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Analyzing For-Profit Colleges and Universities that Offer Bachelors, Masters, and Doctorates to Inmates Incarcerated in American Correctional Facilities

JEFFREY IAN ROSS

School of Criminal Justice, University of Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

RICHARD TEWKSBURY

Department of Justice Administration, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, USA

MIGUEL ZALDIVAR

Federal Correctional Institution, Coleman Low, Florida, USA

Postsecondary education for inmates is championed as an important path to rehabilitation and a factor minimizing recidivism. Over the past four decades, several for-profit colleges and universities have offered degree-based programs to inmates at American correctional facilities. This article reviews the history of these educational institutions, the typical inmates who enroll in these kinds of courses, the appeals that these businesses make to convicts, the channels for their advertisements, and the experiences of inmates who have enrolled and (sometimes) graduated from these courses. This study takes both an historical and an auto-ethnographic approach to its subject matter. The authors conclude by speculating on appropriate policy responses to for-profit postsecondary education institutions that provide this kind of service to inmates, and alternatives that may be better methods for college degree instruction and delivery in jails and prisons.

KEYWORDS *correctional programming, postsecondary prison programs, prison college programs, prison education programs, rehabilitation*

Miguel Zaldivar is now an independent scholar in Miami, Florida.

Address correspondence to Jeffrey Ian Ross, Ph.D., School of Criminal Justice, University of Baltimore, 1420 N. Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21201, USA. E-mail: jross@ubalt.edu

Although formal education is a frequent and well-respected rehabilitative strategy for most inmates, just as in the free community, not all educational programs are of equal quality or benefit to students (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013). Even though many nonprofit educational institutions have offered college and university level courses in correctional facilities, over the past four decades a number of for-profit postsecondary educational entities, sometimes pejoratively referred to as “diploma mills” (Stewart & Spille, 1988; Ruch, 2001; Cooley & Cooley, 2008) have offered bachelor’s, master’s, and/or doctorate degrees to inmates at American correctional facilities.

There is wide latitude among these schools, with some allowing inmates a broader scope in areas of study and differing access to educational opportunities and resources (e.g., computers, books, and the World Wide Web). In 2012, after numerous consumer complaints, however, the federal government started investigating for-profit institutions of higher education (U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, 2012). The majority of criticisms came either from the general public believing that these corporations had engaged in deceptive practices or from employers who tried to investigate the institutions from which prospective and actual employees claimed they graduated only to discover that the schools named were no longer in operation. Surprisingly, only rarely have complaints come from convicts.¹

This study reviews the history of these for-profit educational institutions and their relationship to American corrections. Additionally, the typical inmates who enroll in these kinds of courses of study, the appeals that these businesses make to prisoners, and the experiences of inmates who have enrolled and (sometimes) graduated from these institutions of higher learning are explored. In pursuing our goal, we employ both historical and autoethnographic approaches. We conclude with policy recommendations for governmental regulators of for-profit colleges and universities that provide this kind of service to inmates and for inmates considering pursuing a degree.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, as in most areas of contemporary American life, education helps an individual earn a living wage. For exconvicts, who carry with them added stigmas and challenges when seeking employment (Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2002; Pager, 2003), having a high school diploma and/or GED is all but essential. Exconvicts who participate in and complete education programs while incarcerated not only show lower levels of recidivism (Mitchell, 1998), but they also report a significantly greater likelihood of being employed and significantly higher incomes (Davis et al., 2013; Steuer, Smith, & Tracy, 2001). Correctional education has long been recognized as one of the few, if not the only, jail and prison program to consistently show an association with reduced recidivism (Davis et al., 2013; Lipton, Martinson, & Wilks, 1975;

Wilson, Gallagher, & MacKenzie, 2000). Primarily motivated by the promise of a stable, better paying, and/or higher status job, some convicts enroll in educational programs while incarcerated, whether the courses are offered face-to-face or via correspondence (Moeller, Day, & Rivera, 2004). The majority of inmates who take this step are usually content to earn an associate's or bachelor's degree. Some who are more highly educated, motivated, and/or have access to the necessary resources may attempt to earn a master's or doctorate degree while incarcerated, although such opportunities are more limited (Ross & Richards, 2003).

Frequently, the "opportunities" for educational pursuits that are encountered may actually be scams or may involve low-quality (e.g., unaccredited) institutions that offer courses and degrees that are of little or no value. Some convicts may know that the educational opportunities they pursue are such, while others may not. These inmates will claim to have earned a master's degree or PhD, but when pressed to show appropriate documentation, for one reason or another, they are unable to do so. Others can only present diplomas from unaccredited schools. Perhaps the most easily accessible higher education opportunities available to inmates are those from schools offering a master's or doctorate degree in divinity—typically offered from religious (not educational) organizations. This may be tied to the organization's need or desire to increase adherents to their belief system.

The value of postsecondary correctional education (PSCE) for inmates has been stressed by several scholars, policy makers, politicians, and inmates (e.g., Thorpe, MacDonald, & Bala, 1984; Jancic, 1998; Taylor, 1992; Vacca, 2004). Most of the research in the PSCE field focuses on and champions the benefits of this rehabilitative strategy, particularly its ability to reduce recidivism (however defined). Studies that are more rigorous have looked at the self-selection of inmates who enter these programs (e.g., Kim & Clark, 2013) and have offered conclusions that there may be an overestimation of the benefits of PSCE. In other words, the advantages of higher education (e.g., reduced recidivism) are not universal for inmates. The advantages are contingent upon individual choices that the convicts make to get into such programs, the characteristics of the inmates themselves, and the scope and quality of the programs in which they enroll.

Over the past four decades, the number of educational institutions that have offered postsecondary education to inmates has expanded (e.g., Littlefield & Wolford, 1982; Ryan & Woodward, 1987; Stephan, 2008). The most recent estimates suggest that 84% of state correctional institutions provide some form and level of correctional education programming, including 33% offering some postsecondary courses/programs (Stephan, 2008). The rapid growth of such postsecondary programs occurred mainly in the 1980s and 1990s and was significantly slowed following the federal government's 1994 decision to no longer issue Pell Grants to inmates (Messemer, 2003). However, as recently as 2004, 7% of state prison inmates have participated in at least one postsecondary level

course of study (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008). Surprisingly, although correctional education is a common practice in American prisons and jails, little research has ever assessed such programs for outcomes other than those that are criminal-justice related, most notably recidivism. In particular, the quality of education provided behind bars is rarely examined.

Even when inmates have access to educational programs, navigating bureaucratic channels, getting admitted, and participating in academic activities can be especially challenging. This may be particularly true for postsecondary educational programs that are distinct and different in structure and organization from the departments of corrections. For some inmates, the challenges of access may be too daunting or the process too lengthy, leading at least some potential students to opt out of participation. In partial response to this situation, since the turn of this century, a handful of self-help books have been published, which attempt to guide convicts through the labyrinth of college and university programs that are available to them.

Three self-help books written by convicts have been published with the goal of assisting inmates to prepare and enroll in educational programs. One of the oldest books is Jon Marc Taylor and Susan Schwartzkopf's *Prisoners' Guerilla Handbook to Correspondence Programs in the United States and Canada* (2013). Already in its third revised edition, this book promotes schools that are accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC), an agency recognized by the Department of Education (DOE), but not commonly used by traditional colleges and universities. The authors include a list of colleges and universities they believe are appropriate for convicts.

Another book is Michaels' (2011) *College in Prison: Information and Resources for Incarcerated Students*. This is the shortest and easiest book to read. Chapters cover understanding correctional facilities' policies on education, making allies with other inmates who want to pursue a college education, as well as correctional officers, and paying for college education, including finding sponsors. The bulk of the book (chapters 7–10) provides a list of distance learning programs. With the exception of Vincennes University, all of the colleges and universities Michaels reviews are state-run programs. The typical for-profit universities are not represented.

Finally, Christopher Zoukis' book *Education Behind Bars: A Win-Win Strategy for Maximum Security* (2012) presents copious arguments for convicts gaining education behind bars. The majority of the book focuses on completing high school and learning a trade. A smaller portion of the book provides rationales and suggestions regarding college and university classes of which convicts might avail themselves. It explains the importance of accreditation and reviews different accrediting bodies. Like the previous two books, the author includes several recommendations for schools that might be appropriate for undergraduate and graduate studies, both for-profit and nonprofit.

Monitoring postsecondary education in American correctional facilities is not simply the work of activists and educators. The U.S. Department of

Education runs the Office of Vocational and Adult Education. Some of this office's work involves supervising educational programs for incarcerated offenders. This small entity also provides limited funding for states to implement educational programs for inmates. In recent years, five prominent private foundations have sponsored a pilot program (i.e., Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Project) managed by the Vera Foundation. The effort provides postsecondary education to inmates in three states.² These entities, however, have little knowledge about for-profit colleges and universities, and informal conversations with the grant manager suggest that the inmates in the pilot program make up only a small number of the students who are enrolled in postsecondary educational programs behind bars.

In sum, as access to postsecondary education can be difficult, the self-help guides for potential students might be a good place for inmates to begin their search. However, convicts must persevere through the identification, communication, and admission processes. They will be confronted with options of varying quality and value, but because of their disadvantaged social status and the lack of communication methods available to the free world (i.e., World Wide Web), they may not be equipped to distinguish the differences in quality and status among the various schools. Therefore, in order to better understand the current for-profit postsecondary courses and degree programs offered to inmates, we examine the history of for-profit educational institutions providing services to convicts, the typical inmates who enroll in these kinds of courses, the communications that these businesses make to convicts, the places where they advertise, and the experiences of inmates who have enrolled and (sometimes) graduated from these courses

METHOD

In order to answer the aforementioned questions, two separate approaches were utilized. The first depended on a survey of for-profit colleges and universities offering college and university level courses to inmates. We considered a number of different approaches, including surveying inmates at one correctional facility, administering a questionnaire to the heads/secretaries of state Departments of Corrections throughout the United States, or surveying the heads of education services for state Departments of Corrections. It was our feeling that response rates for all three options would also be low and thus our ability to draw appropriate inferences from this population would be limited. The low numbers would be reflective of the low total of inmates who are enrolled in this kind of pedagogy.

Instead, we compiled a list of for-profit colleges and universities that advertise in magazines and newspapers widely accessible to convicts. The investigators then reviewed all of the suggested for-profit colleges and

universities included in the three previously mentioned books (i.e., Michaels, 2011; Taylor & Schwartzkopf, 2013; Zoukis, 2012). Initially we consulted the Internet to see if these institutions were still in business, after which we called them to see if they would answer our brief survey. This contact was followed up by a letter. In order to increase the relevance of the study, only colleges and universities in the United States were included. Religious-based colleges and universities and those offering two-year associate's degrees were also not included. It became clear that some of the colleges and universities identified by the three books were either no longer in business, had changed names, or despite using the word "university" in their name (e.g., Griggs University), were not universities at all. In the end, we developed a pool of 23 for-profit colleges and universities that were targeted for our survey. The survey was designed to determine:

- When was their educational institution created?
- Are they accredited?
- From which body do they have their accreditation?
- How do students enroll? How are students recruited?
- How much is the cost?
- What types of degrees can inmates earn?
- What percentage of students are inmates?
- How many inmates complete their degree?
- What kind of delivery system is in place (correspondence, online, etc.)?

The questionnaire was sent via snail mail and directed towards the highest-ranking publicly identified individual working there. If one month passed and no response was received, a follow-up communication was sent. Over the course of three months, after numerous e-mail, snail mail, and telephone contacts, only four educational institutions responded, mostly via e-mail. Indeed there was a very low response rate. While only a few claimed that they had inmates behind bars as students, we believe that the overall low response rate is a reflection of these businesses' professionalism, and an indication of their resistance to cooperate in a study that examines a highly controversial business and policy sector in which they are involved.

The second method to get a sense of the role of for-profit colleges that offer college- and university-level courses to prisoners derives from all three of our personal observations, experiences, review of materials, and comments made to us. Our first author worked for a time as a correspondence instructor through a major state university. Several of his students were incarcerated inmates. During the course of their studies, most of them related their difficulties in finding an appropriate postsecondary educational opportunity behind bars. The second author is a former instructor in a prison-based college program. Our third author is a former federal inmate (currently on parole) who spent over two frustrating years searching for an accredited

school that offered a master's degree via correspondence courses. This same author also taught a course entitled Post-Secondary Correctional Education (PSCE) in an adult continuing education program at a federal prison. This class, directed at inmates contemplating higher education, covered: types of programs that are available, information about selecting an appropriate program, and components of a college education.³ We present the following observations.

Why Do the For-Profit Colleges and Universities Target Inmates?

The disappearance of Pell Grants has played a major role in the proliferation of for-profit colleges and universities. Just as the Federal Bureau of Prisons' (FBOP) policy against full-nudity pornographic material created a niche for magazines such as *Black Tail*, *Curves*, *Don Diva*, *Glutes*, and *Maxim*, the disappearance of Pell Grants opened up the opportunity for other schools and other school funding sources to focus on the inmate population. Quite simply, the for-profit industry identified, and has pursued, inmates as a relatively untapped source of income for their product/service.

Why Will Inmates Typically Enroll in These Kinds of Courses?

Convicts who enroll in courses and programs offered by for-profit colleges and universities may be an especially vulnerable population for marketing appeals from less-established, potentially more expensive and risky, schools and lenders. It is likely that several interrelated factors conspire to fuel this vulnerability.

First, as is the case with many potential postsecondary students, many inmates who enroll in for-profit colleges and universities do not understand why traditional schools make students invest so much (especially in terms of time and money) on general education courses when all they are interested in is a specific degree, such as business.⁴ There are multiple explanations for requiring students to take general education courses. From a pessimistic point of view, it may be a way of padding an education, forcing students into taking more classes, which cost more money. Alternatively, few potential students grasp, or appreciate, the notion that having a well-rounded education increases the odds of being successful in a chosen area of concentration. In other words, a legitimate reason exists for why traditional schools require what may be initially seen as "unrelated" courses. The rationale is that students need to gain a well-rounded education. For-profits may require similar courses to more closely resemble legitimate schools.

Second, in a related issue, the majority of inmates are either uninformed or misinformed about the intricacies of a college education. In part, this is likely a product of most inmates having never finished high school (or completed a

GED). As such, the actual activities, the intensity of tasks, and the amount of work required to complete academic pursuits is simply unknown. At the post-secondary level specifically, few appreciate the difference between and/or rationale behind sanctioning courses that satisfy general education requirements and area of concentration (major). Most inmates report they resent the fact that traditional colleges and universities insist they take 9 to 12 credit hours of something like history, when their goal is to earn a business degree. Convicts report finding little value in the idea of a well-rounded education and perceive these expenditures as a waste of time and money. Thus, by offering streamlined programs that cater to inmates' particular needs/desires, unscrupulous educational institutions capitalize on inmates' lack of understanding and information.

Third, for a variety of reasons, many convicts who are interested in pursuing postsecondary education are unrealistic about what such a commitment entails and what the likely payoffs are. Unrealistic expectations, coupled with frequent fears among inmates of being "caught" in either a life of repeated incarceration or an economic struggle in free society, lead to a population that may be extremely vulnerable to the aggressive, and perhaps fraudulent, marketing of schools offering unrealistic promises. When marketing materials guarantee job placement and earnings of six figures with little investment of time and effort (but not little tuition), the draw can be quite powerful.

Fourth, few inmates are cognizant of the volume of work (reading/writing/studying) and time required to successfully complete just one college-level course, let alone a baccalaureate or master's degree at traditional, well-established, and accredited universities. Some institutions of higher learning, on the other hand, exploit these impracticalities by designing evaluative components around multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and true or false formats that allow inmates to complete courses in relatively short periods of time. In addition, frequently the total volume of course work required to satisfy these programs is negligible when compared with traditional schools. This minimalist approach is just too tempting for some convicts (as well as other students) to pass up.

Finally, inmates who enroll in these courses typically still enjoy some form of outside pecuniary support system. Rarely are prisoners in financial positions to pay for tuition and other expenses associated with any type of program, especially something as potentially expensive as postsecondary education. The vast majority relies on the kindness and generosity of loved ones to pay for commissary goods, special expenses, and tuition. Consequently, the for-profit institutions not only utilize the susceptibilities of the inmate population, but they also prey on the munificence of family members and other loved ones whose sole desire is to provide their incarcerated son or daughter, father or mother, brother or sister, a genuine opportunity of becoming and, more importantly, remaining a free and productive member of society.

Appeals that For-Profit Colleges and Universities Make to Inmates

For-profit colleges and universities appeal to convicts in numerous ways. Since most prisoners do not have access to the Internet, for-profit educational institutions typically run their advertisements in print media. Although some, like University of Phoenix and Strayer University, advertise through a variety of communication platforms (e.g., television, the World Wide Web, etc.) these entities rarely offer programs in correctional facilities. Even though advertisements for for-profit colleges can be found in most major newspapers, the for-profit colleges and universities typically advertise their programs in a wide range of men's interest magazines, such as *Black Tail*, *Curves*, *Glutes*, *Maxim*, *Men's Fitness*, *Popular Science*, and *Plane and Pilot*. Some special interest magazines, like *Mother Earth News* and *High Times*, also carry ads for for-profit universities.⁵ Furthermore, the schools promote their programs through publications specifically targeted at inmates, including *Behind the Wall*, *Don Diva*, *Prison Legal News*, *Razor Wire*, and newsletters such as that produced by FAMM (Families Against Mandatory Minimums).

The for-profit schools that seemingly target inmates as potential students include traditional-sounding universities as well as religious/Bible colleges. The organizations known to recruit inmates for religious-related bachelor's and master's degrees include schools such as Global University School of Evangelism, MO; World University, AZ; Herbert W. Armstrong College, OK; Emmaus Correspondence School, IA; America Bible Academy, MO; Mount Zion Bible Institute, FL; and World Bible School, TX. These institutions offer undergraduate programs in religious studies and/or Masters of Religious Studies degrees.

As noted previously, advertisements for these types of institutions appear to lure inmates with specious offerings of well-paying jobs and respected careers upon successful completion of these programs. They do this with claims such as "state certified," "state approved," and "accredited," to promote their legitimacy. The claims are worded in ways that seemingly feed on inmates' insecurities, reminding them of what they most lack—education. These ads frequently feature well-groomed men and women in professional settings, alluding to the endless possibilities of success, riches, and fame. Moreover, by promising to deliver the ultimate American dream through "24 easy payments of \$59.95," these ads sow seeds of hope within a distraught and marginalized citizenry. How can any inmate resist such appeals that claim that they will help them access their dreams at a cost they and their loved ones can bear?

In general, these for-profit educational organizations are typically unaccredited, or they have their accreditation from organizations different from those that accredit traditional schools (e.g., Middle States). Alternatively, the for-profit entities have not been in business very long, thus potential employers have a difficult time doing due diligence when they perform a background

check once an inmate is released and applying for a job. Upon release, ex-prisoners often find that along with other predictable factors, the institution from which they graduated may not assist them in finding appropriate employment. As a matter of fact, one's school may actually cast a negative shadow on one's candidacy for a position.

CONCLUSION

In order to better address the above reviewed concerns about for-profit colleges and universities offering degree-granting programs in America's correctional facilities, regulators and politicians must closely examine their nature and performance. Not only should these political actors look more closely at these educational entities, but also appropriate sanctions should be meted out for failure to make good on their promises.

It must be noted that by the spring of 2015, the fate of many for-profit colleges and universities appeared to be imploding. In May 2015, Corinthian Colleges—one of the largest for-profit colleges, with approximately 88,000 students—filed for bankruptcy.

The ultimate punishment for the CEOs of the for-profit educational companies might be to have them do time on the same tiers as the convicts they victimized. More specifically, these individuals might be required to actually teach inmates basic GED skills. As educators and/or former inmates, we wonder what kinds of lessons the owners of the for-profit colleges will learn from these experiences.

Regulators and politicians must appropriately address the problem of for-profit educational companies offering educational programs of questionable quality. However, the state departments of corrections (DOCs) and the FBOP should not be excluded from this responsibility. By simply refusing to proctor examinations for these organizations, the DOCs and BOP can carve a huge dent into the profit margins of these institutions. Yet it appears as if the DOCs and the BOP are indifferent to this abuse. Why? Is it because it has become fashionable and politically expedient to profit from the most distraught and disenfranchised members of our society? Is it a lack of funding that pervades most of these organizations? Or is it bureaucratic intransigence? Future research should examine both the actual workings of such institutions and legal cases that inmates have brought forward against for-profit universities.

That being said, there is still hope for alternative methods and means for inmates to achieve a college and/or university degree. Some individuals have recommended that as an alternative to the traditional university courses DOCs might adopt Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs). The use of MOOCs in prisons has been supported in some circles (e.g., Lennon, 2015); however, MOOCs do have numerous shortcomings (including quality of course materials and instructors, completion rates, the value of the certificates that

students earn, etc.; (Daniel, 2012). Any correctional system considering this method of instruction would be wise to consult the scholarly literature about their effectiveness before investing in this option.

Recently, there have been some modest recommendations and models of college and university degree offerings in prison. One such program is the Inside-Out program, which brings university instructors and undergraduate students to local prisons in order to achieve college credit. Piloted in 1997 by Lori Pompa, a licensed social worker and current instructor in the Department of Criminal Justice at Temple University, with the support of the Philadelphia Prison System and Temple University, the program boasts over 300 college students and 400 inmates having participated in the experience (<http://www.insideoutcenter.org>).

Another example of university–prison collaboration has been The Goucher Prison Education Partnership, a division of Goucher College. The initiative “offers Goucher College courses to students at the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW) and the Maryland Correctional Institution—Jessup (MCIJ)” (Goucher, n.d.). The website indicates that close to “70 students are enrolled,” and they “are taught on-site by Goucher College faculty as well as by outstanding professors from nearby colleges and universities.”

In February 2014, Andrew Cuomo (Democrat), governor of New York State, advocated that the state spend \$5,000 per inmate in order to enable them to achieve a degree. Predictably this has met with considerable opposition both inside and outside his party. Newspaper reports mentioned selective programs that are run by different state universities including one at the “Cayuga Community College at the Auburn and Cayuga state prisons” (Spector, 2014). This program is utilized with the assistance of a foundation and not simply taxpayer monies. Bachelor’s degree classes are also offered to prisoners through the Hudson Link portal. This organization partners with different colleges (i.e., Mercy, Nyack, Siena, Sullivan Community, and Vassar) to offer classes in selected New York State prisons. A Master in Professional Studies program is offered through Union Theological Seminary at Sing Sing Prison only. There is also the Bard College program operating in New York State. Finally, there is a Consortium for the Liberal Arts in Prison, a nonprofit organization that helps to underwrite the cost of college classes for prisoners offered through eight colleges. This model is a great place to start.

That being said, in July 2015, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced a trial Pell Grant program for prisoners to be initiated. The hope is that this initiative will produce positive results (i.e., show a decrease in recidivism) and be expanded throughout the United States (Lisitsina, 2015).

In sum, prisoners, correctional administrators, and the public must unite in finding appropriate and high-quality learning modalities that afford inmates appropriate college-level education while keeping in mind that the profit motive—while understandable—should be a secondary concern, when the

outcomes are the ultimate rehabilitation of individuals who are held behind bars.

Finally, despite the good intentions at the state and federal levels, not to mention private foundation initiatives, these alternative methods of educational delivery can fail to be translated into proper policies and practices in actual correctional environments. A lot of this depends on the orientation of the individual wardens and their staffs. Progressive correctional administrators (especially wardens) can actively find solutions to what might seem to be insurmountable obstacles (e.g., spaces for learning, access to teachers/instructors, and materials), which others find as noteworthy impediments that they are reluctant to address.

NOTES

1. This could be explained by a number of reasons including the possibility that they may believe that their complaints would not be taken seriously.

2. Interview with John Linton, Office of Correctional Education, Division of Adult and Vocational Education, U.S. Department of Education, January 21, 2014.

3. The PSCE workshop was created because a significant number of inmates regularly inquired about college courses. Unfortunately, most of them had little to no understanding regarding the intricacies of a college education. The workshop provided a safe environment wherein inmates felt comfortable asking questions apropos to their educational goals.

4. Anecdotally, all three authors have noticed that most inmates who are interested in higher education often see it as means to eventually go into business for themselves.

5. Although, because of its focus on illegal drug use, *High Times* is banned in many correctional facilities, it may still make its way in because of lax screening procedures in the mailroom.

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